South Korea journalist and filmmaker Hark Joon Lee’s firsthand account of the challenges that would-be North Korean defectors face in their homeland; in China, as illegal immigrants seeking new lives and a route to asylum; and in South Korea, as these new citizens attempt to navigate a new and unfamiliar reality.

With more than one hundred color and black-and-white photos.
SYNOPSIS

Crossing Heaven’s Border is South Korean filmmaker and journalist Hark Joon Lee’s firsthand account of his four years covering the incredible struggles of North Korean defectors. Already available in Chinese and Japanese, this is its first translation into a Western language.

Lee plunged into the project in 2007 as a budding reporter for the South Korean daily the Chosun Ilbo. As such, Crossing is also the story of his own growth as a journalist and documentarian, and, ultimately, of the emotional toll of his coverage.

While they may be familiar with the seemingly erratic, even bizarre behavior of North Korea’s regime, and with the misery and isolation of the country’s citizens, American readers will likely be surprised and shocked by many of Lee’s accounts:

• North Korean-manufactured methamphetamines are routinely smuggled across the border into China, with the help of a corrupt North Korean military.

• Lee goes on an unusual Chinese “safari,” and the exotic species viewed is the North Koreans themselves.

• North Korean women are sold into forced marriages with rural Chinese men in order to pay off grain debts and feed their families in North Korea.

• In Siberia, North Korean loggers lead a shadowy existence, paid in now-worthless scrip, separated from their families and trapped in dangerous jobs.

While narrating the voyages of defectors along perilous land and sea routes from China to South Korea, Lee introduces readers to the tangled role of South Korean missionaries who lead and even fund defectors, often in defiance of local laws.

Perhaps most pitiful in Lee’s account is the plight of defectors’ children born into a stateless limbo in China. As illegal immigrants, they have no access to education or health care in China; as undocumented aliens, they are rejected by a wary South Korea because they lack proof of North Korean citizenship; and as “children of traitors,” they have no route back to North Korea.

Ironically, after their courageous struggles to seek better lives in South Korea, many defectors find themselves unable to adjust to an unfamiliar society that views them with prejudice.
ABOUT THE DOCUMENTARY

Reporter and filmmaker Hark Joon Lee’s work on the plight of North Korean defectors began in 2007 for the South Korean newspaper the Chosun Ilbo. Crossing Heaven’s Border is the first film in a series that also includes Across Land Across Sea and Phantoms of the Border. Crossing debuted on American television on the PBS program “Wide Angle” in 2009.

Crossing Heaven’s Border has received numerous international awards and was the first Korean-made documentary nominated for an Emmy. It can be viewed on the PBS website at http://video.pbs.org/video/1171612608/. The multimedia project behind the documentary, “On the Border,” can be accessed at the Chosun Ilbo website at http://english.chosun.com/ontheborder/.

“. . .the horror of what people face back in North Korea gives Crossing the kind of suspense Hollywood cannot manufacture.”

From a Wall Street Journal review of the Crossing Heaven’s Border documentary

“. . .while defectors and refugees are important individually as displaced human beings, as a whole they are also responsible for what is becoming an information revolution in North Korea.”

From the introduction by Bradley K. Martin, author of Under the Loving Care of the Fatherly Leader: North Korea and the Kim Dynasty
CROSSING HEAVEN’S BORDER
BY HARK JOON LEE

From 2007 to 2011 South Korean filmmaker and newspaper reporter Hark Joon Lee lived among North Korean defectors in China, filming an award-winning documentary on their struggles. Crossing Heaven’s Border is the firsthand account of his experiences there, where he witnessed human trafficking, the smuggling of illicit drugs by North Korean soldiers, and a rare successful escape from North Korea by sea.

As Lee traces the often tragic lives of North Korean defectors who were willing to risk everything for their hopes, he journeys to Siberia in pursuit of hidden North Korean lumber mills; to Vietnam, where defectors make desperate charges into foreign embassies; and along the 10,000-kilometer escape route for defectors stretching from China to Laos and to Thailand.

About the Author
Author, reporter, and documentarian Hark Joon Lee has served as a war correspondent in Afghanistan and managed online news outlets. He is currently an investigative reporter with the Chosun Ilbo Crossmedia Team, which he now heads. Lee has received an array of accolades for his work, including being the first Korean to be nominated three times for an Emmy award and winning the Golden Nymph award at the Monte-Carlo Television Festival.

With more than one hundred full color and black-and-white photographs and an introduction by Bradley K. Martin, author of Under the Loving Care of the Fatherly Leader.

Published by Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center and distributed by Brookings Institution Press
800-537-5487 • FAX 410-516-6998 • www.brookings.edu/press.aspx
ISBN 978-1-931368-36-0 • Trade • 6 x 9 • 352 pages • $18.95

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