

Bold and bullish: A new breed of North Korean defectors

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Clara Park is a North Korea native who makes her living introducing her homeland to tourists from around the world. But instead of trumpeting its attractions like an ambassador, the wife of a former party cadre shares what it is like living on food waste and working for no pay in the reclusive state.

The 48-year-old is one of the four defectors now working for Panmunjom Travel Centre, the only agency in Seoul that takes tourists to meet a North Korean defector as part of its itinerary for tours to the Korean Demilitarised Zone (DMZ). The Q&A session takes place at Odusan Unification Observatory, which overlooks Imjingang, the river that flows along the tense border. Tourists are seated on child-sized furniture in a mock classroom adorned with wall portraits of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il, as a defector fields questions from the curious with the help of an English-speaking tour guide.

This job earns defectors like Park an average of US\$2,000 a month - a good supplement to the generous benefits they already receive from the South Korean government.

But they are not in it for the money, said their employer Kim Bong Ki, who served in the South Korean army for 23 years before starting his tour agency in 2001.

"Our defector staff have a sense of mission...They want to help bring about positive changes to their homeland," Kim told The Straits Times. "That's why they are sharing the reality in North Korea despite facing a certain level of danger."

Park and her colleagues are part of a growing community of defectors who are increasingly vocal about the hunger and torture they experienced in North Korea. Kang Chul Hwan and Shin Dong Hyuk also brought to light their brutal suffering in North Korea's prison camps in their respective books: *The Aquarium of Pyongyang* and *Escape from Camp 14*. Shin, who last year addressed a European Parliament conference, is so far the only escapee known to have been born in the North's notorious jail for political dissidents.

Growing up on a diet of corn porridge, soup and rats, he was constantly so hungry that whenever given a choice between hunger and beating as punishment, he would always opt for beating.

As a child, he was so jealous to find his mother cooking rice - an extremely rare treat - for his brother one night that he turned both of them in for conspiring to escape, leading to their executions right before his eyes. Other civilian defectors have stepped into the limelight in other ways.

Others like Kim Ha Na, for instance, shared her odyssey while competing on a reality show, *Masterchef Korea*. Lee Hyeon Seo also made a mark at the global TED (Technology, Entertainment and Design) conference last year, sharing her struggle with identity issues. "I see tourists as my messengers. I hope they will walk away with a better understanding of

my pain, and tell the world on my behalf about the necessity of reunification," Ms Park told The Straits Times via her English-speaking colleague Jason Kim. "I strongly believe reunification is the only way to stop the North Korean tragedy."

The cool-headed Park escaped from the North in 2011, after plotting her route for more than two years without her husband's knowledge. "I could not bring this up to him ... We think very differently," Park said in response to a tourist's question on why she had left without her husband. He has since been forced into early retirement, according to Park's friends from the North.

Before the mid-1990s economic crisis, Park lived well, working as an urban planner - a job that she inherited from her mother. Even after the state stopped issuing her monthly paycheck and food ration in the wake of the great famine, she was able to import goods from Yanbian in neighbouring China and turned a profit in the black market thanks to her husband's protection. All that changed after a currency revaluation exercise in 2009, when North Koreans were made to swap their old banknotes - up to just 100,000 North Korean won (about US\$43.86 in the black market) - to the new ones.

The move, widely seen as a bid by the government to wipe out the "new rich", rendered the bulk of Park's savings - three million won in cash - worthless.

"That wasn't the first time I felt angry with the state, but it was a tipping point," she said. People rushed to the banks to air their grievances, Park recalled, but they were "too scared" to band together against the officials. The upper limit was eventually revised after the public outcry, but life had become "much, much harder" with runaway inflation, so bad that some were driven to suicide while others starved to death, Park added.

The events spurred her to set off on a gruelling five-month journey to South Korea via China and Thailand, taking with her only her teenage daughter and rat poison - in case they get caught. Their courage paid off. After surviving three months of grilling by South Korea's intelligence officers - a procedure to weed out potential spies - they were inducted into their new capitalist home, and have been coping well. But Park is still struggling to overcome some hard-wired instincts. "I am still apprehensive about saying anything negative concerning the Kim family," she said. "I get worried even when talking to a close friend."

More than 26,000 North Koreans have resettled in the South since the armistice in the 1950 - 53 Korean War, latest figures from Seoul's unification ministry show.

Dr Song Jiyoung, a political science professor at the Singapore Management University, said the vast majority of defectors need not be overly anxious about their safety, although "the infiltration of North Korean spies through mass defection to the South has happened in recent years". The North Korean government tried to assassinate the late Hwang Jang Yup, a former teacher and advisor of Kim Jong Il, did not succeed.

The death of another defector, Lee Han Young (born Ri Il Nam), whose mother is the sister of one of Kim Jong Il's mistresses, was also believed to be the work of North Korean secret agents. "These two cases were special as the defectors knew about the Kim family," said Dr Song, who studies irregular migration in East Asia. But other defectors are unlikely to be targets of assassinations, and they "should not fear what they say", she added.

To Dr Song, the real problem is whether northerners can really be integrated into the highly competitive South Korean world.

Gina Lee, a tour guide with Panmunjom Travel Centre, shares the same concern. “Even I found it difficult to fit in,” said Lee, a South Korean who had lived in the United States for 20 years before returning to Seoul. “Over here, it's always hurry, hurry, hurry ... People also tend to be more cliquish. It's not easy for outsiders to feel at home.”

The growing number of arrivals from the North might also be a source of brewing unhappiness among South Koreans, who might see red over the costly affirmative action programme for defectors.

The issue of housing is likely to be particularly contentious. While defectors are given decent apartments measuring about 70 sq m, Seoul's expensive properties remain out of reach for many natives despite a lifetime of hard work, Lee explained.

But Park is optimistic about her stay in South Korea. “My daughter is studying hard and doing well, so I see a bright future for my family.”

She now has just two wishes. One, a happy marriage for her daughter. The other might never come true but she lives in hope of seeing her husband and living with him again.