Witness to Transformation: Refugee Insights into North Korea (review)

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Journal of Korean Studies, Volume 16, Number 2, Fall 2011, pp. 309-313 (Review)

Published by Duke University Press
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/jks.2011.0015

its title to *Chōsen iho* in March 1915.) In chapter 6, Caprio speculates that Hyŏn Yŏng-sŏp, the author of *Chōsenjin no susumu beki michi* (The Path that the Koreans Must Take), may have written in Japanese because his command of Korean composition was lacking (p.196). While it is true that Hyŏn mostly published in Japanese, there are also several extant examples of his Korean writings in colonial journals that attest to his linguistic abilities in Korean as well as transcripts of his florid wartime speeches delivered in Korean. Hyŏn, like many of his colonial contemporaries, was a highly multilingual Korean.

These few points of criticism notwithstanding, I applaud Mark Caprio for producing the most comprehensive study available in English on Japanese assimilation in colonial Korea. It is, moreover, a solidly empirical work, apart from some of the counter-factual arguments and speculations that he entertains in the concluding chapter. Indeed, *Japanese Assimilation Policies in Colonial Korea, 1910–1945* forcefully raises a host of important questions and arguments that future studies on the colonial period cannot ignore.

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Witness to Transformation: Refugee Insights into North Korea by Marcus Noland and Stephan Haggard. Washington, DC: Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2011. 256 pp. $23.95 (paper)

A common and useful method for studying a country is talking to its people. In the case of North Korea, social scientists were long deprived the opportunity to apply this method. The government of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) has continually resisted the kind of openness that would allow outsiders to conduct frank interviews inside its borders, and from the end of the Korean War until the mid-1990s only a few hundred people managed to get out. The refugee crisis that unfolded with the catastrophic collapse of the DPRK's economy in the mid-1990s changed this situation. Thousands left North Korea, and research revolving around these refugees rapidly developed into a vibrant sub-field of Korean studies. Working papers, articles, book chapters, and theses have appeared in quick succession and in recent years a number of monographs. Marcus Noland and Stephan Haggard's *Witness to Transformation* is one of the most insightful and empirically impressive among the new books on North Korean refugees.

Scholars have examined North Korean refugees in two basic ways: as the direct objects of study and as privileged informants about developments in North Korea and its border regions. The present volume does both. Chapter 2: "Perils of Refugee Life" looks at refugees in their own right—scrutinizing their demo-

graphic profile, their motivation for and mechanics of escape, the difficulties of living in China, and the psychological distress they suffer in exile. In this regard, the study falls in line with the majority of existing works concerning North Korean refugees. Noland and Haggard's book stands out, however, for its evidentiary heft—which is based on surveys involving more than 1,600 respondents—and the rigorous way the authors organize and analyze this data to tease out insights about economic, social, and political transformations in North Korea in the last fifteen years.

Witness to Transformation emphasizes three interrelated issues, starting with the marketization of North Korean society (chapter 3: "Marketization, Reform, and Retrenchment"). According to Noland and Haggard, this phenomenon has not been driven by reforms from above as was the case in China and Vietnam. Rather, the sudden collapse of the North Korean economy in the mid-1990s and with it the breakdown of the Public Distribution System forced people from all social strata to procure food and other basic necessities through private, mostly black-market, activities. This veritable market revolution from below was a spontaneous reaction to the state's ineffectiveness. Indeed, the marketization of North Korean society went far beyond what the legal statutes allowed and policy changes intended. Responding to questions about their sources of income, almost 50 percent of the refugees indicated that all of their income derived from private business activities, while more than 70 percent of respondents reported engaging in private trading (pp. 59–60).

The second issue is the state's responses to economic and social changes triggered by marketization. The North Korean state emerges in Noland and Haggard's account as reactionary and incompetent (chapter 3) as well as repressive and predatory (chapter 4: "The Penal System and Criminalization of Economic Activity"). The state was slow to respond, initiating major reforms only in 2002. Moreover, the reforms were arguably contradictory: officially trying to sanction the reality of widespread private market activities, while simultaneously attempting to assert tight state control over them. With the failure of this problematic approach, the state next sought to scale back the reform program and reinstitute direct control over the economy. Neither of these policy orientations seems to have had a significant impact on the economic activities of the populace. This conclusion is supported, for example, by refugee survey data which suggests that private trading became easier to engage in over time irrespective of the prevailing policy environment (p. 67).

Unable to effectively control market activities through economic policies, the state resorted to repression. Central authorities expanded the definition of criminality, rendering most day-to-day market behavior as illegal and thereby turning the majority of non-elite Koreans into criminals. Combined with the broad discretion given to officials with respect to enforcement of the new rules, the situation became ripe for extortion and other forms of corruption where "delinquents" could be cruelly punished or simply released at the bidding of those who

represent the state. Hence, the penal system, besides its traditional function of rooting out undesirable political and criminal activities, took on a new "predatory" function.

The third issue is the effect of the aforementioned social-economic changes on political attitudes and potential for dissent. On the one hand, the leadership in P'yŏngyang seems to be united and in full command of the loyalty of the state's strategic institutions, such as the Korean People's Army and the Korean Workers' Party. Likewise, barriers to collective action continue to be high: communication channels are constrained and the general public remains frightened, fragmented, and isolated from potential international support. Noland and Haggard do not expect to see regime change anytime soon. But they do show that discontent is simmering beneath the surface. Survey results suggest that the general public is growing frustrated with Kim Jong Il's government, blaming it for the failure of the economy (p. 105), and even willing to consider unification on South Korean terms (p. 110). The authors suggest that the effects of these changes will be felt in the long-term, especially in the form of increasingly constrained economic and political choices for the regime (p. 124). Here, it is not entirely clear why they do not consider an alternative scenario wherein marketization both constrains the state in some ways but also empowers it in other ways that bolster its long-term stability as we have witnessed in China and Vietnam.

As noted above, *Witness to Transformation* rests on impressive empirical foundations and meticulous research design. The empirical base consists of two large-scale surveys: the first conducted in China (2004–5) with 1,346 refugees and the second in South Korea (2008) involving 300 refugees. Noland and Haggard's research design utilizes structured interviews. This is notable in that a carefully standardized interview format allows for aggregation of data and statistical analysis to discern general patterns. Their work therefore offers an important complement to existing studies that rely primarily on in-depth examination of individual interviews (such as the very informative white papers published by the Korean Institute for National Unification).

A drawback to structured interviews is limited opportunities to pursue a line of inquiry with follow-up questions. This limitation explains in part why some intriguing questions suggested by the data presented in the book go unanswered. For instance, we are told that more than 97 percent of the escapees did not have any intentions of returning to North Korea, presumably due to fear of persecution (p. 35). Yet from the China-based survey we learn that one in five refugees ended up returning voluntarily to North Korea at least once. This statistic is quite interesting when considering that there were few defectors from the former Soviet Union or its satellites in Eastern Europe (countries that were on the whole much less repressive than North Korea) who returned to their countries. What accounts for this high incidence of voluntary return in the case of North Korea? Is it mainly ineffective border controls? Or do North Koreans fear persecution

less than the authors purport? Or is the key factor the difficult living conditions for North Koreans in China?

Another missed opportunity concerns the refugees' motives for leaving North Korea in the first place. In the China survey 94.7 percent of respondents cited economic reasons while only 1.8 percent mentioned political reasons or fear (p. 30). The authors do discuss this striking result to an extent, suggesting that North Korean respondents probably were not able to distinguish between economic and political factors in the sense implied by our use of the terms "political refugee" and "economic refugee." It is unfortunate considering the significance of the question for the general thesis in the book that the survey design did not allow for determining the precise reasons for leaving.

A potentially more serious shortcoming concerns the question of whether the opinions expressed in the two surveys can be taken as representative samples for the North Korean population as a whole. Since nearly all of the analysis and arguments in *Witness to Transformation* are based on these surveys, the discovery of any significant skewing in the data can call the entire study into question. This matter goes beyond the obvious fact that refugees tend to be disgruntled citizens and hence are likely to espouse views that differ from those of the general public. One might ask, for example, whether both samples are tainted with a strong regional bias. Interviewees from the northeastern provinces of North and South Hamgyŏng comprise 75.9 percent of the China survey and 64.7 percent of the South Korean survey. Among a total of 1,646 respondents, 1,215 come from the traditional Korean rust-belt area, a peripheral area where conditions are often worse than in other parts of North Korea. (Notably, both provinces were the hardest hit by the Korean famine and North Hamgyŏng offers the easiest access to China.) There are several instances in *Witness to Transformation* where refugees from these provinces appear to give different answers than those from other parts of North Korea (p. 61, 74, 106 fn, 108 fn).

Fortunately, Noland and Haggard confront this question about the general validity of their data. They have devised numerous statistical tests to support the claim that the two surveys are indeed representative of the North Korean population at large. Unfortunately, the book includes only a short description of these tests, and curious readers must search other publications for a fuller discussion.[1] Given the central importance of this question, it would be a good idea to include a more detailed explanation of the statistical tests in any subsequent editions of the book. Furthermore, one hopes that Noland and Haggard, in future writings, will experimentally divide their samples into two parts (northeastern provinces versus the rest) to allay concerns about possible regional bias in their two large-scale surveys.

Witness to Transformation is a stimulating work that should appeal to three groups of readers in particular. Students new to the study of North Korean refugees would do well to start with this book for it provides a concise overview on what we know and how scholars approach this challenging area of inquiry.

Policymakers will find its concluding chapter especially helpful in formulating new strategies for engaging the DPRK. Ultimately, scholars who are committed to analyzing and writing about North Korea will discover in it a wealth of data that can be productively utilized in their own attempts to refine interpretive frameworks and theoretical statements. Although some of the arguments in *Witness to Transformation* will inevitably be challenged as the sub-field of North Korea Studies continues to develop and additional sources from this still largely isolated country become available, Marcus Noland and Stephan Haggard should be commended for having produced a fine study that will likely serve as an important resource for years to come.

NOTE

1. Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland, "Reform from Below: Institutional and Behavioral Change in North Korea," *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization* 73, no. 2 (2010): 133–52; Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland, "Political Attitudes under Repression: Evidence from North Korean Refugees," *East-West Center Working Papers: Politics, Governance, and Security Series*, no. 21 (March 2010): 1–43.

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Inside the Red Box: North Korea's Post-totalitarian Politics by Patrick McEachern. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010. 320 pp. 6 halftones. 3 tables. $35.00 (cloth)

The Hidden People of North Korea: Everyday Life in the Hermit Kingdom by Ralph Hassig and Kongdan Oh. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009. 296 pp. $39.95 (cloth and e-book)

Is North Korea a totalitarian state? The two books under review offer contrasting answers to this question. According to Patrick McEachern, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) is a dictatorship but not a totalitarian state. *Inside the Red Box: North Korea's Post-totalitarian Politics* portrays Kim Jong Il as situated at the top of a pyramid of power composed of the Korean Workers' Party, Korean People's Army, and the DPRK Cabinet. By identifying and analyzing the contrasting ways that these three institutions frame political issues in their newspapers—the *Nodong Sinmun*, *Chosŏn Inmin'gun*, and *Minju Chosŏn*, respectively[1]—McEachern tracks competition between them and attempts to tease out distinctive policy positions within the North Korean central government. He