

North Korean Defectors in Memoirs and Screen Media

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The phenomenon of North Korean defections and migration is one of the most recent historical events to emerge from the North Korean famine of the mid-1990s. Following economic failures and the loss of Soviet support due to the collapse of the Eastern Bloc and the death of Kim Il-sung (1912-1994), between 240,000 and 3,500,000 North Koreans died of starvation or starvation-related diseases in 1994-1998, leading to a large number of defections in the following decades. However, the number of North Korean defectors coming to South Korea is changing.

Since Kim Jong-un took power in 2011, the number of defectors has decreased, while the number of memoirs by forcibly repatriated migrants has increased. Moreover, women make up the largest proportion of defectors, accounting for more than 70 percent of all defectors between 2004 and 2023, and the majority of autobiographical texts, documentaries and social media such as YouTube, Facebook and TikTok are produced by and for women.

Similarly, the portrayal of North Koreans in South Korean media in general is a new phenomenon, as the TV series *Crash Landing on You* (2019-20) shows. More and more North Korean defectors are featured in successful K-dramas such as *Squid Game* (2021), *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* (2022) as well as in the various films such as the latest documentary film *Beyond Utopia* (dir. Madeleine Gavin, 2023) and the Netflix film *My Name is Loh Kiwan* (Ro Ki Wan, dir. Kim Hee Jin, 2024).

Using selected autobiographical memoirs by female defectors as well as South Korean dramas and films, this paper analyzes the media discourses on how women defectors are portrayed in selected screen media, assesses the 'defector narratives' in relation to refugees' self-analysis and self-assertion in 'defector memoirs' and autobiographical new social media by survivors and activists, and examines how cultural productions about North Korean defectors and migrants contribute to or critique micronarratives of displacement.