

The Price of Rescue — On Trafficking and Missionaries

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June 27, 2008

(This was written as a talk at the Valuing Human Dignity: Challenging the Trafficking of Women, a conference organized by the Interfaith Institute for Justice, Peace and Social Movements at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver.)

I'm an immigrant Korean American activist and a geographer from California. Over the years, I've been involved in anti-racist and feminist activism, mostly in immigrant Korean communities in the United States and international solidarity efforts linking grassroots activism in the US with social movements in Korea.

As part of my dissertation research on the Christian Right and contemporary geography of evangelical Christian missions, I have been studying migration and cross-border movements in the China-North Korea border region. This research dovetailed with my activist work, throwing me in the middle of a deeply contentious politics of human rights advocacy involving that region. Why is it so contentious? **Because of a lethal mix of desperation, greed, and geopolitics—and no lack of good intentions.**

What do I mean by this? Let me begin here. Once known as a “well-organized and highly industrialized socialist economy,”¹ North Korea is today a pariah in the contemporary capitalist world order, a country that everyone loves to hate.² The North Korean leader Kim Jong Il is usually portrayed as insane and evil, a man responsible for “starving his own people.” From the mid to late 1990s, as many as two million people in North Korea died of starvation and hunger-related illnesses.³ Despite the need for food aid, the US has cut its donations by 80% since 2001, and international humanitarian aid has decreased dramatically. To this day, malnutrition remain widespread, especially among children.⁴ The situation is no doubt very bleak.

It is estimated that there are anywhere between 100,000 to 300,000 North Koreans, majority women, living illegally in China today. Tens of thousands of North Korean border crossers are also scattered throughout Southeast Asia, constituting irregular secondary movements of North Koreans involving long, circuitous routes through Mongolia, Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand. Only about 10,000 have resettled in South Korea, 70% of whom are women. This highly female migrant population from North Korea face few options in China, mostly limited to poverty-wage jobs, sex work, or forced marriages to ethnic Han Chinese men in rural areas where the female to male ratio can be as skewed as 1:13. The shortage of women in rural areas is partly due to China's “One Child

¹ Christine Ahn. 2005. *Famine and the Future of Food Security in North Korea*. Oakland, California: Food First: Institute for Food and Development Policy. p. 16.

² Bruce Cumings, *North Korea* (New York: The New Press, 2004).

³ See *The Politics of Famine in North Korea* (1999) by Andrew Natsios, United States Institute for Peace.

⁴ See the 2004 survey by the World Food Program (WFP)

Policy” but also the result of massive rural-to-urban migration in recent years. Trafficked North Korean women have come to play a major role in filling this gap. As illegal migrants in China, North Korean women have no legal protection whatsoever—they can be arrested and sent back to North Korea at any time.

Just how things got so bleak requires a much more detailed discussion. I’d have to begin with how the beginnings of the modern states of North and South Korea emerged during the struggle against Japanese colonialism and US occupation that immediately followed, how the US dropped napalm every day for 3 years and leveled just about everything in northern and central Korea during the Korean War, and how the Cold War, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and what has been described as a famine of biblical proportions resulted in a major energy and food crisis in North Korea. But all of this is beyond the scope of the forum today. Suffice it to say that a constellation of geopolitical, historical, and ecological factors contribute to not only what North Korea is today, but also the present condition of North Korean border crossers, as well as the advocacy work taking place on their behalf. Today, I will be focusing on the role of evangelical Christian missionary networks, and begin by sharing a couple of stories from China.

In recent years, decentralized and clandestine “underground railroad”-style networks of evangelicals have been carrying out the bulk of advocacy work in China, dealing with state authorities, operating safe houses, brokering arrangements and transporting asylum seekers to South Korea and elsewhere. The exact numbers are unknown, but I can safely say that you are guaranteed to run into a missionary in this line of work in China.

In 2006, I was able to meet a group of North Korean women in missionary custody, hiding in a secret safe house run by an ethnic Korean Chinese missionary couple. They were financially supported by South Korean megachurches and American funders. A North Korean woman who asked to be called **Sarah**, was a 30-year-old who had arrived at the safe house just a few days beforehand. She told me that in North Korea, she was married with 2 kids, ages 4 and 6. Hard hit by years of famine, they survived on what little food they could manage to find, and the kids would cry constantly in hunger. Her husband, once kind but now abusive, would beat them to shut them up. All the while, Sarah kept hearing rumors about finding work and food in China. So one morning, Sarah made some gruel out of tree bark and leaves, and snuck out. Not because she hated the regime or the religious persecution in North Korea, but because she wanted to come back with some money and food. She also said that she just couldn’t bear to watch her own kids starve to death.

Once near the border, she met smugglers who helped her get to China, but unbeknownst to her, they then sold her to a Chinese farmer. By now, this becomes an all too typical story of North Korean women being trafficked into forced marriages for prices ranging anywhere from CDN \$1,000 to \$2,000. Sarah told me she tried several times to run away and each time she was caught and locked up in the house. After a few months of this, she met a group of Korean missionaries from a neighboring town, who soon started visiting her with the Bible and Korean food. Sarah asked them to help her run away. The missionaries told her that the Bible says that divorce is bad, and that she must stay married no matter what and just try to be happy. **The missionaries in fact refused to help her run away because even a forced marriage was a marriage.**

After a few months, Sarah gave birth to a child, and grew more and more resigned to staying in China. After all, her Chinese husband wasn’t abusive like her first husband, she told herself, her Chinese was getting better, and she had a child now. But when her son was about 9 months old,

Sarah overheard her so-called husband making arrangements to sell her to another farmer to recoup the money he had paid to buy her. She ran away a few days afterwards, leaving behind her infant son. This time, because Sarah's husband himself was planning to break the vows of marriage, the missionaries agreed to help her and brought her to the safe house.

Aside from Sarah, there were 16 others living in the safe house, most of them under the age of 16. **Esther**, a young woman who had been living in the safe house for 2 years, went back and forth between China and North Korea several times since she was 14. She had been captured and sent back twice, and she has spent 9 months in a North Korean labor camp. The second time she was caught, she escaped again to China, knowing that if she were caught and returned to North Korea a third time, she would face punishment far worse than before. Similar to Sarah's case, Esther crossed the border and met a Christian family who gave her food and shelter, and then tried secretly to sell her to a marriage broker. Her story had a different twist, though. This broker knew that missionaries were in the business of "rescuing" North Korean girls, so he sold her to the missionaries instead—at a discount. Even during the time I was at this safe house, trafficking brokers repeatedly called the missionaries about the girls in their custody, and the missionaries negotiated with them over the price of rescue. One missionary even joked to me about selling a television set to rescue a girl.

When I asked Esther where she wanted to live ultimately, she could not answer. Her parents were dead, she had no family anywhere, and she's been on the run since the age of 14. While she hesitated in silence, the missionary running the safe house answered for her. She said, "Of course Esther is going back to North Korea. That's her calling—to go back as a missionary and spread the Gospel in North Korea." Esther never got to answer the question herself.

1.

There's no question that missionary networks provide much needed help to women and girls in situations both dire and desperate. But as self-appointed custodians of vulnerable populations who find themselves confined in isolated networks disciplined by evangelical agendas, missionaries also indoctrinate and discipline the women in their custody, making decisions based not simply on "good intentions" and supposedly non-political humanitarian principles, but also out of deeply-held religious beliefs.

During the course of my research, I've met missionaries who openly question the trafficked women's moral character, describing the women as having acquired a "taste" for sexual promiscuity. They complained about thieving children and adults with no work ethic, and they also participate directly and indirectly in sustaining the existing trafficking networks. This isn't surprising, especially since the evangelical groups involved in North Korean anti-trafficking and human rights advocacy tend to be conservative and closely aligned with the neoconservative Washington. **But I need to emphasize that ideas around Christian morality and "family values" play a huge role in shaping what anti-trafficking activism looks like not just in the abstract, but in the ways that very much determine people's lives.** And where is the accountability?

2.

We have to actively counter the racist and Orientalist ideas about the so-called backward traditionalism and authoritarianism of the Third World—in this case Chinese, North Korean, or even the South Korean missionaries. As I discussed in the beginning of this talk, there is a complex geopolitical and historical context in which the US is deeply implicated. And it would be a mistake to think that the conditions "over there" have nothing to do with forces "over here."

3.

There is a significant growth of Korean overseas missions, and the emergence of a particularly conservative strand of Korean and Chinese evangelical Christianity. And it's not simply the work of the North American Christian Right. For many of the evangelical missionaries, anti-trafficking advocacy involves a heroic and custodial discourse of deliverance into capitalism—"saving" and "rescuing" North Koreans from the clutches of evil Communism, so that they can rejoice in the triumph of the free market and the virtue of wage labor in God's Kingdom. A recent *Christianity Today* magazine cover story on "The Business of Rescue" profiled Christian humanitarian organizations that orient former prostitutes toward entry-level jobs in the service economy, teaching women to bake muffins for Starbucks and to prepare Western-style drinks and food.

4.

Finally, anti-trafficking activism can not *end* at the point of so-called "rescue" because as we know, the "receiving countries" are no safe havens for migrants and refugees. North Korean migrants and refugees face considerable stigma and discrimination in South Korea, so much so that some have petitioned for asylum in the United States on the grounds of their hardship in South Korea. In the US, "alien detention centers" are the fastest growing sector of the prison industrial complex, and "illegal aliens" are being held today at more than 400 detention centers throughout the US, without legal representation or badly needed medical attention. Despite all the promises of deliverance to safety and freedom, North Korean refugee resettlement in the US and Canada remains painfully slow. For example, a total of 170 North Koreans have sought asylum in Canada since 1996. Since 2003, only 3 North Koreans have been granted asylum.

Unless we make a fundamental commitment to making connections across violences at the local and global scale, and link domestic and international activism, anti-trafficking activism is short-sighted at best. As I'm sure the speakers tonight and the workshops tomorrow will go into much more detail, we need an active agenda for individual and collective empowerment and social justice. And there must be a broader coalition of Christian and secular activists and nongovernmental organizations who not only help each other, but also hold each other accountable.

Thank you.