

TEACHING RESOURCES ESSAY: TEACHING ABOUT NORTH KOREAN DEFECTORS

**Editor’s Note:** This teaching resources essay is not a comprehensive treatment of North Korean defectors, but it provides instructors and students with new approaches to the topic, and also particularly focuses upon the plight of women defectors. The TRE also includes content that enables students to consider different perspectives about the topic.

Teaching about North Korean Defectors



Three guards at the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) stationed to stop defectors from leaving North Korea. The two rear guards watch each other to make sure neither defects to the South. Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <https://tinyurl.com/yak7wa24>.

CONTEXT

Freedom House: An Overview of North Korea from *Freedom in the World 2023*  
<https://tinyurl.com/bdh5zvyy>

North Korea is a one-party state led by a dynastic totalitarian dictatorship that regularly engages in grave human rights abuses. Surveillance is pervasive, arbitrary arrests, and detention are common, and punishments for political offenses are severe. The state maintains a system of camps for political prisoners where torture, forced labor, starvation, and other atrocities take place.

Kim Jong-un became the country’s supreme leader in 2011 after the death of his father, Kim Jong-il, who had led North Korea since his father’s death in 1994. In 2016, the State Affairs Commission (SAC) became the country’s top ruling organ, and Kim Jong-un was named its chairman. North Korea is effectively a one-party state.

There is no opportunity for public political participation, and even elites operate under the threat of extreme penalties for perceived dissent or disloyalty. The Korean Worker’s Party (KWP) is subject to regular purges aimed at reinforcing Kim Jong-un’s personal authority. The regime has executed senior officials who have fallen out of favor.

“Leaving North Korea: My Story” *Education About Asia* 18, no. 2 (2018): 48–50  
<https://tinyurl.com/rsxxdaxe>

North Korean women defectors are constantly subject to sexual abuse and sex trafficking.

“Leaving North Korea: My Story,” by Anonymous (was obtained through the assistance of the highly respected Committee for Human Rights on North Korea (<https://www.hrnk.org/>) located in Washington, DC. Thanks also go to the Committee on Teaching about Asia (CTA). The article has over 13,400 views in the EAA Digital Archives.

In her efforts to leave North Korea, the author was subjected to sexual exploitation and attempts at trafficking. After her father, arranged for a Chinese broker to meet Anonymous, this occurred:

*While we were driving, the broker suggested that we should change our clothes since they were all wet. I trusted him and went into a house where the broker’s wife gave me a change of clothing. With no change of expression, the broker’s wife casually told me that I had been sold at a high price to a wealthy Chinese man and that I would be getting married in a week. She told me that I was lucky.*

FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2023

**North Korea** **3**  
 /100

NOT FREE

Political Rights	0 /40
Civil Liberties	3 /60

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS **3 /100** Not Free

**LEAVING North Korea MY STORY**

*I am guessing you all are here at this event because you are curious about the story of a North Korean defector.*

Editor's note: "My Story" is a highly-cited version of a North Korean defector's account, which was originally a presentation at the Asia Commission on Teaching about Asia held at George Washington University in March 2018. The author requested that her name not be published.

I am a North Korean defector currently working as a research intern at a law firm in the United States. I have been in the United States for about a year now. I did not know how to write in English, so I had to use a translator. I am guessing you all are here at this event because you are curious about the story of a North Korean defector. There are only a few defectors who have been able to share their stories. However, there are only a few defectors who have been able to share their stories. However, there are only a few defectors who have been able to share their stories.

TEACHING RESOURCES ESSAY: TEACHING ABOUT NORTH KOREAN DEFECTORS



The following excerpts with slight modification are from Chapter 4, “Is Economic Freedom Indispensable to Democracy?,” pages 37–38 of *Economic Episodes in Civics and American Government* by M. Scott Niederjohn, Mark C. Schug, Signe Thomas, and William C. Wood, reprinted with permission of Wohl Publishing (Copyright 2022). This publication has already sold 3,000 copies and more sales are expected. In these excerpts, four outstanding economic educators highlighted Yeonmi Park’s story based upon her autobiography *In Order to Live: A North Korean Girl’s Journey to Freedom* (Penguin Books, 2016).

## Yeonmi Park’s Personal Account of Life in a Communist Dictatorship

### KEY ECONOMIC CONCEPTS

civil rights (civil liberties)  
 constitutional monarchy  
 economic freedom  
 political freedom  
 republic

In her biography *In Order to Live: A North Korean Girl’s Journey to Freedom*, Yeonmi Park describes how, as a little girl, she was indoctrinated to believe she was fortunate and lived better than the rest of the world. Yet for much of her childhood she went without food on a regular basis, and she saw bodies in the streets and [a] river from those who starved to death.

Because her village of Hyesan was separated from China by only the Yalu River, she can recall being able to see the lights and smell the aromas of food



Yeonmi Parks speaks at a press conference at the 2018 Oslo Freedom Forum.

cooking on the other side of the river. During the worst of the famine, she and her sister would catch and eat bugs to fight hunger. Yeonmi was taught that their “Dear Leaders”—dictators Kim Jong-Il and Kim Jong-un—could read their minds. No religion was allowed, and only the Kims could be revered.

Yeonmi explains how North Korea had an endless list of crimes. It was illegal to wear jeans or to dye or cut your hair in a way not approved by the government. All forms of foreign media were forbidden. The government controlled every aspect of life. Yeonmi and her fellow North Koreans were unable to climb the economic ladder based on their work ethic, intelligence, or interests. Instead, everyone in North Korea is classified by their “songbun” status. This status system is based on the political, social, and economic background of one’s ancestors, as well as their own behavior and the behavior of their relatives. One’s songbun status determines everything from job and college opportunities to the amount of food received.



*Women work on a roadside in North Pyongan province, North Korea.*

Yeonmi was part of the upper-middle class during her early years of childhood. Even so, she was living in what would be considered poverty by Western standards—no modern plumbing, and the majority of the time she did not have electricity. Then her father was arrested and sent to a prison camp for the crime of buying and selling goods. Once arrested, he was kicked out of the Worker's Party, securing a dismal fate for his entire family as their *songbun* status was ruined.

Public executions were used to teach citizens the consequences of disobedience. Yeonmi remembers a young man being executed by firing squad for killing and eating a cow. It didn't matter that he was starving. In North Korea, it is a crime to eat beef without special permission from government officials. Cattle are considered

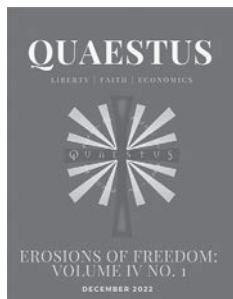
too valuable to eat because they are used for plowing fields and dragging carts. Anyone who butchers one is stealing from government property.

Yeonmi Park was able to escape from North Korea in 2007 at age 13 by sneaking into China, where she was caught in human trafficking for a few years. Her journey led her through Mongolia and South Korea on the way to the United States, where she completed a degree in economics from Columbia University in 2018.

What made the North Korean system perform so poorly, economically and politically? As we will see . . . it was not the culture, natural resources, or geography.



## To the Students of Concordia by Yeonmi Park



The following are excerpts from Yeonmi Park's speech in late 2022 to students at Concordia University Wisconsin about her escape from North Korea. The complete transcription of the speech appears in the Fall 2022 Concordia University Wisconsin student journal *Quaestus* available at <https://tinyurl.com/4hktt9y7>. We thank Editor-in-Chief Isaiah Mudge and faculty advisors Scott Niederjohn and Daniel Sem for allowing us to reprint the excerpts.

Although Yeonmi Park's quite explicit language complements the textbook excerpts, teachers are advised to read the transcription before assigning the reading to students.

There's a saying I wrote [in my book] that there are two things that I'm most grateful for. First that I was born in North Korea, and number two, that I escaped [ . . . ]

The reason why I'm so grateful to have been born in North Korea is that if I was not born in that darkness, if I was not born in that oppression, I would not have known how unique, how amazing, how miraculous it is to be in this free country. And if I had stayed in North Korea, first of all, right now I would not exist. I would be dead by 2007, when I was just a mere thirteen years old. I just turned twenty-nine and people tell me I'm young. You know in North Korea, at twenty-nine I'm seeing the ending of my life. Most people do not make it to even after fifty. So how can I not be grateful for being born there and coming here?

I was hearing about how this forum is about civil discourse and freedom of speech, and that reminded me of the first thing that my own mother taught me when I was growing up in North Korea. The first thing I remember [...] was my mom telling me, "Don't even whisper," because birds and mice could hear me. She said that the most dangerous thing I have in my body was my tongue. If I said one thing that was wrong in the eyes of the regime that was bad, they were not just going to kill me only. They were going to kill three generations of my entire family. What they say is, "kill the entire root." That's the cost of having a tongue and practicing the freedom of speech in North Korea.


I was born in 1993, in the northern part of North Korea, and I went to school like you guys. I went to school, but I never even saw a map of the world. I did not hear about biology or anything, the only thing I heard about was how amazing my dear leader was, and how powerful he was. And the other things they taught me was how horrible the American bastards were. So, it's so surreal for me right now, standing on this stage in front of so many bastards. But I was brainwashed to think that if I saw them, I would have to kill them, but now I'm here. I just became another bastard; I became American this year. I remember seeing my textbook in school, it went like this, "There are four American bastards. You kill two of them. How many American bastards are there left to kill?" So even at six years old, five years old, everything they teach us, even the music, even sports [...] Everything that education in North Korea does is to brainwash. And helping us to not realize what a horrible, oppressed country [we] are really living in.

So, when I was thirteen years old it came to the point that we couldn't really find any more food. The reason why North Korea is poor is not because we're like Haiti or Africa, it's because the regime chose to starve us. So, for instance, there are a lot of people saying, "Why are these North Koreans so poor?" The reason is, if our tummy is full, we're going to start thinking about what the meaning of life is, what's out there, why our lives are not better. But if we are constantly starving, the only thing that we are allowed to think about is finding the next meal. If you do not find the next meal, you're going to die. Hunger means death in North Korea. So, most of the days growing

up in the country I remember going to the fields and mountains, catching dragonflies, grasshoppers, but don't worry, they're very good for diets. They're very high in protein and you never get fat from eating that food.

Surviving on that, we still couldn't find food. So when my sister was sixteen years old, she escaped to China first. I wanted to go with her, but I couldn't go because one day I had a very, very bad stomachache. My parents took me to the hospital and, you'd expect—this is a socialist paradise right—that everything is free there. Free education, free healthcare, but in that free healthcare system the doctors didn't even have mere electricity or X-rays and machines to see what's wrong in your body. They just literally rubbed my belly and they just opened my stomach without any painkiller. And as soon as they opened my stomach, they realized it was just malnutrition and I had a high fever. But they still removed my appendix. I think they just wanted to say something to my mom afterwards. So I'm going to sue them when I go back. It's the one thing that Americans taught me, is how to sue people. We don't have that in North Korea. They stitched me


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back; I remember just fainting and screaming and fainting again during the surgery. And that's the last thing I remember of my home country. [Leaving] from the hospital [...] and there are piles of dead human bodies. And on top of the human body, I remember this lady wearing these flower patterned pants.

As soon as I got out of the hospital, I found a little note that my own sister left me. She said, "Why don't you go find this lady, and she will help you to escape." At the age of thirteen, I found this lady and then she said, "Same day, you can go to China, I can help you." When you're so desperate you don't even ask why this person is helping [you]. It [didn't] even matter if she would kill me, it [didn't] make a difference because I was going to die anyway in that country. It was March 26, 2007. My mother and I were crossing the frozen river into China, through the boat she helped me to go with. As soon as I arrived in China, the first thing I [saw] was my own mother being raped.

And these people wanted to rape me too, but [my mother] saved me, offering herself instead. And then, we realized there are more than 30 million men in China [and] because of the One Child Policy (abolished in 2016) they cannot find women to marry them. So, they buy North Korean girls as sex slaves. And this is not the worst thing that can happen to North Korean women who escape.

My mother was sold for [US] \$65, and they sold me for just over [US] \$200 because I was a child, and I was a virgin. Two years I lived as a sex slave by the men who bought me. By some miracle two years later, I met missionaries coming from South Korea. These missionaries, they were risking their lives and helping rescue North Korean defectors. It's like during Nazi Germany, there were people helping Jewish people, exactly like that. They told us "There's a way out of China," and we asked them, "How do you get out of China? We don't have a passport, we don't have money, how do you get out?" And they said, "You have to walk across the frozen Gobi Desert into Mongolia from China." When you're so desperate, of course risking your life is the easiest thing you can do. So, at the age of fifteen—it was 2009, right after facing all these things in China—I chose to [do] that with my mother and a few other North Korean defectors. In February, we started crossing the frozen Gobi Desert.

By some miracle, I didn't die from the negative forty degrees cold or the guards. I made it to Mongolia. And Mongolian soldiers eventually helped me to go to South Korea. So at fifteen [...] I'm safe, I became free. But this is a whole other journey that I began. You'd think that's the end of story, right? That all this trouble ended. So, when I arrived in South Korea I had a major problem of trust. The first thing that I arrived in South Korea, these intelligence people telling me, first of all, well Kims are not gods. He's a fat dictator, he goes to the bathroom, he poops and he pees. And as a North Korean defector I was so brainwashed to think he was a god, he can read my mind, and this is what North Korean regime did. They eliminated all religion and they copied the Bible, so Kim Il-sung said he became a god. [He said] "I love you guys so much I'm giving you my son," that's Kim Jong-un—he's like Jesus Christ—his body dies but his spirit returns forever. And that's how he knows what we think, how much hair we have on our head. Because he was copying Christianity.

So, in South Korea they were telling me that they were not gods, and first of all Americans were not bastards they were amazing, lovely people. And [they told me] the world that they knew, the different continents, there's a space and there are different races, and they were telling me everything about that [and] I had no idea. Like I was almost time traveling, I came from a different planet. It's like coming from Mars to Earth or something. But the hardest thing I remember was [that] if everything that I believed when I was in North Korea was a lie, then how do I know what you're telling me is not a lie? How do you ever trust again?

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## A Decline in North Korean Defectors

The number of North Korean defectors (refugees) reaching South Korea in 2020 dropped sharply, dipping to a new low since the refugee outflow began in the late 1990s, as the North was suffering from the famine during the era known as the Arduous March. The South Korean Unification Ministry reported that during the entire year of 2020, only 229 North Koreans sought admission and were resettled in the South—down from 1,047 who arrived in 2019 and 1,137 who arrived in 2018.

The number of refugees in 2020 was significantly lower than any time in the previous two decades. When defectors began to arrive in South Korea in the late 1990s, 947 arrived in the two or three years through 1998. In the three years from 1999–2001, an additional 1,043 arrived. In 2002, the number given refuge in the South was 1,142, and from that time the number increased to its highest level of 2,914 in 2009. Since that time, the number of defectors slowly fluctuated downward, but well over a thousand arrived annually until 2020. The total number of defectors resettled in the South through 2020 is 33,752.

The most immediate cause for the decline in defectors reaching the South is significantly tighter border control in the North to prevent spread of the COVID-19 virus. One year ago in January 2020, the North

Source: Robert R. King, "Number of North Korean Defectors Drops to Lowest Level in Two Decades," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, January 27, 2021.

closed borders to all tourist travel. Within a few weeks, the borders were closed to all border crossings—not just tourists. This border closure was so strictly enforced that North Korean border guards were directed not to allow North Korean citizens who had illegally crossed into China to be repatriated to the North by Chinese border guards.

Another indication of how serious this became is that the North not only stopped people from crossing the border, but cut back on trade with China as well. As a result of these border restrictions to stem the contagion of COVID-19, trade dropped precipitously in March 2020. That month, North Korean exports to China fell 96 percent from the previous month to a value of only \$616,000, and imports from China declined 91 percent to only \$18 million. Chinese customs data showed a continued decline, and in October 2020 Beijing exported goods valued at only \$253,000 to the North—a drop of 99 percent from previous levels. China is by far North Korea's largest source of imports.

North Korea has also engaged in a longer term effort to publicize how difficult life in the South is for those who defect. This effort was begun soon after Kim Jong-un became supreme leader. High profile media events involving defectors who returned from the South focused on how difficult life was, and how welcome they were when they returned to the North. Media attention given to the experiences of these "re-defectors" in South Korea has been used to discourage migration to the South.

## Critical Thinking, Historical Analysis, and Markets for Defectors

Teachers who choose to use what follows with students should first *clearly communicate* to young people, referencing the 2023 "Report of the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the DRPK to the Human Rights Council" (<https://tinyurl.com/scupky7m>), that no case can be made that disputes the fundamental reality that North Korea is a totalitarian criminal state that oppresses its people and denies them fundamental human rights, especially women. Both Anonymous and Yeonmi Park experienced the horrors of totalitarianism and in Anonymous's case, multiple instances of sexual exploitation, and in Yeonmi's case, sexual trafficking.

That said, Yeonmi Park was thirteen years old when she left North Korea and by the time she was being interviewed, she was twenty-one. Readers who are interested in a more critical perspective regarding Yeonmi Park should read the Australian journalist Mary Ann Jollet's 2015 article in *The Diplomat* "The Strange Tale of Yeonmi Park" (<https://tinyurl.com/bde27789>) and read, in the same article, Yeonmi Park's explanation of alleged inconsistencies in her story.

Literature Professor John Cussen, in "On the Call to Dismiss North Korean Defectors' Memoirs and on Their Dark American Alternative" (*Korean Studies* 40 (2016): 140–157, <https://tinyurl.com/ypzr4k4c>) makes obvious, but evidentially powerful assertions that geopolitical and domestic politics create markets that are incentivized to destroy North Korean defectors' stories. The North Korean government goes to incredible lengths to discredit any defector that doesn't support the regime. Also, for political reasons, South Korea is often incentivized not to question the factually terrible situations North Korean defectors encounter. The author makes the point that former defectors collect large speaker fees, including Yeonmi Park, in South Korea, the West, and some Asian countries. Although Professor Cussen provided no explanation for the "Dark American Alternative" referenced in his

title, his clear explanation of North Korean efforts to discredit defectors in South Korea and democratic nations desires to hear their stories might assist students in better understanding that other incentives are possibly in play when thinking about how politics potentially impacts this topic.



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