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## An Investigation into the Educational Experiences of North Korean Refugees in China in Light of Their Exposure to Human Rights Violations

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### Abstract

North Korean refugees face myriad challenges in China which makes it difficult to obtain access to formal education. The Chinese government classifies them as illegal, economic migrants. If they are caught by authorities in China, they face deportation to North Korea, which can result in torture, incarceration, and even execution. It is important to learn more about the educational experiences, both formal and informal, of North Korean refugees in China so that aid organizations can better assist them by providing quality educational programs while concealing the refugees' identities. Participants in this study were North Korean refugees in their twenties who live in South Korea and had travelled through China or lived in China prior to gaining asylum through a South Korean consulate abroad. The study was conducted with North Korean refugees in South Korea since North Korean refugees in China are at risk of being sent back to North Korea if exposed. Several types of data were collected including a demographic survey, a timeline of primary life events, standardized open-ended interviews, and journal entries. This article discusses primary themes that emerged related to the educational experiences of North Korean refugees in China in light of their exposure to human rights violations.

■ **Keywords** : North Korean refugees, North Korean defectors, China, human rights violations, transformative learning

### Introduction

North Korea is a country that is often shrouded in mystery and is known for its reclusiveness and abysmal human rights record. In 2014 the United Nations released a 372-page report which detailed various

human rights atrocities occurring in North Korea. Since the 1990s, the primary reasons why North Korean people have escaped include dire poverty and pervasive economic problems (S. Y. Kim, 2010) which can be classified as human rights violations since they are attributed to government policies which result in inadequate distribution of food and resources to the populace and thus lead to malnutrition and famine. As a result of these appalling conditions, some North Korean citizens choose to escape despite the possibility of being captured and sent to prison and facing torture; some are even executed. The vast majority of North Korean refugees (sometimes referred to as North Korean defectors) who escape begin their journey in China. This is a perilous odyssey which includes evading border guards and authorities (S. M. Choi, 2016). Furthermore, concrete walls and fences have been built along some of the primary escape points (E. Choi, 2010). Those fleeing often must pay bribes to guards to cross the Sino-North Korean border (B. H. Chung, 2003; Hassig & Oh 2009), and the cost is significant to most North Koreans (Tanaka, 2008). Brokers assist many refugees during the escape process (Lankov, 2007; Suh, 2007).

For some North Korean refugees, China is a transit country, but others stay in China indefinitely (H. J. Kim, 2015; Kirkpatrick, 2012). In China, North Korean refugees often seek assistance from NGOs and South Korean Christian groups operating covertly (Hassig & Oh, 2009; Kirkpatrick, 2012; Tanaka, 2008). These organizations are illegal in China and individuals who are abetting refugees can be imprisoned (Kirkpatrick, 2012). Cash rewards are also given to Chinese citizens who report North Korean refugees (S. M. Choi, 2016). However, North Korean refugees in China are sometimes assisted by other North Korean refugees, North Korean citizens who still live in North Korea, and Chinese citizens of Korean ethnicity (Suh, 2007). There are various estimates of the number of North Korean refugees in China. The lower estimates range from 30,000 to 50,000 (Tanaka, 2008). Moderate estimates place the number at around 100,000 (Haggard & Noland, 2011). Some NGOs estimate the number to be as high as 300,000 (M. Kim, 2012).

Life in China is often replete with myriad human rights violations that inhibit North Korean refugees from obtaining an education. A substantial number of North Korean refugee women have fallen victim to the trafficking industry (Committee for Human Rights, 2009; Tanaka, 2008), with some estimates as high as 80 to 90 percent (Margesson, Chanlett-Avery, & Bruno, 2007). North Korean refugees are also exploited in the job market (Haggard & Noland, 2011). Additionally, many are taken advantage of by the brokers whom they hired to assist them (Han, 2013). Moreover, mental health issues including posttraumatic stress disorder and depression are common among North Korean refugees (Emery, Lee, & Kang, 2015). North Korean refugees often endeavor to remain hidden in China so that they are not detained by authorities and sent back to North Korea (E. Chung, 2014; Kirkpatrick, 2012). They experience numerous challenges trying to obtain access to formal education since they are in hiding and are classified as illegal, economic migrants by the Chinese government.

The purpose of this study is to gain more insight into the informal and formal educational experiences of North Korean refugees in China and learn more about how human rights violations impacted their access to education. It is important to conduct further research on the educational experiences of North Korean refugees (C. K. Lee, 2012; Yoo, 2012) which can better assist educators, aid organizations, administrators, religious groups, and other individuals and groups that provide assistance to them, especially in an educational context. Although North Korean refugees are generally living in hiding in China, it is vital that they are educated and learn useful skills to help them adapt to their new environment while avoiding detection. Some North Korean refugees also choose to escape from China and go to South Korea or other countries that will accept them as refugees. Many struggle to assimilate and acculturate in these countries and do not have ample knowledge of the world around them due to the restrictive and inaccurate education that they received in North Korea.

There is limited research on the educational experiences of North

Korean refugees in China. Most of the literature primarily consists of governmental and NGO reports that provide vague descriptions of the refugees' educational experiences in China. Qualitative studies tend to focus on the Christian elements of the refugees' education rather than broad educational experiences. North Korean refugees in China have diverse educational experiences ranging from having no formal education to attending public schools. In addition, North Korean refugees are exposed to numerous human rights violations in China which may impact their access to education. Although some North Korean refugees may be able to attend school through illegal documentation, there are significant risks of being exposed. Learning about their educational experiences can aid in developing a practical curriculum which focuses on skill development and useful knowledge that can be taught in safe houses. Through a practical education and proper guidance from volunteers, missionaries, and aid workers in shelters, North Korean refugees can become empowered and explore possibilities for a better future whether it be in China or another country.

The following research questions were used to guide the study:

- (1) What primary themes emerge from the educational experiences of North Korean refugees in China?
- (2) How do North Korean refugees describe their educational experiences in China?
- (3) How did human rights violations affect North Korean refugees' educational experiences in China?

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is rooted in the transformative learning theory which centers on "experiencing a deep, structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feeling, and action. It is a shift of consciousness that dramatically and permanently alters our way of being in the world" (O'Sullivan, 2012, p. 4). Transformative learning plays an important role in the lives of refugees as they learn to adapt to their new environment (Billet &

Onsando, 2009). Even though the process of transformative learning may involve recalling painful memories, it can also be a rewarding experience. Many refugees experience a wide range of obstacles as they leave behind war, major atrocities, widespread famine, persecution, or other brutal conditions that leave them desperate and in search of a better life. North Korean refugees experience transformative learning as they reflect on their past and present experiences while adapting to their new lives. The world around them in China is brimming with new experiences, both positive and negative. They have to learn how to assimilate and acculturate into the unfamiliar environment and make sense of their lives. Although North Korea and China share similarities and have remained allies since the Cold War, they are economically, socially, linguistically, and culturally very diverse. These new experiences can be overwhelming for North Korean refugees who likely had a limited understanding of the outside world when they were living in North Korea.

According to Cranton and Taylor (2012), “Transformative learning theory is based on the notion that we interpret our experiences in our own way, and that how we see the world is a result of our perceptions of our experiences” (p. 5). Experience plays a pivotal role in the transformative learning process. Experience serves as the “primary medium” of transformation (Taylor & Cranton, 2013, p. 35). Furthermore, negative experiences can result in transformative learning (Mezirow, 1981). These experiences can include war, sickness, death, moving, and various other adverse factors (Mezirow, 1990). North Korean refugees experience many positive things in China, but they are often confined to their shelters or are victims of brokers or traffickers who take advantage of them. Even though they leave behind numerous human rights violations in North Korea, they are still plagued by human rights abuses in China. They can gain more knowledge about the world around them and potentially have more opportunities in China, but they still must be careful to conceal their identities. Despite significant risks involved with escaping to other countries, North Korean refugees can feel more empowered by the options that they have outside of China. Although they face significant risks,

they may also feel content with their lives in China and appreciate any form of safety and economic security that they have. Transformative learning may be rooted in negative events, but it has the power to vastly improve the lives of refugees as they deeply reflect on their experiences and strive to have a better future (Wright, 2007).

Critical reflection is a central component of transformative learning (Cranton & Roy, 2003). Critical reflection involves developing solutions to problems, evaluating the opinions of other people, and analyzing personal perceptions and beliefs (Mezirow, 1998). According to Mezirow (1997), “It becomes essential for learners to become critically reflective of the assumptions underlying intentions, values, beliefs, and feelings” (p. 6). In nations in which the government has tremendous control over the people, critical reflection is less likely to occur (Mezirow, 1998). North Korea is regarded as a restrictive country in which the government has significant authority over the people. However, as North Korean refugees are exposed to new environments and different perspectives, they assess the world around them more and critically examine their views with new insight. Since many of the volunteers, missionaries, and aid workers who are assisting the refugees at shelters in China are from South Korea or have lived outside of China, they likely have a more balanced and accurate understanding of the world. Although Chinese citizens have far more freedoms than the average North Korean person, they are still subjected to government censorship and other restrictions that may result in an unbalanced or inaccurate understanding of the world. Through these volunteers, missionaries, and aid workers, North Korean refugees gain more knowledge of the world around them. North Korean refugees can also access the Internet for the first time when they are in China. Despite Internet censorship in China, they are exposed to a wealth of information that they would not have had access to in North Korea.

Volunteers, missionaries, and aid workers who are assisting North Korean refugees must be sympathetic and understanding of their experiences and past lives. Those who are teaching North Korean refugees in safe houses need to respect the refugees’ ideas and culture as well

(Martin, 2004; Tolliver & Tisdell, 2006). Since many of those assisting North Korean refugees are affiliated with Christian churches, it is also vital that they do not force their beliefs upon the refugees. Although there are many harsh realities that North Korean refugees will ultimately learn about the North Korean regime and the appalling atrocities that occur in the country, individuals who are assisting refugees in safe houses also need to try to be understanding of the refugees' perspectives. As North Korean refugees learn more about their past and have to determine fact from fiction based on what they learned in North Korea, they eventually will need to critically reflect on their experiences and their understanding of the world around them. The transformative learning process does not occur immediately; it takes time for the refugees to adapt and learn from their new experiences (Magro & Ghorayshi, 2011).

### **China's Position on North Korean Refugees**

China repatriates North Korean refugees to North Korea (Chan & Schloenhardt, 2007). The Chinese government is a signatory to Article 33 of the 1951 UN Convention on the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol (Tanaka, 2008). Nonetheless, China is in violation of these laws since it does not classify these North Koreans as refugees, but rather as illegal economic migrants, and it deports them back to North Korea where they may face imprisonment, hard labor, and even the death penalty (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2014). China is fearful of a mass exodus of North Korean refugees (Cohen, 2012). Even though there is an office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in China, it does not have the authorization to assist North Korean refugees (Kirkpatrick, 2012). North Korean refugees also are not able to legally seek asylum at other countries' embassies and consulates in China.

### **North Korean Refugee Education in China**

According to Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human

Rights (1984), education is a basic human right that should be afforded to all people. Most North Korean refugees in China do not have access to the education system through lawful means. Many North Korean women marry Chinese men either by force or desperation. Children of Chinese fathers and North Korean mothers generally do not have legal Chinese identification cards and resident permits (Haggard & Noland, 2011) which are needed to attend school. If the child has a Chinese father, he can technically obtain legal documentation; however, this would put the North Korean mother at risk for arrest and deportation (Human Rights Watch, 2008). Marriages between North Korean refugee women and Chinese husbands are not recognized by the Chinese government (Committee for Human Rights, 2009). The women are sometimes sold several times, and the children are left with the fathers who may not take care of them; this results in some of the children becoming orphans who are not officially documented by the Chinese government (Ling & Ling, 2010). Consequently, they do not have legal access to Chinese schools. Some North Korean refugee children gain access to the Chinese education system. Primary school administrators are occasionally bribed and allow the students to enter the school, but without official records, the students are not able to proceed to secondary school (Kirkpatrick, 2012). Some parents have bought resident permits of other children who have Chinese citizenship and fake resident permits have also been purchased even though these methods are expensive and risky (Kirkpatrick, 2012). Many North Korean refugee children in China are orphans, and some are trying to work to support their family members in North Korea (B. H. Chung, 2003). Although some North Korean refugees are able to obtain an education in China, there are various human rights abuses occurring that inhibit their ability to safely get a formal education without risk of exposure.

NGOs and Christian organizations in China assist North Korean refugee children. Many aid workers believe it is easier to help the children in China rather than to help them escape to a safe country (Kirkpatrick, 2012). Some groups have developed educational programs to benefit the



children (Hyun, 2003; Kirkpatrick, 2012). In addition, shelters sometimes have funding to pay for the costs of textbooks and educational supplies so that the children are engaged in active learning (Kirkpatrick, 2012). Regrettably, the children are generally confined to the home and cannot interact and play outside, which is a precautionary measure to avoid detection and abduction (Hyun, 2003). Christian organizations and missionaries provide shelter to North Korean refugees, but proselytizing is a significant objective and the refugees are often forced to participate in Bible study and small church services (Kang, 2016). If the refugees fail to participate in the activities and follow the strict rules of the home, they may be subject to harsh punishment (Han, 2013). Some refugees have been promised a chance to escape from China to another country faster if they quickly prove their devotion to Christianity (Kang, 2016). Although North Korean refugees are given shelter and assistance in China, they are living a life in hiding. Moreover, the religious indoctrination that they experience is eerily similar to the government propaganda and brainwashing that they had left behind in North Korea. Even though Christian missionaries may have altruistic motives for assisting North Korean refugees, religious indoctrination can also be perceived as a human rights violation.

## **Research Method**

### **Research Plan and Design**

The purpose of this phenomenological inquiry was to learn more about the informal and formal education experiences of North Korean refugees in China and to gain more insight into how human rights violations impacted their access to education. This research is a part of a larger study which examined the educational experiences of North Korean refugees during their time in North Korea, during the transmigration period (including time spent in China), and in South Korea. This study focuses on the educational experiences of the participants while they were

in China.

A phenomenological design was chosen for this study because it is critical to learn more about the shared, holistic educational experiences of North Korean refugees in China. According to Moustakas (1994), “Phenomenology is concerned with wholeness, with examining entities from many sides, angles, and perspectives until a unified vision of the essence of a phenomenon or experience is achieved” (p. 58). A transcendental design was used because it is imperative to gain a richer understanding of the participants’ views of their experiences. It is also important for the researcher to remove personal biases and opinions that could skew the research process. Prior to beginning the study, the researcher used bracketing to consider how her opinions or preconceived views could influence the research process. The researcher had done extensive volunteer work with North Korean refugees and had taught North Korean refugees in university classes.

Prior to beginning data collection, IRB approval was given. Four types of data were collected including a demographic survey, a timeline of primary life events, standardized open-ended interviews, and journal entries. The demographic survey, primary life events timeline instructions, and journal writing instructions and topics were given to the participants through email. Participants communicated with the researcher through KakaoTalk (a popular, free messenger program in South Korea), Skype, Facebook, and email. The demographic survey consisted of 24 questions. The participants created a timeline of primary life events which included details about pre-migration in North Korea, transmigration in China and other countries, and post-migration in South Korea. Standardized, open-ended interviews were conducted with the participants through Skype. The participants were living in South Korea and the researcher was in the United States. Longer interviews lasted about one hour and 10 minutes, and the shortest interview was 50 minutes. The interviews were conducted in Korean and were transcribed and then translated into English. Finally, participants completed eight journal entries about their educational experiences during

pre-migration, transmigration, and post-migration. Some responses included several pages of details, and others were a few sentences. A trustworthy translator who also served as an interpreter was used throughout the research process.

## **Participants**

Criterion, purposive, and snowball sampling (Creswell, 2007) were used to obtain participants. Snowball sampling began with the pilot participant who recommended other potential participants. A recruitment letter was also sent electronically to potential participants. There were 15 participants in the study including the pilot participant. In phenomenological studies, the number of participants can range from five to 25 (Polkinghorne, 1989). The research was carried out until thematic saturation was reached (Creswell, 2007). Participants were given a 30,000 won (\$28 USD) gift card. All of the participants were in their twenties. Since this was a phenomenological study that focused on shared experiences, it was important to have participants who were similar in age. One participant did not state her age, but it can be inferred that she is in her twenties. Of the participants, 11 are male and four are female; furthermore, 13 are from Hamgyeongbukdo, and one is from Ryanggangdo. These provinces are located in the northeastern part of North Korea which borders China. One participant did not state her province. The participants lived in North Korea for at least 10 years and South Korea for at least three years. Most of the participants live in the Seoul-Metropolitan region of South Korea. The participants had also lived in China which is a common transit country on the new underground railroad. Some participants had stayed in China briefly, and some had stayed there for years by hiding in safe houses. Participants had also transited through other countries on the new underground railroad in order to safely seek asylum through South Korean embassies. Participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities. Table 1 provides an overview of the participants.

Table 1  
*Overview of Participants*

Pseudonym (Gender)	Premigration (Age of escape)	Transmigration (Duration)	Hobbies/Interests
Cheol Su (M)	Hamgyeongbukdo (18)	China, Mongolia (7 mo.)	Church, Driving
Hee Cheol (M)	Hamgyeongbukdo (21)	China, Thailand* (1 yr.)	Sports
Hyeon Su (M)	Hamgyeongbukdo (22)	China, Laos, Thailand (7 mo.)	Exercising, TV
Kyoung Hee (F)	Hamgyeongbukdo (22)	China, Laos, Thailand (2 yr.)	Bible Study, Reading
Kyu Hyeon (M)	Hamgyeongbukdo (10)	China, Mongolia (6 yr.)	Basketball
Min Sik (M)	Hamgyeongbukdo (*)	China, Vietnam, Laos, Thailand*(*)	Meeting Friends
Min Su (M)	Hamgyeongbukdo (16)	China, Thailand* (4 mo.)	Watching Sports
Seon Young (F)	* (21)	China, Thailand* (4 yr., 4 mo.)	Traveling
Seong Cheol (M)	Hamgyeongbukdo (14)	China, Vietnam, Laos (2.5 yr.)	Soccer
Su Jung (F)	Hamgyeongbukdo (23)	China, Vietnam, Cambodia (1.5 yr.)	English, Traveling
Yoon Cheol (M)	Hamgyeongbukdo (23)	China, Laos, Thailand (2 mo.)	Ping Pong, Soccer
Yoon Hee (F)	Ryanggangdo (11)	China, Thailand* (5 yr.)	Reading
Yoon Su (M)	Hamgyeongbukdo (23)	China, Laos, Thailand (4 yr.)	Sports
Young Cheol (M)	Hamgyeongbukdo (25)	China, Thailand* (3 mo.)	Reading, Photography
Young Su (M)	Hamgyeongbukdo (20)	China, Laos, Thailand (3 mo.)	Traveling, Hiking

*Note.* \*Information was not identified or was not fully identified (other transit countries or duration)

## Results

The following results highlight the essence of the participants' educational experiences in light of their exposure to human rights violations while in China. Although the participants had varying experiences in their day-to-day lives while they lived in China, there are commonalities that emerged that have been classified into thematic descriptions. These six

predominant themes that emerged include lack of formal education, hiding in fear, lack of trust, Christian education and informal lessons, limited formal education, and hope for the future. The results are a representative sample of the data obtained.

### **Lack of Formal Education**

Twelve of the participants did not receive a formal education while they were in China. Participants expanded on the importance of obtaining an education, but there were legal barriers and problems which prevented them from going to school. In addition, many of the participants moved frequently while they were in China. Since most of the participants did not receive a formal education or only had a limited education that did not last the entire duration of their time in China, lack of formal education represents the essence of their experience which is also connected to human rights violations since getting an education would put them at significant risk of being detected. Three participants, Kyu Hyeon, Yoon Hee, and Min Sik, obtained a formal education. Of the three participants, Kyu Hyeon seemed to have the most vivid memories of his education in China. He said, "In Chinese class, I memorized pages of Chinese books. All of these extra classes are taught in the schools in China, so *hagwons* (private education academies) are not needed." He could not go home from school until he finished all of his assignments. There were also Taekwondo and soccer clubs at his school. Even though Kyu Hyeon, Yoon Hee, and Min Sik, could obtain a formal education, they did not have access to schools the entire time that they were in China.

### **Hiding in Fear**

The participants knew that the Chinese government or North Korean agents could arrest them and send them back to North Korea. Seven of the participants, Seong Cheol, Kyoung Hee, Yoon Cheol, Hyeon Su, Min Sik, Su Jung, and Yeong Cheol, discussed how they remember hiding to prevent repatriation. Seong Cheol recalled paying a bribe to a police

officer. The police officer found out that he was North Korean and was going to turn him in. He also recalled paying money to border guards to escape from North Korea. Although he stated that he felt “lucky” to be able to pay the guard, he felt that he would not be so “lucky” if he was caught again. While he was in China he “felt like a hostage in his home.” He expanded on this and said, “I could not go outside and play with my friends. I was a prisoner. I was thankful to be safe, but living like that is not really living. When I did go outside, I felt a sense of paranoia knowing that people could know I was North Korean. I also could not speak Chinese well.”

Three participants, Kyoung Hee, Hyeon Su, and Young Cheol, remarked that they lived their life in hiding because they were often worried about being captured. Min Sik stated that he always hid because, “If they knew I was a refugee, I would be treated worse than a dog or pig.” He also escaped from the Chinese police. Yoon Cheol said, “I have always had a desire to learn things, but safety is so important. I could not risk getting caught to get an education. My goal was to make it to South Korea. I knew that if I could eventually get to South Korea that I could get an education.”

Receiving a formal education in China can be extremely risky because of the high possibility of arrest and deportation, so hiding was emphasized.

### **Lack of Trust**

The participants discussed the need to rely on different individuals, organizations, and churches to assist them in China. However, they worried about who to trust. If they attended school, that would expose them more to untrustworthy people who could receive compensation for turning them in. Lack of trust was a predominant theme mentioned among the participants. Seong Cheol stated that he escaped from police officers in China. He said, “Of course I had to trust people for my survival. I would have had a very hard time living if I had no one to help me, but I

was very careful about getting close to people and sharing information. People are paid bribes to turn in North Korean refugees.”

Min Sik mentioned being captured by the Chinese police three times. The first two times were not a major problem because he was very young, but the third time was different. He commented, “I was forced to go back to North Korea. I was kicked and beaten with a stick. That period lasted for about 1.5 months. Then I was sent to a camp for orphans.” During the train ride to the camp, he escaped from the train and went back to China. He mentioned being very cautious of his surroundings the final time that he left.

Some individuals or organizations may have been able to assist the participants in obtaining a formal education, but once again, networking and connecting with people is a major risk.

### **Christian Education and Informal Lessons**

Three participants, Yoon Su, Kyu Hyeon, and Cheol Su, discussed having lessons in their safe houses that related to Christianity. Many of the shelters in China are operated by Christian organizations and missionaries. These participants discussed having required Bible study, prayer sessions, and other lessons related to Christianity. Kyu Hyeon also mentioned reading the entire Bible at least 10 times while in China. He said, “My life centered on Christianity. I am still a Christian and am very thankful for the people who helped me. I learned a lot about the Bible and often prayed. I developed my understanding of Christianity.” Cheol Su discussed talking with other North Korean refugees who learned from South Korean missionaries. Four participants, Yoon Su, Min Sik, Su Jung, and Yoon Hee, discussed learning informally through independent study. Yoon Su said that it is nearly impossible to get a formal education in China. She did not have a sponsor who could help her gain access to schools. She also stated, “After escaping from North Korea, it is impossible to get an official education. It is impossible to have education. I educated myself. Be strong. Do not fall down.

You must survive. These thoughts made me have hope.”

Although several participants discussed having informal lessons and learning about Christianity, these are not formal types of learning in a standard academic environment.

### **Limited Formal Education**

Three participants were able to gain access to Chinese schools; however, this was not for the entire period in which they were in China. Min Sik expanded on his education in China and stated that it was a good opportunity for him and he studied hard. Kyu Hyeon was able to attend a high quality elementary school for ethnic Koreans with Chinese citizenship. He stated that he learned Korean, Japanese, English, music, exercise, mathematics, and other subjects. He also took many tests. He generally described having positive experiences while studying in China and mentioned that the schooling helped him to better assimilate into South Korea’s competitive education system. Yoon Hee attended school for 4 years in China and learned to speak Chinese. Even though these three participants were able to gain access to formal education, they were still very fearful of being exposed.

### **Hope for the Future**

Although data collection centered on human rights issues and education in China, six participants, Kyoung Hee, Min Sik, Cheol Su, Hee Cheol, Su Jung, and Yoon Hee, discussed the theme of having a new life and a better future. Hee Cheol stated, “Many people did not want to help me, and I had to be careful of my surroundings, but I met some very kind people in China whom I will never forget though. Being in China gave me some hope.” Kyoung Hee said that although she was fearful in China, she felt more secure. She said, “In China, there was enough to eat. I never worried about starving. People seemed happy. I missed my country, but I knew that my life was going to become better.” A more detailed description was provided by Min Sik:



I went to China to survive, leaving behind my hometown and family. When I crossed the Tumen River, I could see a Chinese town. I was afraid, because if I crossed the river, I would betray my country. If I was captured, I would go to jail. I had not eaten anything for several days, so I needed some food. I crossed the river, and then I kept running and did not look back.

He mentioned that when he was in China, he was amazed by what he saw around him including a corn field. This was surprising to him because he could not find enough food to eat in North Korea and resorted to eating roots that he scavenged for in the mountains. He mentioned truly being amazed because he thought North Korea was the best country in the world, but he could then see the disparities between China and North Korea. In China, he could find enough food to eat. That was his motivation for leaving North Korea. He learned many new and fascinating things from his experiences in China. Although the participants were fearful and worried about being exposed, they still discussed feeling hopeful and looked forward to the future.

### **Discussion and Implications**

Education was described as an important goal for the participants, but they were deprived of a formal education because of the risks of repatriation which could result in torture or even execution; additionally, most lacked the resources and support to be able to obtain a formal education. Numerous challenges and legal issues prevented them from going to school. The participants were often reminded of the realities of repatriation which includes interrogation as well as various punishments such as involuntary labor, being sent to a prison camp, and execution; additionally, a significant percentage of North Korean female refugees become victims of human trafficking (Margesson et al., 2007). Hiding in fear may not be directly linked to education; yet, if the participants were apprehensive about being captured and had to conceal their identities, it would be very difficult for them to gain access to formal

education outside of their shelters.

It is difficult to escape from North Korea without the assistance of other individuals, brokers, and organizational aid workers who are knowledgeable about the covert network. North Korean refugees must determine who can be trusted since many North Korean refugees are taken advantage of by local citizens, Chinese police, border guards, North Korean agents, brokers, and even missionaries and aid groups. Rewards are given to individuals who report North Korean refugees (Tanaka, 2008). Some brokers habitually threaten refugees while they are in China and other countries; but at the same time, the refugees need their assistance to be able to navigate the expansive underground network. Survival and evasion take precedence over education. If basic life necessities are not met, education does not have much value; moreover, reaching out to individuals or groups for assistance can be very risky. Education is a basic human right though. Since the Chinese government does not officially recognize North Korean refugees and classifies them as illegal economic migrants, international aid groups need to provide more educational resources and funding to assist North Korean refugees in hiding in China. Furthermore, it is essential to provide a balanced and accurate education to North Korean refugees that can empower them as they reflect on their experiences and develop goals for the future.

Although the participants were frequently in hiding, they still had new experiences in China. Some learned about Christianity and participated in informal lessons. Christianity was generally discussed in a positive light. Religious conversion can be connected to transformative learning which requires critical reflection of one's past and present experiences. Some of the participants discussed the profound importance of their Christian faith and how their daily actions and beliefs revolve around Christian principles and service. Even though Christianity was generally discussed in a positive way, it is also important that Christian organizations and missionaries not force religious beliefs upon refugees. Han (2013) studied Christian organizations in China and the impact that their proselytization had on North Korean refugees. These Christian or-

ganizations and missionaries may have altruistic motives for assisting North Korean refugees, but forcing religious views on other people can be perceived as a human rights violation. According to Kang (2016), although North Korean refugees are being assisted by missionaries in China, some have been exploited and are required to learn about Christianity. The people of North Korea are forced to study ideological lessons that center on the leader, Kim Jong Eun and his family. Christian aid organizations should not require refugees to study religious doctrines and participate in mandatory Bible study and church activities. Refugees have expressed their gratitude to these religious groups and missionaries and many have converted to Christianity, but proselytization should not be forceful and perceived as a form of excessive indoctrination that reminds the refugees of their lives in North Korea; additionally, indoctrination can be viewed as a human rights abuse.

The transformative experience is largely rooted in how individuals change perceptions of themselves as well as the world around them (O'Sullivan, 2012). The participants could gain more knowledge about the world that they probably would not have been able to learn about in North Korea. Participants discussed the new-found freedom that they experienced in China. Many North Korean refugees reported not knowing about life in China prior to escaping (Committee for Human Rights, 2009). The participants were guided by optimism and the desire to have a better future. This was also a transformational learning period that included positive and negative experiences. According to Taylor (1994), "When a stranger travels to another culture to live for an extended period of time, he or she often experiences a transformation. It occurs out of necessity for survival" (p. 389). This new experience in China was likely further intensified for the refugees since they had little awareness about the outside world when they lived in North Korea. They lived in hiding in fear for their safety, but while in hiding they had many chances to reflect and learn more about the world around them. They also had access to the Internet for the first time and were exposed to a considerable amount of information. While in North Korea, some are able to illegally

watch foreign movies and television shows or get access to information on smuggled devices, but this cannot compare to the information available on the Internet, even with censorship in China. Refugees can learn through new experiences and education that may have not been possible in their country of origin (Billet & Onsando, 2009).

The participants had many ambitions and remained hopeful and resilient during their time in China. They also desired a good education; however, there were various challenges that prevented them from achieving their goals. The three participants who were able to get a formal education still faced many obstacles and lived in fear that they would be deported. Although the purpose of this phenomenological inquiry was to focus on the shared accounts of the participants, it is also important to expand on the differences in the participants' stories. Testimonies of North Korean refugees become more plausible and gain credibility when refugees share similar memories with different details (Hassig & Oh, 2009). The essence of the participants' experiences centers on a lack of formal education in China which is connected to human rights violations. The participants lived in fear of being captured and repatriated. Education is not a priority if basic life needs including safety are not met. Gaining access to schools in China can be incredibly difficult and involves violating the law.

Some North Korean refugees in China and other countries on the new underground railroad choose to go to safe countries, including Thailand and Mongolia, to be granted safe passage to South Korea. However, this can be very dangerous and requires evading police and border guards. Although there are likely to be far more North Korean refugees living in China than in South Korea, the number of North Korean refugees in South Korea recently exceeded 30,000 (Ministry of Unification, 2016), which is a significant number. When North Korean refugees come to South Korea, they also experience transformative learning as they adapt to life in a highly competitive, capitalistic country that pushes the importance of hard work and professional and academic excellence (A. R. Lee, 2015). In addition, South Korean students are noto-

rious for studying hard which can be difficult for North Korean refugees to adapt to. Even if they work hard and try to achieve academic success, many are far behind their South Korean peers because they lack foundational knowledge. Once North Korean refugees escape from North Korea, they discover many new ways of life in China, in other countries on the new underground railroad, and once they enter South Korea.

South Korean educators, administrators, students, and society in general should become more knowledgeable about the experiences of North Korean refugees to help them better assimilate into society and reduce cultural problems and misunderstandings. In addition, the South Korean government must prepare for possible reunification in the near or distant future (Fuqua, 2011; Lankov, 2007). South Koreans often have difficulties understanding the challenges that North Korean refugees have experienced (Harden, 2009). South Korean society may be cognizant of the challenges that people face inside of North Korea, but there should also be increased awareness of the experiences of North Korean refugees in China and other locations on the new underground railroad; additionally, they should be more informed about the challenges of North Korean refugees living in South Korea.

Even though transformative learning is often based on negative experiences, it can lead to empowerment and personal development (Wright et al., 2007). Although South Korea recognizes North Korean refugees as citizens and provides numerous financial and educational benefits to them, many struggle to succeed due to the vast economic and social differences between the countries. However, since South Korea is a democratic and developed country, North Korean refugees have ample opportunities to learn and develop, even if it may be incredibly difficult for them. According to Billet and Onsando (2009), "For many students from refugee backgrounds, perhaps for the first time in their lives, they have real opportunities to choose and embark on life pathways that empower them through education" (p. 89). Many North Korean refugees struggle to assimilate into South Korean society; nevertheless, some have adapted well and have become very successful.

Volunteers, aid workers, and missionaries can play a key role in helping refugees to assimilate into the new culture as they traverse uncharted territories in their lives (Magro & Ghorayshi, 2011; Mezirow, 1981). Refugees in many countries are encouraged to adapt, integrate with the local population, and be a contributing member of society. Their transformation can also lead to a new found sense of citizenship and duty. This is not the case though for North Korean refugees in China who are treated as illegal economic migrants and often need to remain isolated to protect their identities. Still, through their voices, they can be a source of hope for people in North Korea who wish to escape and learn about the realities, both positive and negative, of the outside world. Although it is risky, their messages can be passed on to people in North Korea. Their transformative learning experiences can be a source of wisdom and guidance for North Korean citizens who are contemplating escaping.

This research can be beneficial to aid workers, religious officials, and humanitarian organizations in China, as well as countries that admit North Korean refugees. North Korean refugees live in various countries including South Korea, Russia, Japan, the Philippines, Singapore, the United States, Canada, Germany, the United Kingdom, and other European countries (International Crisis Group, 2006; C. K. Lee, 2012; Tanaka, 2008). According to C. K. Lee (2012), "Little is known currently about the North Korean refugee experience that would help host nations better understand and therefore better accommodate the educational adaptation needs of North Koreans" (p. 39). North Korean refugees share similarities with other refugee groups, but there are also many distinct differences that host countries must take into consideration when developing education or social integration programs.

## **Conclusion**

This study examined the educational experiences of North Korean refugees in China in light of their exposure to human rights violations.

Primary themes that emerged from the study include lack of formal education, hiding in fear, lack of trust, Christian education and informal learning, limited formal education, and hope for the future. The essence of the participants' experiences centers on a lack of education which can be attributed to human rights violations. The participants discussed living in hiding in safe houses to avoid arrest and deportation. Education is not a priority when basic human needs, including safety, are not met.

There are several primary limitations of this study. This sample does not represent all North Korean refugees in South Korea, China, or other countries. The participants also lived in China for varying amounts of time. They also transited through or lived in other countries on the new underground railroad which may make it difficult to remember specific experiences or events that happened in China. In addition, testimonies of North Korean refugees can change over time (Haggard & Noland, 2011; Hassig & Oh, 2009), and their stories may become altered by listening to the accounts of other North Korean refugees' whom they know personally or have learned about.

Future studies should examine human rights violations and educational experiences of individuals living in North Korea under the Kim Jong Eun regime. None of the participants in this study lived under Kim Jong Eun's regime which began in late 2011. Additional studies can explore human rights violations and educational experiences on the new underground railroad (transit countries) including Mongolia, Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. Quantitative studies can also be conducted to reach a larger number of participants. In China and other countries where North Korean refugees face deportation, researchers must be careful to not harm the refugees by potentially exposing them. Conducting studies on refugees who have recently arrived in South Korea would be beneficial since their memories are still fresh; however, researchers should not intrude in the lives of North Korean refugees. In addition, the participants mentioned that sometimes research can be burdensome. Future studies could examine North Korean refugees in more natural settings such as schools or in informal educational classes

so that participants are not troubled with additional research tasks that involve a lot of their personal time.

Although North Korean refugees in China are in hiding, and it is vital to not expose them, greater effort must be placed on providing them with a useful education and skills training that can help them to survive and have a better future. According to Hyeonsoo Lee (2016), a North Korean refugee living in South Korea, North Korean refugees in China “have no rights and cannot legally find jobs, so they must scrape by on the margins of society” (para. 14). Lee (2016) also mentioned that it is safer for North Korean refugees to remain hidden in China because there are tremendous risks involved in escaping to another country. There is estimated to be a significant number of North Korean refugees in China that far exceeds the number who go on to South Korea and other countries. Therefore, international NGOs, missionaries, and other charity organizations must strive to provide assistance to the refugees so that they can adapt in Chinese society, have a sustainable income, avoid detection to prevent repatriation, learn practical skills, and obtain a balanced and useful education. It is also essential for pressure to be placed on the Chinese government to protect North Korean refugees. Although the Chinese government still maintains close ties with the North Korean government, it cannot disregard international laws and humanitarian principles by neglecting the basic human rights of people. If China will not provide economic assistance and shelter to North Korean refugees, it should at least grant them safe passage to South Korea or another country that will give them refugee status. The Chinese government should also allow the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Beijing to visit and provide aid to North Korean refugees.

Individuals who are interested in protecting and educating North Korean refugees in China should donate to reputable organizations that assist North Korean refugees. Some organizations may also have volunteer positions in China and other countries that provide assistance to North Korean refugees. Those who wish to assist North Korean refugees in China must be aware of the risks involved though since they can face



imprisonment and potentially expose the refugees. It is also critical for government officials, policy makers, educators, and people around the world to gain insight into the problems afflicting North Korean refugees in China. Although many South Korean people are broadly aware of the challenges faced by North Korean refugees, it is important for them to understand the depth of their problems including the challenges that they face while living in China. Since South Korea accepts North Korean refugees and grants them citizenship, this is especially important. In addition, the people of China have a moral responsibility to not report North Korean refugees to the authorities. Government censorship may make it difficult for the people of China to be aware of the myriad obstacles and risks that North Korean refugees face, but fortunately there are many citizens who do assist them despite risks of being caught. As more Chinese citizens travel abroad, hopefully they will be afforded opportunities to learn about the experiences of North Korean refugees and become sympathetic toward their plight. As the world becomes more globalized, people must understand that they have moral responsibilities as global citizens outside of the borders of their own country which extends to assisting refugees, ensuring that refugees are safe and have access to education, and bringing light to their stories so that more people are aware of their experiences.

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1) This study is partially based on the researcher's doctoral dissertation entitled *A Phenomenological Study on the Role of Juche, Militarism, and Human Rights in the Educational Life Experiences of North Korean Defectors*. Premigration (A. R. Lee & English, 2016) and postmigration (A. R. Lee, 2015) studies on the participants have been previously published.

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