

Thailand and the North Korean Defectors

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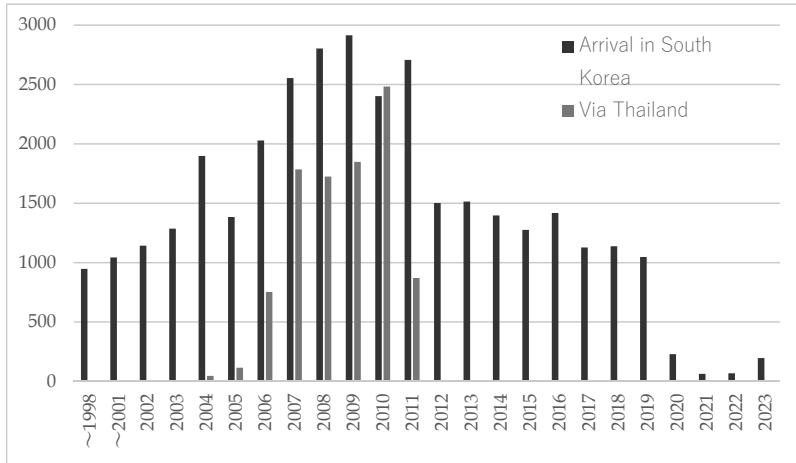
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1. North Korean defector heading for Thailand

Many people have escaped from North Korea (Democratic People's Republic of Korea: DPRK). The main reasons driving these defections are political oppression and economic hardship, and most of the defectors have ended up in South Korea. According to South Korea's Ministry of Unification, the number of North Korean defectors arriving in South Korea increased markedly: from 947 until 1998, to 1,043 between 1999 and 2001, and to nearly 3,000 in 2009. The number of defectors arriving in South Korea has since halved to around 1,500, and decreased to nearly 1,100 in 2017. Furthermore, the number dropped sharply from 2020.

The routes by which people fleeing North Korea arrive in South Korea are diverse. Some crossed the 38th parallel of north latitude under high alert or paddled out into the Sea of Japan despite the risk of weather conditions. However, the main route is across the Yalu and Tumen Rivers into China. From China, although many defectors headed for Mongolia in the early years, an increasing number of defectors passed from southwest China to Southeast Asia (Skretteberg 2018). Among Southeast Asia countries, defectors going through Thailand increased dramatically after 2004. In 2011, 2,482 North Korean defectors arrested in Thailand were able to contact the South Korean embassy there. This is more than the 2,402 defectors who arrived in South Korea in the same year (see figure). After this, the Thai government stopped publishing the number of arrested defectors. This does not mean that no more defectors are arriving in Thailand. For example, in 2016, the number was reported to be 535.

Figure: The number of defectors: arrivals in South Korea and those via Thailand (persons)



Source: For arrivals in South Korea, Korean Ministry of Unification (https://www.unikorea.go.kr/eng_unikorea/relations/statistics/defectors/); for those via Thailand, Aksaraphak 2017. : 78

Why were defectors bound for Thailand? In this paper, we will first review the relationship between Thailand and North Korea to see how close or distant the two countries are. It's apparent that the two countries do not have particularly close friendly relations. Next, we will look at how North Korean defectors pass through China to reach the borders of Southeast Asian countries. Yunnan Province in southwest China borders Myanmar and Laos, while Guangxi in southern China borders Vietnam. Thailand, however, does not border China. Thailand borders Laos and Myanmar but not Vietnam.

On the other hand, Thailand's other neighbor, Cambodia, does not border China. Defectors enter Thailand via Laos or Myanmar or take a cargo ship from Yunnan Province down the Mekong River, an international river, to Thailand. According to a researcher who boarded such a cargo ship departing from Kuan Yue Port in the Xishuangbanna (Sipsongpanna) district of Yunnan Province, the required travel time was two to three days (Hashitani, 2011 pp. 66-71).

Based on previous studies, we will then consider what attracts defectors to Thailand and why they choose Thailand over Vietnam, Laos, or Myanmar. One researcher notes "Thailand is the closest

country to a heaven that North Korean refugees can reach" (Jeong, 2020 p. 22). To preempt the conclusion, the appeal of Thailand was that once the defectors reached Thailand they would not be deported to North Korea or China and could then travel to South Korea relatively easily. The fact that defectors, who are illegal immigrants because they have not completed immigration procedures at Thailand's immigration office, are willing to appear in person and have themselves arrested tells us that Thailand is a gateway to "heaven" for defectors.

2 Thailand-North Korea Relations

2.1 Political Relations

Thailand adopted a pro-U.S. line when the Korean War broke out in 1950 and took the initiative in deploying government troops. In this sense, it was an enemy of North Korea. However, following the end of the Vietnam War and improved relations with China, Thailand established diplomatic relations with North Korea on May 8, 1975. The North Korean ambassador to Myanmar became in charge of Thailand, and the Thai ambassador to Beijing became in charge of North Korea; the North Korean Trade Representative Office in Bangkok, which had been established on December 25, 1979, was upgraded to an embassy in Thailand on March 15, 1991. The Thai side did not have an embassy in Pyongyang, and the ambassador to Beijing continued to oversee North Korea.

Dignitaries began coming and going in the 1980s and increased in the 1990s. North Korean foreign ministers visited Thailand in 1982 and 1988. The Thai Minister of Foreign Affairs also visited North Korea in 1987. Interestingly, several members of the royal family from Thailand visited North Korea: Princess Galyani Vadhana, the sister of King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX) visited in 1987; Princess Sirindhorn in 1991; and Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn (the present king Rama X) twice in 1992 and 1993. It is believed that North Korea was aware well of the political importance of the royal family in Thailand and invited them.

After the end of the Cold War, relations between the two countries deepened. This was especially true on the economic and regional diplomatic fronts. After the Chatchai administration (August 1988-February 1991), Thailand began to emphasize economic diplomacy while simultaneously seeking to expand its role in the ASEAN region. North Korea, on the other hand, faced economic difficulties with the end of the Cold War and needed to expand diplomatic relations and increase trade. North Korea focused on Europe and Southeast Asia, and in Southeast Asia it emphasized Thailand.

For North Korea, Thailand's appeal was fourfold: 1) Thailand is geographically located in the

center of Southeast Asia. This favorable location is evidenced by the fact that Thailand ranks third in the world in terms of the number of U.S. diplomatic missions abroad. 2) Thailand plays a leading role in ASEAN. 3) Thailand has the food and raw materials North Korea needs. 4) Compared to other countries, Thailand has not taken a tough stance toward North Korea politically or economically (Nithi, 2020 p. 147).

An example of Thailand's conciliatory stance is the kidnapping of a Thai woman. In his book, former U.S. soldier Jenkins mentions a Thai woman, Anocha Panjoi, who was abducted in Macau. In contrast to the Japanese government's intense pressure on North Korea to return the abductees to Japan, the Thai government only summoned and questioned the North Korean ambassador and took no concrete measures when the North Korean side denied it (Nithi, 2010 pp. 150-151).

North Korea made efforts to expand its relations with Thailand in the 1990s. North Korea hoped for military cooperation, and its Minister of Defense visited Thailand in 1990. The Thai Defense Minister also visited North Korea in 1993. North Korea requested that a military attaché be stationed in Thailand and a Thai military attaché at its embassy in Beijing be assigned to North Korea. Thailand did not respond to this request. Next, North Korea proposed the conclusion of cultural cooperation agreements in 1989 and 1991. As Thailand did not respond positively, North Korea dispatched the Speaker of the National Assembly to Thailand, where he gained an audience with King Bhumibol Adulyadej in March 2002, leading to the conclusion of a cultural exchange agreement (Nithi, 2010 p. 146).

Thailand prepared the international stage for North Korea. During Thailand's ASEAN chairmanship, Foreign Minister Surin Pitsuwan lobbied North Korea's Foreign Minister to join the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and through Cambodia's King Sihanouk, who had a pipeline to North Korea. As a result, North Korea joined the ARF in 2000. Participation in the international multilateral interactions was greatly beneficial to North Korea. North Korea's Foreign Minister was able to meet with US Secretary of State Albright before she visited North Korea. North Korea joined the ARF because it was not under the firm control of the United States and friendly countries such as Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia were its members (Nithi, 2010 p. 152).

A problem arose in 1999: the Hong Sun-kyung incident. The North Korean government informed the Thai government that Hong, a North Korean embassy official, had defrauded the Thai government of \$80 million that North Korea paid for the purchase of rice from Thailand. They also added that if the Thai government could not arrest Hong, it would not be able to get the proceeds. It was later revealed that an embassy car heading toward the Laotian border was involved in a traffic accident. It was discovered that embassy officials were attempting to take

Hong and his family into custody as an excuse to avoid paying the rice purchase price. The Thai government deported 11 embassy employees and banned them from entering the country (Nithi, 2010 p. 152).

2.2 Economic Relations

Trade between Thailand and North Korea was in surplus on the Thai side, with the main exports being rice, sugar, and tin, as well as other industrial products such as computers and their components. In some years, crude oil and chemical products were also exported. Thai imports were industrial raw materials such as iron, power equipment, minerals, and chemicals (Nithi, 2010 pp. 147-148).

The greatest impediment to trade was North Korea's ability to pay. For this reason, a trading account was used (Nithi, 2010 p. 148). When North Korea purchased 300,000 tons of rice in 1993 and 1995, Thailand had to provide the North Korean government with a one- to two-year loan. When North Korea failed to repay the loan, the Thai government began deducting from the price of goods imported from North Korea by private Thai companies. This was done to circumvent the problem of North Korea's inability to pay in its reserve currency (dollars or yen) (Nithi, 2010 p. 148). As a result, trade between the two countries has increased from only \$13.1 million in 1994 to \$206.9 million in 2000. Thailand consequently became North Korea's fourth largest trading partner, reaching a peak of \$328.6 million in 2004.

Allegations of corruption arose in Thailand over the sale of rice. The Thai Senate investigated the sale of 300,000 tons of rice to North Korea for 20 billion baht. The ship carrying the rice was headed to somewhere other than North Korea. There was a possibility of collusion between Thai suppliers and North Korean representatives. If the rice was sold to North Korea, it would take two years before payment was made, and it was not a certainty that a payment would be made. Though the price was lower, cash would be paid immediately for the rice if sold to a third country. The North Korean representatives were reportedly paid \$6 per ton (Nithi, 2010 p. 153).

A notable aspect of the economic relationship between the two countries was the investment in North Korea's telecommunications business by a Thai company. Loxpac, a subsidiary of a famous Thai trading company Loxley, which belongs to a powerful business group owned by the Lamsam family, has invested in the Korea Posts and Telecommunications Corporation (KPTC), a state company owned by the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications (MPT) of North Korea, to establish Northeast Asia Telephone and Telecommunications (NEAT&T). NEAT&T opened the Rason International Telecommunication Centre in Rason Special City. NEAT&T was the first

mobile telecommunications operator in North Korea and began providing cell phone services in Pyongyang and Rason on November 11, 2002. Loxpac had acquired long-term business rights by developing a telecommunications network¹.

The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) unanimously adopted Resolution No. 2375 on September 11, 2017, prohibiting existing joint ventures with North Korean individuals and entities; NEAT&T's business must be dissolved within 120 days. Under the resolution, Loxpac ceased operations and transferred the assets of NEAT&T to KPTC in 2018.

Before the resolution, the UNSC had begun imposing sanctions in connection with North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missile development, banning imports from North Korea in 2006 and exports to North Korea in 2009. Reflecting this, imports from North Korea have declined markedly since 2007, and exports have also declined significantly since 2008 (see table). Apart from the reduction in trade and investment, North Koreans working in Thailand have also decreased. In December 2017, the UN adopted Resolution 2397, strengthening economic sanctions against the launch of an ICBM-class ballistic missile on November 29 of the same year, obligated UN member states to repatriate workers from North Korea to North Korea. That deadline was set for two years, and as of December 2019, North Korean citizens in Thailand for work purposes would be deported.

Table: Trade between Thailand and North Korea (\$ million)

year	exports	imports	total	rank
2000	186.90	20.05	205.10	74
2001	106.33	21.80	124.80	78
2002	172.78	42.90	215.13	67
2003	203.59	49.92	252.55	68
2004	239.84	88.82	327.41	57
2005	206.98	119.47	325.76	52
2006	204.08	69.57	273.16	60
2007	179.52	33.51	212.84	69
2008	46.37	28.73	75.10	86
2009	30.43	13.92	44.35	89
2010	29.54	21.37	50.91	98

¹ Tamura, Kazuteru, "Kukyo wo mitometa koryolink kita-chousen seisai no eikyou to sinki sannyo no kanousei (In DPRK, koryolink and KANGSONG NET are providing mobile phone service)", February 16, 2016 (<https://wirelesswire.jp/2016/02/50321/>).

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2011	24.12	12.58	36.70	108
2012	40.31	21.92	62.23	108
2013	99.79	13.90	113.68	111
2014	107.25	19.08	126.33	113
2015	74.96	7.02	81.98	108
2016	26.35	2.27	28.62	125
2017	1.71	0.51	2.22	159
2018	0.51	0.33	0.83	185
2019	0.16	0.01	0.17	222
2020	1.24	0.04	1.28	217
2021	0.09	0.26	0.35	189
2022	0.04	0.01	0.05	230
2023	0.03	0.11	0.15	193

Source: Department of Trade Negotiations, Ministry of Commerce, Thailand

3 Escape Routes

3.1 Passage through China

Although China had taken a tolerant attitude toward defectors, it hardened its attitude in 2002 after an incident in which North Korean defectors rushed to diplomatic establishments in China to ask for help. They included the embassies of Spain, Germany, the United States, Canada, Albania, and Ecuador, and the consulates general of Japan, the United States, and South Korea (Yoon, 2006 p. 297). The Chinese government demanded the extradition of those who had fled to the embassies and consulates.

When Kim Jong-un became the leader of North Korea in 2011, China's attitude hardened further. Since China is cooperative with North Korea, the Chinese transit portion of the defectors' escape is reported to be the most dangerous (Jeong, 2020 pp. 15-18). According to NGOs, there are between 30,000 and 50,000 defectors in China, and the Chinese government knows where they are, but because of their economic and demographic advantages has left them without arrest or other action.

It was reported in 2011: "The defectors take great risks to get here. After escaping into China, they must dodge police who may arrest them and send them back to North Korea to be imprisoned. They usually need to save money to pay brokers who organize the journey, but as illegal workers,

they are subject to exploitation. Many women are forced into the sex trade, while men end up working as hired muscle for Chinese gangsters” (Ferrie, 2011).

Religious organizations, NGOs, and brokers assist defectors, helping them move from China to the borders of Mongolia and Southeast Asia. Winn reported in 2017 that defectors' "journeys are typically managed by either rogue people smugglers, who charge several thousand dollars, or secretive Christian networks operating out of Seoul. It is reported that "[t]he cost of moving a North Korean defector through China rose to tens of thousands of dollars from thousands of dollars before the pandemic"².

The Christian support network has actively assisted defectors in China. Once in China, defectors are either assisted by contractors who charge thousands of dollars to move them to South Korea or by a Christian network headquartered in Seoul. The latter is also supported by fundraising in the United States, sometimes referred to as the "underground railroad," the trails used by enslaved Americans in the 19th century (Winn, 2011).

According to members of a Christian network, the first month in China was spent in the homes of their supporters, where they were well-fed. This was because if they were emaciated, they would be easily detected on the move. Since they traveled by public transportation, railroads, and buses, they had to evade the scrutiny of Chinese officials. Once they had improved the fleshiness of their emaciated bodies and came to "look like Chinese," they took public transportation to their destinations. A journalist reported in 2011 that escapees were exposed "to more than a week's worth of bus and train rides riddled with random checkpoints" (Winn, 2011).

3.2 Beyond China

"Underground railroads" for defectors include those going to Mongolia via China and those going from southwest China to Vietnam, Laos, and Myanmar.

In the 1990s, it took 15 hours to put them on a bus to Mongolia, which was possible for about \$500 per person. Since 1999, Korean Christian organizations and Chinese brokers have helped defectors escape to Mongolia. Along the way, if caught by Mongolian soldiers, they were sent to the South Korean embassy in the capital, Ulaanbaatar, but if caught by Chinese soldiers, they were repatriated to North Korea (Aksaraphak, 2017: 75). However, as China tightened its crackdown and built an interdiction line at the border, they changed their route to southwest China.

² "Defecting from North Korea Is Now Far Harder", *The New York Times*, July 9, 2023 (<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/09/world/asia/north-korea-china-defectors.html>).

They arrived at China's southwestern border in a little over a week using public transportation such as trains and buses. They had to pass through checkpoints along the way. From China, they crossed the border into Vietnam, Laos, and Myanmar before arriving in Thailand.

Many defectors came to Vietnam because of the country's early tolerance for defectors. The tolerance was partly due to a surge in direct investment from South Korea, which became the largest investor in Vietnam. In 2004, the Vietnamese government sent 468 defectors to South Korea. Vietnam explained that this was out of respect for domestic and international law and human rights. North Korea protested and recalled its ambassador; when the Vietnamese foreign minister visited North Korea in 2008, the issue of defectors became a topic of discussion (Akasaphak, 2017 p. 75). The Vietnamese government changed its attitude under pressure from North Korea. The hardening of the Vietnamese attitude contributed to an increase in defectors to Thailand.

In Laos, NGOs and missionaries have been assisting defectors. Lao government officials sometimes arrested defectors but let them go if they paid a ransom; in 2007, they demanded \$1,000 per person from a Japanese NGO; in 2009, the Lao government allowed 50 defectors to travel to South Korea (Akasaphak, 2017: 76). However, in May 2013, nine North Korean orphans between the ages of 15 and 23 were arrested and deported to North Korea. Since this coincided with a visit to Pyongyang by the Laotian Foreign Minister, it was thought that Laos might have used this as a bargaining chip. The international community criticized the South Korean government for not responding quickly enough. Laos signed an agreement with North Korea in March 2016, showing the closeness of relations between the two countries. This was related to the fact that China's influence on Laos has been greater than that of Vietnam since 2013 (Jeong, 2020 pp. 19-20).

4 Attractiveness of Thailand

4.1 Defectors in Thailand

Even though Thailand does not border China, most defectors heading to Southeast Asia via China go to Thailand (Han, 2020 p. 75). In the period between 2004 and 2011, Thailand was a popular route for defectors: 46 in 2004, 752 in 2005, 1,785 in 2007, 1,849 in 2009, and 2,482 in 2010. By 2006, the rise in volume reportedly had strained the system and led Bangkok authorities to intensify measures to prevent illegal entry by North Koreans. In an indication of the Thai government's fraying patience, the Foreign Ministry complained in December 2006 that international and local NGOs...were hurting its ability to prevent the illegal entry of North Korean

defectors” (WikiLeaks, 2009: 13). Despite these frustrations, it was reported in 2011 that 95% of the North Korean defectors arrived in South Korea via Thailand. The Thai government has since stopped releasing the number of defectors; in 2013, it was estimated at 10-15 defectors per week.

Although Thailand does not welcome defectors, Thailand contrasts favorably with Vietnam, Laos, and Myanmar, which are more lukewarm toward defectors. In Thailand, defectors are treated as illegal immigrants. The Immigration Office of the National Police Agency handles Thailand's immigration administration. This has been the case since the formation of the modern state in Thailand at the end of the 19th century when the police were established under the Ministry of Interior and has remained unchanged even after the police were separated from the Ministry of Interior in 1998. Defectors are taken into custody by the immigration police as illegal immigrants and are kept in detention facilities for one month. After securing their safety in the camps, they are handed over to the South Korean embassy for asylum in South Korea. For this reason, defectors turn themselves in for arrest when they enter Thailand. Thailand is one of the easiest countries for defectors to reach where they can expect extradition to South Korea.

The border area between Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar is known as the Golden Triangle. The Mekong River, which flows down from Yunnan Province in China, forms the border between Laos and Myanmar, and the Golden Triangle is the area where the Ruak River, which forms the border between Myanmar and Thailand, meets the Mekong River. The Golden Triangle was once famous for poppy cultivation, and today there are casinos here. Chiang Rai Province is in this northernmost part of Thailand, and Chiang Saen, a river port on the Mekong River, is located there.

Many have entered Thailand from the Golden Triangle. According to a lawyer in Chiang Rai, as of 2011, an increasing number of people were coming down to Chiang Rai by cargo ship from Chinese territory on the upper Mekong River. However, some were entering from Nong Khai and Nakhon Phanom via Laos on the opposite bank of the Mekong River. Reuters had expected an increase from 535 in 2016 to 385 in the first half of 2017³. In August 2015, a Christian missionary who has lived in Thailand for nearly 20 years was arrested for helping seven defectors smuggle themselves into Thailand in June via Laos.

According to a 2016 article in *The Bangkok Post*, immigration police reported that the number of defectors coming to Thailand had increased to about 2,000 a year as more defectors used the

³ “North Korean defectors surge into Thailand amidst regional tension”, *Reuters*, August 1, 2017 (<https://www.nst.com.my/world/2017/08/263054/north-korean-defectors-surge-thailand-amidst-regional-tension>).

route via Laos.⁴ North Korean defectors entering China first worked to earn money to travel to southern China. Some use the Golden Triangle route, but most prefer to go through Laos. From Laos, they either head for Chiang Saen in Chiang Rai or cross the Mekong River to Nong Khai, Nakhon Phanom, Bueng Kan, and Chiang Khong (Loei Province). Upon entering Thailand, they would head to the police to be arrested. After their arrest, Korean government officials visited them and arranged for their travel to South Korea.

According to the Thai immigration office, migration process of defectors was as follows: 1) first cross the border into China; 2) take the train to Beijing, where they stay for a few months to prepare for their move to the south; 3) head to Sichuan Province and then to Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture of Yunnan Province; 4) cross the border into Laos; 5) cross the Mekong River into Thailand and have them arrested.

Upon arrival in Thailand, defectors are arrested by Thai officials to seek asylum in Korea. Some of them intentionally commit minor crimes to be arrested. They are fined a small amount for illegal entry and transferred to a detention center in Bangkok. Some travel to Bangkok alone and turn themselves in to save time before leaving the country. Because the South Korean constitution grants citizenship to North Korean citizens, North Korean defectors travel to South Korea as returnees. North Korean defectors who arrived in Thailand would migrate to South Korea and the U.S., with the former accounting for the majority. The time between arrival in Thailand and departure for South Korea is reported to be approximately one month, and due to the increase in the number of people entering Thailand since 2004, South Korea proposed the establishment of a support center in Chiang Rai. The Thai government did not allow it, judging that the increase in arrivals and the resulting increase in brokers would threaten national security (Aksaraphot, 2017: 78).

4.2 Survey of Immigration Police Officers

Artnarong, an immigration police officer working in Chiang Saen, Chiang Rai Province, where many defectors enter the country, wrote his master's thesis on defectors at Phayao University in 2012. He describes the 27 defectors in custody, including interviews with colleagues, and explains why and how they came to Thailand and what the police officers' views are on them.

Artnarong provides an overview of the defectors' arrival in Thailand. Initially, he details, many came via Vietnam. However, the North Korean government put pressure on the Vietnamese

⁴ "North Korea defectors a 'dilemma'", *Bangkok Post*, January 26, 2016 (<https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/838792/north-korea-defectors-a-dilemma>).

government to tighten its crackdown on them. The same is true of Myanmar and Laos. As a result, more were going to Thailand (Artnarong, 2012: 8-9). The Thai government has been arresting 1,000 illegal defectors a year in Chiang Rai Province alone.

NGO organizations have been set up in Thailand to assist, leaving 300-500 North Koreans in Thailand waiting to seek asylum in a third country. In addition, over 5,000 North Koreans are waiting in the border areas between China and Myanmar and China and Laos for an opportunity to enter Thailand (Artnarong, 2012: 2).

The time taken to reach Chiang Saen after leaving North Korea is two to three weeks, at a cost of 100,000 to 200,000 baht (Artnarong, 2012: 58-59, 62). In addition to this, food costs would be required along the way. According to Artnarong, although there are serious risks when crossing the border from North Korea into China, it is often possible to reach the Thai border once in China. North Koreans, unlike people from Vietnam, Laos, and Myanmar, look like Chinese and can easily blend in with the Chinese, so they reach Xishuangbanna in Yunnan Province at the border and come to Chiang Saen.

From Xishuangbanna, they take a cargo ship. The boat costs 500 won (2,500 baht) per person. The cargo ship terminates at a port town in Bo-Keo Province, Laos, about 15 km upstream from Chiang Saen. There, they will transfer to another ship. When the Chinese government's crackdown is too severe to travel down the Mekong River, defectors sometimes travel through Myanmar territory.

There is another study on immigration police officers. Ninety-five defectors and 270 police officers in Chiang Rai were surveyed. According to the survey, defectors choose Thailand because 1) it has a long border, making it easy to smuggle them in; 2) if they are arrested, the charges are light, with a fine of 2,000 baht and one month in prison, and they are given a suspended sentence and immediately begin the process of transfer to a third country (Baenyapha et al. 2013 pp. 95-109).

In China, they moved to Yunnan with the help of brokers. Safe passage requires reliance on Chinese brokers who are paid 150,000 to 300,000 baht as a reward. If they need more money, they work in China to earn it. The contingency fee is paid upon arrival in Korea (Baenyapha et al., 2013 p. 105).

Both Artnarong and Baenyapha et al. point out that defectors choose Thailand because the government is more humane than in neighboring countries, punishment is lighter when arrested in Thailand, and Thai people are kind and caring.

4.3 Japanese Views

Ebihara, a Japanese researcher involved in North Korean abductee rescue and assisting North Korean defectors in Thailand, explained in an interview with VOA: "Since 2004, the number of North Korean defectors coming to Thailand has increased rapidly. The total number of defectors since 2004 is about 10,000. This increase can be attributed to a change in policy in Vietnam. In the past, many defectors were heading to Vietnam. The Vietnamese government used to send 200-300 at a time to South Korea. After strong protests by the North Korean government, Vietnam changed its policy.

The main route for defectors was through Mongolia. However, there is a risk of arrest by Chinese officials, and the cold winter temperatures made passage difficult. The southern route, in contrast, is subtropical and thus accessible year-round. One of the reasons why Thailand was chosen as an alternative to Vietnam is that the Thai government does not repatriate North Korean defectors to North Korea.

Ebihara said that, according to interviews with defectors in South Korea, many of them took years to arrive in Thailand from the time of departure. If they are lucky, it takes three to four months. After hiding in northern China, they head to the south. Along the way, they are subjected to human trafficking, prostitution, and other hardships⁵.

Apart from that, the Japanese North Korean Refugee Relief Fund has gone to the Thai-Laos border survey and published a report. The Fund surveyed the border region between Thailand and Laos from January 14 to 19, 2018, interviewing local police officers and officials from diplomatic missions.

The first stop was Nakhon Phanom in northeastern Thailand. Nakhon Phanom is the capital of Nakhon Phanom Province, facing Laos across the Mekong River. Among the several routes by which defectors cross from Laos to Thailand, the city has suddenly come into the limelight in recent years. The landing sites of defectors on the Thai side of the Mekong River include, from upstream, the Golden Triangle, Chiang Saen, and Chiang Khong. Since some Korean NGOs sending defectors were half-openly too active for the Thai authorities to bear, the police tightened their control over Korean NGO activists. As a result, the crossing point was reportedly moved downstream to Nakhon Phanom.

⁵ "North Korean Refugees Seek Freedom Via Thailand", VOA, Dec 29, 2011 (<https://www.voanews.com/a/north-korean-refugees-seek-freedom-via-thailand-136370353/150081.html>).

According to the police in Nakhon Phanom, regarding the future influx of North Korean defectors, "It is difficult to limit the influx of defectors from North Korea because every place in Thai territory bordering the Mekong River is a point of influx. In the past, the average size of one group coming to the police station throughout the year has been five to seven people; in 2017, Nakhon Phanom police detained about 400 people. As for the background to the increase in North Korean arrivals over the past two to three years, Nakhon Phanom police said they heard that it was the result of stricter policing in Chiang Saen and Chiang Khong upstream.

According to Chiang Khong police, until 2015, they had been detaining approximately 1,000 illegal North Koreans per year in accordance with the law; in 2016, they detained approximately 700, and in 2017, approximately 300; in January 2018, the number of detainees was just 2. He said he expected that the number of detainees for the same year would be less than 100. He speculated that the decrease in detainees may be related to the strict checkpoints along the defectors' route.

During an exchange of views at the Japanese embassy, the Laotian police's opinion was revealed that about 1,000 North Koreans were looking for opportunities to enter Thailand on the Laotian side⁶.

5 Conclusion.

The number of defectors reaching South Korea has declined sharply from a high of 2,914 in 2009, 1,137 in 2018, 1,047 in 2019 to 229 in 2020 and 63 in 2022⁷ (see Figure). A human rights worker testified, "[T]he decline in defections does not stem from a diminished desire among North Koreans to escape their oppressive regime... Rather, it reflects the mounting difficulties imposed by China's pervasive surveillance measures⁸".

According to the Daily Yomiuri, "In the past, defectors who fled to China typically used fake ID cards prepared by brokers to impersonate ethnic Koreans in China and traveled by train or bus to the Southeast Asian border. With the current digitization of ID cards, however, forgery is no longer possible. They have no choice but to take passenger cars or taxis to Southeast Asia, but even on

⁶ Kita-chosen nanmin kyuen kikin (North Korean Refugee Relief Fund), "Tai Laosu kokkyo chosa hokoku (Thai-Laos border survey report.)", HUFFPOST, June 18, 2018 (https://www.huffingtonpost.jp/entry/thai-laos-20180618_jp_5c5b7ddce4b0faa1cb68119c).

⁷ King, Robert R. "Number of North Korean Defectors Drops to Lowest Level in Two Decades", Center for Strategic and International Studies, January 27, 2021 (<https://www.csis.org/analysis/number-north-korean-defectors-drops-lowest-level-two-decades>).

⁸ "Defecting From North Korea Is Now Far Harder", *The New York Times*, July 9, 2023 (<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/09/world/asia/north-korea-china-defectors.html>).

highways they must go through strict security checkpoints⁹.

In 2023, 196 people had arrived in South Korea, but they were not new escapees since they had already been working in China or Russia.

The significant declines in numbers occurred in 2012 and 2020. 2012 was due to a change in North Korea's national leadership. Kim Jong-il died on December 17, 2011, and was succeeded by his son Kim Jong-un. Kim Jong-un steadily progressed through the succession of power, and on April 13, 2012, he officially became the supreme leader, holding the three powers of the party, the state, and the military. Kim Jong-un stepped up his crackdown on defections.

The decline in 2020 derived from COVID-19. During the COVID-19 pandemic, North Korea completely sealed its border in January 2020, cutting off human traffic and making it impossible to defect from the country. In the unlikely event that North Koreans were able to cross the border into China, China enforced a zero-corona policy that severely restricted smuggling from North Korea into China as well as movement within China. China has installed high-tech surveillance systems on its roads everywhere since before COVID-19, making it difficult for North Korean defectors to escape detection. Travel within China used to be by train or bus, carrying a counterfeit identity card. However, counterfeit cards are often found fraudulent and no longer accepted. The means of transportation are now private cars and cabs. Even on highways, there are checkpoints to detect them. According to the *Asahi Shimbun*, during the global outbreak of COVID-19, ID checks were conducted regardless of location or time, and since public transportation was no longer available, non-shared vehicles were used.

The business of assisting defectors in China has become "almost impossible," according to Christian pastor Chun Ki-won. China imposed strict restrictions on entry and exit and even domestic travel during the pandemic; those restrictions were relaxed in 2023, and Chung and other aid workers have received a surge of appeals from the thousands of North Koreans stranded in China. However, the cost of hiring contractors to transport people has skyrocketed. The risk of being caught by Chinese police has increased.¹⁰ Human rights activist Hanna Song told a congressional hearing in Washington in June 2023 "The decline in defections does not stem from a diminished desire among North Koreans to escape their oppressive regime. Rather, it reflects

⁹ Takayuki Nakagawa, "North Korea Reinforces Border with China, Tightens Control to Prevent Defections that Could Threaten Kim Jong Un's Rule", *Yomiuri Shimbun*, October 11, 2023 (<https://japannews.yomiuri.co.jp/world/asia-pacific/20231011-142174/>).

¹⁰ "Defecting From North Korea Is Now Far Harder", *The New York Times*, July 9, 2023 (<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/09/world/asia/north-korea-china-defectors.html>).

the mounting difficulties imposed by China's pervasive surveillance measures.” (Hanna, 2023).

Although the door to the "heaven" in Thailand is open, the stairway to that "heaven" is becoming steeper and steeper.

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