

North Korean defector Hyeonseo Lee on escape and the secretive state

The escapee who made it to China at the age of 17 discusses being a voice of her people

[Lunch with the FT](#)

Hyeonseo Lee bursts into the quiet warmth of the traditional Korean restaurant, bringing with her a blast of sub-zero air from the wintertime streets of Seoul. A miniature hurricane and a woman of strong will — “obstinate” is how she puts it herself — she is not at all the doll-faced persona suggested in photographs. Now 36, she escaped on foot across the frozen Yalu river into China from her home in North Korea at the age of 17. For the next decade, she survived abusive Chinese pimps, gangsters, importunate marriage suitors, informers and police interrogators, and then escaped again to seek asylum and a new home in South Korea.

Her traumas and adventures did not stop there. She returned to China in 2009 to smuggle her mother and brother out of North Korea and eventually had to extract them from a prison in Laos. She is now one of the most prominent global voices of the subjugated North Korean people, a bestselling author and public speaker and a campaigner against the thriving Chinese trade in Korean sex slaves. With North Korea developing nuclear weapons and long-range missiles, and Donald Trump questioning America’s existing security commitments to its Asian allies, there has rarely been a more important time to hear the truth about the secretive, paranoid state of North Korea and its symbiotic relationship with the neighbouring Chinese superpower.

Lee has arrived 15 minutes late to Sosonjae restaurant. Since our dinner appointment was set for 5pm, early even by Korean standards, I am hardly complaining as she flings her coat aside and we order a Korean set meal, starting with vegetable pancake and japchae, a salad of glass noodles made from sweet potato and flavoured with sesame oil. The restaurant’s name means “house of simple food”.

I start by asking about identity and truthfulness, an issue that has haunted North Korean exiles — and played into the hands of Pyongyang’s propagandists — ever since the most prominent among them were found to have lied or exaggerated their already gruesome experiences in their memoirs.

Lee, according to those who first heard her story and helped her tell it to the world, is different, not least because she openly loves her homeland and is able to evoke the cosy normality of family life in the north as well as the horror of public executions, the mindless worship of the Kim dynasty and the famine of the 1990s. Lee’s North Korea is not just a country where peasants starve to death and denounce their neighbours — though it is that place, too — but one where people fall in love, friends gather to (illegally) watch foreign videos, and a young girl delights in a new pair of shoes.

Some memories, she admits, are “very painful”, especially those of her narrow escape from servitude in a brothel in the north-eastern Chinese city of Shenyang and her harrowing journey to smuggle her family out of North Korea and across China to freedom. But she is conscious of

being peculiarly lucky, perhaps even the recipient of the kind of miracle attributed to the Christian God.

“In my life there are so many ‘what ifs?’ What if I was repatriated by the Chinese police when I was caught by them? What if I was raped by the Chinese gangsters? What if when I brought my family out of the country . . .”

Her voice tails off. “My mum and my brother and me, even today we are not talking about that experience.” A few months ago, a fellow defector arranged the extraction of her own parents from North Korea via China; the Chinese police caught them and repatriated them, and the mother committed suicide by swallowing poison on the bus before recrossing the border. The father’s fate is unknown.

[Lee](#) is *The Girl with Seven Names* (her autobiographical book describes how she escaped detection in China, learning the language and living under a series of assumed identities), and unless the two Koreas are reunified, I will probably never know her real name (“A girly name” is all she will say), which must remain secret to protect relatives and friends left behind under the dictatorship of [Kim Jong Un](#). She chose the name Hyeonseo — whose two parts mean “sunshine” and “good luck” — to celebrate her emergence from the “long tunnels” of darkness into her new life of freedom in South Korea, and insists that even her mother must use it all the time.

“Because if they use the old name at home, then they are going to get used to calling me by my original name and make a mistake on the outside when we are around with people. She says I’m trying my best to erase my name. Of course we can’t forget about the name but you just get used to it.”

The dangers are real. South Korea’s National Intelligence Service has warned Lee that Pyongyang’s agents may try to kidnap her — it has happened to other critics of Pyongyang and Beijing — and make an example of her in North Korea.

We learned that all human scums live in America. South Korea was described as the poorest country in the world, where beggars filled the streets

With chopsticks, we are delicately wrapping slices of boiled pork — one of Lee’s favourites — with tiny raw shrimp and radish kimchi into a pickled leaf and popping the rolls into our mouths.

“That’s why the NIS tells me, every event, when you receive an invitation, better check if that’s a real event. And the one thing they told me is, don’t go to Southeast Asia, including China.” After her book was published in 2015 and while she was in New York, she says, the NIS told her that Pyongyang had sent a message to its embassies abroad accusing her of slandering North Korea and ordering them to “do something”.

After just two generations of separation since the end of the Korean war in 1953, the ill-nourished people above the 38th parallel north are on average a couple of inches shorter than those in the prosperous south. Lee herself witnessed devastating famines. Yet at 5ft 2in — “very small,” she says — she seems always to have been determined and resourceful, driven to survive first by curiosity about the bright lights of China over the river from her home, then by

the urge to find her family again, and now by her mission to speak out for the voiceless 25m inhabitants of North Korea.

“I think I have some strong something that maybe other people don’t have,” she says, recalling the [TED talk she gave in 2013](#) that propelled her to stardom. It has so far been watched 7m times; and her book is being translated into at least 18 different languages. “The TED talk I gave, that gave me another character I didn’t know about. I’m not saying the mind of a hero, but a kind of responsibility. Every word I’m speaking, it’s not from myself. I’m speaking for and representing the people of communist North Korea.”

With constant public appearances, by the end of last year she had driven herself into a state of exhaustion, “torturing myself”, she says, in “mental agony” and with a sense of inadequacy for the task she had undertaken. “People in the past, they used to tell me you need a vacation, vacation, vacation — I didn’t know what they meant.”

To cheer ourselves up, we turn again to the food, including a large and delicious uncooked crab, its gooey flesh marinated in the restaurant’s secret sauce.

Food is a difficult subject for North Koreans who survived the famine of the 1990s. Hundreds of thousands, possibly millions, died, and Lee left the country just as the disaster reached its peak. I ask her whether it still feels strange to be able to eat whatever and whenever she wants. “The food makes me the most sad,” she replies, pointing out how often we leave it behind on the table. “For us, it’s nothing. For people in North Korea, only for one bowl of rice — not this kind of fancy food — they don’t have it and so many people have died . . . We are unlucky. We’re born in the wrong country, with the wrong leader.”

As she settled into the high-tech economy of South Korea eight years ago, Lee was astonished to discover from television and from Google that there were things called “human rights”, even “animal rights”. She suddenly reaches across the table and shows me a picture of a cat on her smartphone.

“In New York, last week — it’s my friend’s pet. And on her birthday, often, actually, she eats nice sushi. She loves sushi.”

The cat? I ask, incredulous. “Yes. She loves sushi. Then whenever I see those pictures, I feel so sad. People who live in North Korea, they die for food, but living in the free world, the cat even eats expensive sushi.”

Yes, but that’s not really sensible, is it? “I’m not criticising the cat or the owner,” she says. “I’m not. It’s just reminding me how North Koreans live.”

The memories come tumbling out, some good but mostly bad: her disbelieving mother — lost and now found again — running towards her in a prison yard in Laos; the corpses of famine victims floating down the Yalu; the handcarts to take away the dead so that Chinese visitors would not see evidence of North Korea’s shameful failure; a weakling flung on to the heaps of dead because he was probably going to die anyway and a passing Chinese driver laughing at the sight. Lee’s hands are fiercely twisting her long necklace of black beads as though she is trying to strangle the recollections.

“Sometimes the dead bodies wouldn’t be moved, so the smell of the decomposing flesh was everywhere, especially under the bridge and near the train station, because under the bridge is where not many people can see.”

I suggest we celebrate the good memories and the reunification of her family (her brother is studying at Columbia University in New York) and order soju, the local rice liquor. She rejects it as too ordinary and so we opt for a plump bottle of Korean black raspberry wine, a sweet drink that tastes to an Englishman like neat Ribena.

We need the painful testimony of escapers such as Lee — who barely touches the wine — to understand the reality of life in North Korea and China’s essential role in propping up the Kim regime. She does not want to dwell on other defectors such as the torture victim [Shin Dong-hyuk](#) or Yeonmi Park, a prominent young woman escaper, whose stories have been subject to scrutiny after having been shown to contain inconsistencies. All she will say over dinner is that it “makes me so angry” because the exposing of “fakers” helps the regime and undermines the credibility of those who do tell the truth.

The importance of Lee’s story rests on her intimate understanding of China. The country’s communist rulers supported Kim Il Sung during the Korean war, but they worry today about the nuclear ambitions of his grandson Kim Jong Un. They also oppose reunification for fear of seeing US troops along the Yalu river.

The communist government in Beijing treats North Korean refugees with varying degrees of cruelty and indifference, depending on the winds of geopolitics. Even in South Korea, North Koreans find it notoriously hard to succeed in such a hyper-modern society, brainwashed as they are since birth and almost wholly ignorant about the outside world. (The north is seen by southerners as their “mad uncle in the attic. A subject best avoided,” Lee wrote in her book.)

“We refugees, we become always a punchbag,” she says now, as we turn to dessert, a large slice each of crisp and juicy pear. “A political punchbag between China and South Korea and North Korea. China has all the keys right now. On unification, China also has the answer. So if China wants North Korea to completely end, if China stops supporting North Korea, within one week or 10 days they can make North Korea chaos. I wish they could do more, but they are not doing it at all . . . Certainly North Korea is not easy to handle. And the west, including South Korea, they see North Korea in a wrong perspective. They see them weak while western media make jokes about the Dear Leader’s ridiculous hairstyle. What they’ve done over time, they’ve developed more the nuclear missile system, while we make fun of them. And right now it becomes a real threat. I don’t know if the Trump administration can really have something change.”

Lee wants reunification, she wants to be able to go back to her hometown on the Yalu, and she worries that young South Koreans do not care as much as their parents whether or not it ever happens. (“Many people in the past, they never predicted German reunification,” she says hopefully, “but it did happen very abruptly.”).

Her immediate goal is to build an NGO to stop the trafficking of desperate North Koreans in China as brides and sex-workers. She estimates that about 30,000-40,000 of the 200,000 North Korean defectors hiding in China are sex slaves. “As a woman who actually survived from there, I should be their voice. I want to end sex slavery in China, although I know it’s really difficult to make it happen. One day maybe it’s possible.”

I ask Lee what she has learnt about North Korea since she escaped, but I quickly realise it is the wrong question. North Koreans flee because they realise there is something wrong with their homeland. It is the lies they have been taught about the rest of the world that are deeply ingrained. “We learned that Americans are our primary enemies and all human scums live in America,” says Lee, who stunned her mother and brother by entering a relationship with an American man called Brian, before marrying him four years ago.

“South Korea was described as the poorest country in the world, where beggars were filling the streets. And then the most shocking thing for us was the Korean war — it was created by the American and South Korean enemies together. We never learned it was actually started by the North Korean regime. My mum, who was brainwashed for more than 60 years, she still asks me: ‘Show me the proof’.”

In South Korea, Lee also learnt about freedom. “Breathing in South Korea, even though the life here is not easy, makes me so happy. I feel that sitting in a coffee shop, having a cup of tea and looking out of the window at the blue sky — this is happiness. Truly happiness. I could never have this moment when I was living in North Korea for 17 years and when I was hiding in China for 10 years. I don’t think many people, when they are having a cup of tea, go: ‘That’s freedom. It’s the joy of life.’ But me, I have that.” For the first time in two hours, she laughs.

Victor Mallet is the FT’s Asia news editor

Illustration by James Ferguson