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문학석사 학위논문

# Writing as Righting

: Human Rights, Arendtian *Action*  
and North Korean Refugee Life Writings

탈북난민 수기 읽기:  
인권, 그리고 아렌트의 '행위' 개념을 중심으로

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## ABSTRACT

# Writing as Righting : Human Rights, Arendtian *Action* and North Korean Refugee Life Writings

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The purpose of my dissertation is to illuminate the significance of North Korean refugee life writings, particularly the narratives by Kang, Chol-hwan and Shin, Dong-hyuk, in the light of human rights discourse—both in the context of humanities (‘human’) and politics (‘rights’). Suggesting Hannah Arendt’s idea of *action*, I investigate how the narratives of Kang and Shin reveal that they are complex and multilayered texts that resist any simple, straightforward reading that labels them as a journey of escape from ‘hell’ to the ‘world of freedom.’ I give particular attention to the political status of refugee writers, first as a refugee or a narrated self in and out of North Korea and its prison camps, and then as a narrator or an author who sometimes firmly claims his rights and sometimes seems to be exploited by other political agencies.

I argue that the narratives, which at first seemed to be plain descriptions of human rights violations in North Korea that embrace uncritically the modern notion of human rights, actually problematize it by revealing that neither the totalitarian state nor the ‘world of freedom’ have seen its true realization. The continued frustration and confusion in Kang and Shin’s attempt to have their voice heard, I contend, is an articulation of Arendtian revision to the common perception of the notion of human rights. Moreover, following the threefold challenge of truthfulness that North Korean refugee writers face—political innocence, factual accuracy, and the subjectivity of the narrator—I argue that the given texts which shows anxiety, ambivalence and contradiction in their testimonies, are escaping not only from the totalitarian state, but also from the competing voices of the democratic free world. Reminding Arendtian idea of *action*—i.e. an individual with personality that acquires the meaningfulness of their existence amongst men, which I suggest as an alternative to the common reception of human rights, I contend Kang and Shin’s act of writing itself, which records the narrator’s progress of acquisition of his or own voice in the form of storytelling, become *action*—hence writing as righting.

**Keywords:** North Korean refugee, human rights, Hannah Arendt, action, life writing, Kang Chol-hwan, Shin Dong-hyuk

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## Transliteration

This thesis follows the McCune-Reischauer system for the romanization of Korean except for some widely used terms like *Juche* (instead of *Juch'e*). Personal and geographical names are transcribed according to their regional rules: the official notation system of North Korea and the recent Revised Romanization system of South Korea, respectively. Korean personal names are written in the order of the surname followed by a comma the given name, unless a different order is preferred by the person. For books written in Korean, I provide their original titles with their transliteration and translation in parentheses. All translations are mine unless there exists an already published translation, in which case I will note them in the text.

## Abbreviations

- COI Michael Kirby, Marzuki Darusman, Sonja Biserko (February 17, 2014). "Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea". United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. distributed on 17 February 2014.
- OT Arendt, Hannah. *Origins of Totalitarianism*. Memphis: Books LLC, 2009.
- HC ————. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: UP Chicago, 1958
- Escape* Harden, Blaine. *Escape from Camp 14: one man's remarkable odyssey from North Korea to freedom in the West*. New York: Penguin, 2012.
- Suyongsoui* Kang, Chol-hwan. 『수용소의 노래 (*Suyongsoui Norae*, or the Song of a Concentration Camp)』 Seoul: 시대정신 (Zeitgeist), 2004.
- Aquariums* ————, and Pierre Rigoulot. *The Aquariums of Pyongyang: Ten Years in a North Korean Gulag*. New York: Basic, 2001.
- Sesang* Shin, Dong-hyuk. 『세상 밖으로 나오다 (*Sesang Bakkūro Naoda*, or Emerge to the Outside World)』 Seoul: NKDB, 2007.

# I. Introduction

Human rights, intertwined with various themes and issues such as sovereignty, life, individuality, and nation-state, have been heavily and most actively discussed for the last century at various levels by academics and professionals alike, whether their fields be legal, political, ethical, or, of course, philosophical and literary. The modern history of atrocities, wars and massacres have not only generated problems and casualties, but also produced a vast amount of literature, which, by testifying such horrors of human deeds, urges readers to reconsider the notion of human and humanity itself. Still, as current issues of conflict, refugees and the re-emergence of detention camps draw international attention on human rights discourse, I should point out that there is one state, not far from where I am, which is pertinent to the issue of human rights more than ever, of which situation there is a growing literature of testimonials: the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

Commonly known as North Korea, the state is referred to as a despotic, totalitarian, and stalinist state where "its gravity, scale and nature of human rights violations have no parallel in the contemporary world," (COI 379) and such an



assessment is already a well established cliché for the mass media worldwide.<sup>1</sup> For all the North Korean government's notorious isolationist policies that frustrate any foreign investigation, a sufficient number of studies have been conducted to reveal that North Korea resembles many aspects of the totalitarian regimes of the early

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<sup>1</sup> It is not difficult to find that international media, especially western media most frequently defines the DPRK as dictatorship, totalitarian and stalinist state. For example:

"The rotten Stalinist dictatorship"—Walsh, Lynn. "North Korea: The Korean Crisis." CWI Online: Socialism Today. Journal of the Socialist Party, CWI, 8 Feb. 2003. Web. 23 Jan. 2015;

"North Korea, run by a Stalinist dictatorship for almost six decades..."—Brook, James.

"North Korea Says It Is Using Plutonium to Make A-Bombs." *The New York Times*. N.p., 2 Oct. 2003. Web. 23 Jan. 2015;

"North Korea, officially known as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, is one of the world's most oppressive, closed, and vicious dictatorships. It is perhaps the last living example of pure totalitarianism – control of the state over every aspect of human life."—Buruma, Ian.

"Leader Article: Let The Music Play On." *The Times of India*. N.p., 13 Mar. 2008. Web. 23 Jan. 2015;

"...so does Stalinist North Korea."—"How the Other 0.0000001% Live." *The Economist*. The Economist Newspaper, 31 May 2008. Web. 23 Jan. 2015;

"The totalitarian state also stands accused of systematic human rights abuses."—"North Korea Profile." *BBC News*. N.p., 14 Oct. 2014. Web. 02 Dec. 2014;

twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> What makes the country perhaps worse than its forerunners is the fact that its prison camps have lasted twelve times as long as Auschwitz.<sup>3</sup> The estimated number of refugees, seeking freedom from persecution, hunger, and oppression from North Korea hovers at 120,000, some having remained stateless for more than ten years.<sup>4</sup>

The last half-century of North Korean defection saw an accumulation of a considerable literature thereon, ranging in genre from testimony and fiction to

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<sup>2</sup>The latest report of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea of United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (COI report) states that the DPRK "displays many attributes of a totalitarian State,"(COI p. 280)

Many of human rights organizations also defines the DPRK as "a single-party state under a totalitarian family dictatorship". For example, see: Freedom house "B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 0 / 16,"Freedom in the World 2014: North Korea." Freedom House. N.p., 2014. Web. 4 Dec. 2014

For the scholarly analysis on the DPRK as totalitarian state: among many, MacEachern, a specialist on North Korean affairs who provides with detailed study on North Korea's institutional policy in his publications, defines the DPRK as "the post-totalitarian institutional state" which "retains some key elements of totalitarianism."McEachern, Patrick. *Inside the Red Box: North Korea's Post-totalitarian Politics*. New York: Columbia UP, 2010. Print. p. 218; and Magstadt suggests North Korea as "the last Soviet-style totalitarian state still in existence."—Magstadt, Thomas M., and Peter M. Schotten. *Understanding Politics: Ideas, Institutions, and Issues*. New York: St. Martin's, 1984. N. pag. Print. p.139.

For more reference for the scholarly analyses on the totalitarian aspect of the DPRK regime, see: Lankov, Andrei. "North Korea: De-Stalinaization from Below and the Advent of New Social Forces." *Harvard Asia Quarterly* 10. no.2 (Spring 2006). Print. pp. 4-14; Cumings, Bruce. *Korean's Place in the Sun*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1997; Scobell, "Making Sense of North kOream" 245-66, Cho, Han-beom. "The Characteristics of the North Korean Political System: A Comparative Socialist Perspective." *Vintage Point* (April 2003). Print. pp. 44-54

<sup>3</sup>The expression is rather frequently used for describing the extremity of North Korean prison camps. For example: "North Korea's Concentration Camps." *Aishcom*. N.p., n.d. Web. 04 Dec. 2014. The source states that this article originally appeared in The Boston Globe.

<sup>4</sup> Han, Dong-ho, et al. *White Paper on Human Rights in North Korea*, Seoul: Korea Institute for National Unification. 2014. Print. pp.589-594

biography and memoir.<sup>5</sup> These works mainly feature refugees in their flight from the extreme conditions of famine and repressed freedom under the dictatorship of the North Korean regime. Some authors specify the purpose of their books as bearing witness to the atrocious violation of human rights in North Korea.

As such, North Korean refugee literature is an extensive field to be studied not only by literary scholars but also in the contexts of politics and other academic disciplines engaged in current timely discussions such as biopolitics, sovereignty and the human rights discourse. Considering the immensity of influence the Korean War and its aftermath have had on the people of the two Koreas, North Korean refugee writings, which crystalize the traumatic experience of the division, should be recognized as valuable works of art and records. It is, however, regretful that, notwithstanding the amount and rigor seen in the current studies on North Korean refugees from political, legal and social perspectives, there has been a conspicuous lack

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<sup>5</sup> According to Kwon, Se-young, the present number of published North Korean refugee life writings in print is up to 85 which includes six books on their experience in the prison camps; for online publication, the estimated number is more than 364; the number of published novels on North Korean refugee is 52 which includes 16 works of North Korean refugee; the number of published poetical works of North Korean refugee is seven. (All published in Korean, 2014). See Annex I and II of Kwon, Se-Young and "Chart of the North Korean Refugee Testimonies." Data Base Center for North Korean Human Rights, n.d. Web. There have been significant number of translated or collaborated work of North Korean refugee life writings in languages other than Korean; among them, the estimated number of North Korean life writings published in English is about twenty in 2014.

of attention among literary scholars on the body of their *writings*.<sup>6</sup> There exists, to my knowledge, virtually no preceding research on North Korean refugee literature done

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<sup>6</sup> There has been several literary studies on the literature which deals with North Korean refugee situations; the most notable project was the collected literary study of Diaspora of North Korean Defector in Korean Literature, published in 2012. Yet, most of the studies focuses with the literary description of the situation of North Korean refugee as a social phenomenon, mainly dealing with their literary figuration of identity in the contexts of diaspora or immigrant to South Korea. Further, see: Park, Deok-Kyu, and Sung-Hee Lee, eds. 『탈북 디아스포라 (t'albuk Tiasŭp'ora, or Diaspora of North Korean Defector in Korean Literature)』 쟁점으로 읽는 한국문학 (chaengjömüro Ingnŭn Han'guk Munhak , or Korean Literature in Issues). Vol. 2. Seoul: 푸른사상사 (p'urŭnsasangsa ), 2012. Print.

Kwon, Se-young, giving the study of literature for her article on the novels on North Korean refugee, affirms that there has been no previous literary studies on North Korean refugee. She suggests four reasons for the lack of North Korean refugee literature scholarship as following: the small number of predicted works, lack of public conscious, trend of depoliticizing in current Korean literary field, the issue of aesthetic value of the produced works. In the same article, Kwon defines her studies on North Korean refugee literature as ‘North Korean escapee citizens’(Puk'an It'al Chumin) literature,’ which includes both literature works produced by North Korean refugees and the works dealing with the North Korean refugee issues. However, as the title of the article shows, her study rather focuses on imaginative literature; and sees North Korean refugee as immigrant (‘escapee citizen’) to South Korea, not to their recollection and description on the experiences in North Korea and the progress of escape which takes larger amount of produced works. Further, see chapter II of Kwon, Se-Young.

in Korea, and very limited attention is given around the world as well.<sup>7</sup>

My thesis, taking as an initial stepping stone the necessity and the possibility of interdisciplinary analysis of North Korean Refugee literature, attempts the reading of selected life narratives by North Korean refugees in the light of human rights discourse. My particular interest lies in a small group of narratives that describe the defector's experience in the political prison camps in North Korea; such works are

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<sup>7</sup> One of the reason for the lack of studies on life writings can be suggested that in South Korean literary scholarship, there has been very little attention on life writing as literary genre. Yet, there has been an short article which attempts an analysis on a recorded testimony of a North Korean refugee in perspective of literary therapy by Kang, Mi-Jung. Here the text which Kang is dealing with is a part of a collected testimonies of North Korean refugees which was first voice-recorded and then later transcribed and edited in a book for the research on the refugee's post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Refer to: Kang, Mi-Jung. "Trauma Analysis in the Story of North Korean Refugees -Focusing on Lee Seung Jun's Case in 『The Story on North Korean Refugees in Arduous March Period』 ." *Journal of Literary Therapy* 30 (2014): 413-37. Print.

In the world-wide scholarship, there have been many studies on North Korean refugee in perspective of human rights, among them a few number of approaches to the life writings as follows:

One of the most recent and notable work was done by Shine Choi, a visiting professor of University of Mississippi attempts the reading of three life writings of North Korean refugees including *Aquariums of Pyongyang*. The significance of her work is that as a scholar of International Relations, she introduces to her field the literary perspective such as critical theories on the Other, subjectivities and way of narration. Refer to: Choi, Shine. *Re-imagining North Korea in International Politics: Problems and Alternatives*. New York: Routledge, 2015. Print.

Another scholar, Christine Hong, a professor of literature at UC Santa Cruz also actively uses the perspective of human rights in reading of Korean culture and literature. In her critical overview on COI report and North Korean human rights discourse, she briefly refers to *Aquariums of Pyongyang* as an example for the issue of authenticity; but in this work she does not widen her perspective on the text to literary aspect.

Helena Grice, in her book *Asian American Fiction, History and Life Writing: International Encounters* very also briefly mentions *Aquariums of Pyongyang* in the context of political mediation. Refer to: "War by Other Means: The Violence of North Korean Human Rights (他の手段をもつてする戦争 北朝鮮の人権を語る暴力性)." *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 12.13 (2014): n. pag. Web.

relatively few yet consistently growing in number.<sup>8</sup> Two most renowned escapees have been selected for this study: Kang, Chol-hwan, who had spend ten years of childhood in a prison camp, fled from North Korea in 1987 and acquired a South Korean citizenship in 1992 —a relatively early case in defection history<sup>9</sup>; and Shin, Dong-hyuk, the only known escapee from the ‘no-exit camp’ where he was born and raised, defected to South Korea in 2006, after almost an year of stateless status. Both are now among the most active advocates of human rights in North Korea.

The main texts to be studied are: *The Aquariums of Pyongyang* (original in French, 2000; English translation, 2001), the autobiography of Kang, Chol-hwan, written by Kang in collaboration with a French historian and journalist Pierre Rigoulot; and *Escape from Camp 14* (2012) by Blaine Harden, the biography of Shin, Dong-hyuk. These books became world-famous bestsellers and were translated into

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<sup>8</sup> About twelve published books and larger number of other form such as recorded or written testimonies, documentary materials and witnessing public hearings.

<sup>9</sup> There has been prominent number of North Korean defectors since the Armistice Agreement of Korean War in 1953, however the international recognition for North Korean defectors as refugees begins around 1990's, especially following the large number of defection occurred because of the great famine (or “Arduous March (*Konanŭi haenggun*)” as it is metaphorically called in North Korea) in the late 1990s. South Korean government has revised its definition of North Korean defectors from ‘surrendered veteran(*Kwisunnyongsa*)’ to ‘defected North Korean brethren(*Kwisun Puk'an Tongp'o*)’(1993) and then ‘North Korean escapee citizen(*Puk'an It'al Chumin*)’ (1997); and effectuated Act on Protection and Settlement Support of Residents Escaping from North Korea in 1997. As increasing number of defectors seek their asylum in other than South Korea, some countries including United States of America which enacted North Korean Human Rights law in 2004, started to recognize the status of North Korean defectors as refugees in early 2000's. Further see: Schwekendiek, Daniel. *A Socioeconomic History of North Korea*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011; Han, Dong-ho, et al. *White Paper on Human Rights in North Korea*, Seoul: Korea Institute for National Unification. 2014; Park, Sungchul, and Sunhee Im. “재중탈북자 현황 (Jaegungtalbukja Hyunhwang, or Status of North Korean Defectors in China).” ; Yoon, Yeosang. “중국의 탈북자 강제 송환 과 인권 실태 (Joonggukeu Talbukja Gangjaesonghwangwa Ingwonsiltae, or Status of North Korean Defector Deportation and Human Rights in China)” Seoul: Database Center for North Korean Human Rights, 2013. 20-27. Print. and also, the official website of the Ministry of Unification of Republic of Korea.

about twenty languages, bringing the authors not only international fame but also the basis for their human rights activism. In addition, two memoirs written in Korean—『수용소의 노래(Suyongsoŭi Norae, or the Song of a Concentration Camp, 2005)』 by Kang and 『세상 밖으로 나오다(Sesang Pakkŭro Naoda, or Escape to the Outside World, 2007)』 by Shin, respectively—are also studied in this thesis. The latter two books, which earned less public attention in South Korea than the former two, are particularly to be considered in comparison with their western counterparts. I should also mention that Kang and Shin’s testimonies in public hearings and official records for researches on North Korea will be also be dealt with here.

In line with other refugee writers, Kang and Shin also dedicate their books to the cause of accusing the human rights deprivation in North Korea. Indeed, the horrors and atrocities recollected in their writings are beyond description—they divulge what is covertly, but undoubtedly being committed by the totalitarian regime and its political prison camps. Their testimonies call for a shift in public attention from the ridiculous image of the ‘crazy Kims’ to the truly urgent issue of human rights. A careful analysis of these narratives, however, reveals that they are complex and multilayered texts that resist any simple, straightforward reading that labels them as a journey from ‘hell’ to ‘free world.’ My thesis thus attempts to delineate how the narratives defend and at the same time *question* the very notion of human rights itself.

Indeed, the allegedly universal and essential notion of human rights, as many scholars point out, is in fact a rather recent creation. Its dynamics have developed within the contexts of modern—and Western—history and philosophy. Our reading of the aforementioned texts in the light of human rights, for that reason, should be preceded by a thorough reconsideration of the notion itself. My thesis consults

Hannah Arendt's ideas on the subject, which, I believe, finds articulation in the life writings of Kang and Shin. Rethinking human rights, my reading of the texts will help illuminate their singularity among other human rights themed works by refugees and prison camp survivors.

My reading of the texts follows how the narrators in North Korean refugee life writings express and develop their understanding of human rights— both in the contexts of humanities (“human”) and politics (“rights”). I pay particular attention to the formation and dynamics of multiple layers of voice within the given texts, which appear as confusion, ambivalence and even contradiction in testimonies and thus challenge the truthfulness of the narrators themselves. This, I suggest, is due to the characteristics of the genre that is simultaneously a retrospective account and a human rights discourse, as well as the authors’ varied political status in relation to North Korea. By doing so, I ultimately aim to argue that North Korean refugee life writings emerge as a distinctive canon within the genres of human rights literature and retrospective narratives, giving us new insights into human rights in perspectives of literature and philosophy.

To accomplish this, I begin with a theoretical examination of the connection between North Korean refugee life narratives and human rights. In the first chapter, I aim to show the necessity and significance of the theme of human rights in North Korean refugee life writings through a historico-philosophical review of the contemporary notion of human rights and a look into its relevancy to North Korean prison camps. I will first provide the specific situations in the camps: what atrocities are being committed and how they are in accordance with the North Korean government’s official theory of human rights. I will then move on to examine the



modern notion of human rights, a precarious union between the conflicting ideas of the natural rights of man and citizenship that results in ultimate failure. To support this, I will borrow Hanna Arendt's critique of the modern notion of human rights, as well as her accusation of totalitarianism and understanding of the human condition. I will end the chapter by suggesting *action* as an Arendtian substitution for human rights discussion in North Korean refugee life writings.

The following two chapters attempt to show how the Arendtian notion of *action* finds articulation in the life writings of Kang and Shin. Chapter two is dedicated to textual analysis, providing some important excerpts from the text which shows how the Arendtian *action* can be essential for the cause of human rights. My focus is divided between two themes: first *action* as interaction, and then *action* as political power, both of which appear significantly different in the narratives of Kang and Shin, yet bring to the same conclusion that their human rights cannot be guaranteed by their circumstance, but by their willful *action* of right-ing—in Kang and Shin's case: writing.

In chapter three, I observe the characteristics of North Korean refugee life writings in relation to the issue of truthfulness; thus the chapter will also serve as a genre study on the texts' forms and contents.<sup>10</sup> First, I will look into situations and

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<sup>10</sup> The structure of my thesis may strike one as rather unusual, especially since its genre discussion, which usually comes in at the beginning of a thesis, is put off until the very last chapter. I hope to make it clear that such unconventional arrangement was a deliberate choice on my part for the sake of effectivity. The development of my thesis follows after an explication of the Arendtian concept of *action* from interaction, narrative and then to storytelling. Moreover, the ultimate conclusion of my thesis reaches the suggestion of the distinctness of North Korean life writing as a genre. It is, therefore, indispensable to arrange the contents of my thesis in such a way that the practical reading of the text is firmly situated on a solid theoretical foundation. In addition, I believe this structure can reveal the argument of my thesis as a composed narrative.

examples that lead to the mixture of varied voices and tones within the texts and thus provoke the issue of truthfulness in North Korean refugee life writings. Suggesting truthfulness as three concepts—political innocence, factual accuracy and the subjectiveness of the narrator, I will investigate how such issue of truthfulness relates and reflects the characteristics of the genre, first as retrospective narratives and then as human rights-themed literature. Then I will argue that Kang and Shin's books, by way of fighting for the reinstatement of their own voices, become an *action*.

The final chapter is both a brief review and the conclusion of my thesis. Here I will provide a brief summary of the main argument for each chapter, followed by some concluding remarks that will once again indicate my previous points about the distinctiveness of the narratives by Kang and Shin: in addition to their form, the political situation behind it all makes them all the more unique.

## 2. Human, Rights and Human Rights

### 2.1. “Wishing for the Recovery of Human Rights” : North Korean Refugee Narratives as Human Rights Literature

One notable feature of North Korean refugee narratives is that a significant number of authors specifically link human rights with their experiences. Forthright expressions like ‘human rights abuse’ are frequently found in many of these texts, along with other related terms such as democracy and freedom, which makes them distinctive within the genre of life writings. In the case of Kang and Shin, the two authors also continually remind their readers of their mission to advocate human rights in North Korea, not just in introductory chapters but also throughout the whole of their books. Shin even dedicates the final and additional chapter of *Sesang Bakkyō Naoda* to voice his opinions on North Korea and its human rights issues, naming the chapter “Wishing for the recovery of human rights consciousness of the camp inmates.” Such a form is rarely found in other literary works on the experience of calamities, less often even in similar kinds of other prison camp literatures such as holocaust literature, narratives of Soviet Gulag survivors and Latin American *testimonio*. When a book deals with dreadful experiences amid extreme oppression, it inevitably alludes and is associated with human rights for humanity’s sake, but it is quiet unusual that the text itself directly speaks on the subject of human rights.

In this chapter, by providing some characteristic aspects of North Korean situations and its political prison camps, I aim to identify what spurred North Korean

refugee narratives to heavily emphasize the issue of human rights. I will then try to show why we need to bear the theme of human rights in mind when reading these texts, a trait which makes the genre singular among others. Furthermore, as I give a brief analysis of the development of the modern/contemporary notion of human rights, I will suggest the Arendtian understanding of human and human activities—her notion of *action* as the revision of human rights, in particular— for the reading of North Korean refugee narratives.

Coming back to the question of the close link between North Korean refugee narratives and human rights, the most obvious and straightforward answer would be the situation in North Korea. It can be argued that the narratives are the just and inevitable response to the grim reality of a large-scale violation

of what are considered to be the basic rights of human—such as nourishment, life, and freedom. The situation of human rights in North Korea has admittedly become an international concern, as evinced by its recent inclusion on the provisional agenda of United Nations Security Council.<sup>11</sup> There are a significant number of organizations as varied as a group of different international organizations, governmental institutes

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<sup>11</sup> United Nations Security Council, “Security Council Meeting Records on 7353rd meeting” (S/PV.7353) 22 December 2014. (Provisional) Web.

and Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs)<sup>12</sup> which conduct human rights campaigns and investigation<sup>13</sup> on North Korea. They all unanimously accuse North Korea of “systematic, widespread and gross human rights violations.”(COI 6)

Most investigations accuse North Korea of that major human rights deprivation are perpetrated by the regime and its officials.<sup>14</sup> These reports, mostly written with the help of testimonies by North Korean refugees, cover a wide array of instances of human rights violation, categorized as: the deprivation of rights to nourishment by the state’s monopolistic food distribution system; the systemic

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<sup>12</sup> The exact number of the organizations concerned to North Korean human rights are unknown; what follow are some of the notable active organizations which I have provided with valuable informations in this thesis:

As for the international organization— United Nations and its affiliated offices including Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and World Food Program (WFP); EU;

For national government— United States and Japan have activated North Korean human rights law, and produce significant studies on North Korean human rights issue periodically; South Korea;

For international NGOs—Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Christian Solidarity Worldwide, The Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, International Coalition to Stop Crimes Against Humanity in North Korea. Network for North Korean Democracy and Human Rights (NKNet), the Free North Korea Coalition, Life Funds for North Korean Refugees, and Liberty in North Korea (LiNK)

For South Korean NGOs—The Database Center for North Korean Human Rights, The Citizens’ Alliance for North Korean Human Rights (NKHR), Human Rights Korea. According to 2013 *White Paper on Korean Unification*, there; have been 24 NGOs for North Korean human rights registered with the Ministry of Unification; 177 private institutions supporting North Korean refugees, of which 61 were established by the refugees in South Korea by December 2012. Refer to: Ministry of Unification. *White Paper on Korean Unification*. Seoul: Ministry of Unification, 2013. Print. pp. 150, 196

<sup>13</sup> To name some of the most authorized reports on North Korean human rights issues I refer to this thesis are: the Report of the United Nations Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (2014), the annual White Papers on North Korean Human Rights of Korean Institution of National Unification and the non-periodical U.S. report on North Korean Human Rights and the Policy of U.S.

<sup>14</sup> See: Ibid; KINU pp.14-15; Gause, Ken E. *Coercion, Control, Surveillance, and Punishment: An Examination of the North Korean Police State*. Washington, DC: Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, 2012. Print. pp.310-311

discrimination on the state-assigned social classes (*songbun*); the discrimination against vulnerable groups such as women and the disabled; the repression of the freedom of residence, movement, religion, and expression; human rights deprivation in relation to detention, torture, enforced disappearance, abduction from outside of the country; and last but not least, imprisonment in political prison camps. Indeed, among the inexhaustible list of the cases of violence by the regime, it is the existence of political prison camps that many investigations consider as the pivotal and the foremost representation of North Korea's human rights violation. The COI report claims that North Korea's human rights violations committed in the prison camps is a crime against humanity, which comprises "essential components of a political system that has moved far from the ideals on which it claims to be founded" (379)

The COI reports's comments on North Korea's political system and its ideal deserve some discussion. In fact, the notion of politics and its ideals, or its founding ideology, is crucial to understanding North Korea and its political prison camps. North Korea, as the state claims to be a "self-reliant socialist state that has realized the ideas and leadership of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il,"<sup>15</sup> is idiosyncratic for its official ideology— *Juche*. Translated as 'being master of one's body,' (Han et al. 7-16) *Juche* is interpreted as "a combination of Confucianism, post-colonialism, Marxism and some religious aspects," (Song 123) an effort towards the consolidation of power under the Kim dynasty, i.e. the Supreme Leader (*Suryong*) system, which is also referred to as

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<sup>15</sup> The first line of the Preamble of Socialist Constitution of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (1972). The constitution also states in its very first chapter dedicated to politics: "Article 3. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea is guided in its activities by the *Juche* idea, a world outlook centred on people, a revolutionary ideology for achieving the independence of the masses of people." Socialist Constitution of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea §1.3 (1972). Print.

“Kimilsungism.” (Lim 63) *Juche* has exerted its fundamental and almost omnipresent presence in the public discourse of North Korea, influencing every aspect of the country in various ways—examples include *Juche* agricultural method, *Juche* industry, *Juche* art, and *Juche* national view, etc. (Song 123) The power and propagation of *Juche* ideology is beyond any existing propaganda; the SAGE Encyclopedia of Global Religion defines *Juche* as a form of state religion.<sup>16</sup> (Song 672)

North Korean prison camps, referred to as the crystallization of the North Korean situation itself,<sup>17</sup> also represent the state’s heavily underlined ideology. The names of the prisons, such as “enlightenment areas (*kyohwaso*, the ordinary prison)” and “controlled areas (*kwanliso*)” which consists of “revolutionizing zone (*byöngmyöngwagyöök*)” and “total control zone (*wanjönt’ongjeguyöök*),” (COI 231) reflect the essential role they play in the regime’s sanctioning of its ideology. Especially, the political prison camps that are dealt with in my thesis imprison political offenders who are referred to as “anti-revolutionary actors” (COI 238) who are “threats to the stability of the state.” (*Aquariums* 63, *Escape* 130) Even though there is no international consensus on the definition of “political offense,” North Korea’s criminal code includes acts of “anti-state crimes” and “anti-people crimes” to condemn political and ideological “criminals.” (Lee et al. 10) The definition and application of such

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<sup>16</sup> For more details of *Juche* ideology, refer to: Oberdorfer, Don. *The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1997. Print.; Cumings, Bruce. *The Two Koreas*. New York, NY: Foreign Policy Association, 1984. Print.; Kim, Il-söng, and Yuk-Sa Li. *Juche! The Speeches and Writings of Kim Il Sung*. New York: Grossman, 1972. Print; and Lee, Grance. "The Political Philosophy of *Juche*." *Stanford Journal of East Asian Affairs* Spring 3.1 (2013): 105-12. Web.

<sup>17</sup> And vice versa, referring North Korea to one giant political prison camp is widely used metaphor. Kang uses such expression in the both of his books: the preface of *Aquariums* p.xii and the conclusion for *Suyongsoui*.pp.388-9.

political crimes are very ambiguous and even overly sensitive. According to the refugees' testimony, it is widely known in North Korea that one can be charged with being a "threat to North Korea's regime"<sup>18</sup> for the most trivial reason and then be sentenced to imprisonment in the camps with no explanation. (Jeong, 230-231)<sup>19</sup>

Such political and ideological feature of North Korean political prison camps is unheard of among other previous concentration camps in the history of the world. There were a number of different grounds for the selection of convicts that were housed in the preexisting penal camps, such as race, suspicion of recalcitrance and prisoner of war, etc. None of these grounds for detainment, however, were as purely

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<sup>18</sup> Jeong, Jin-hwa, a witness at North Korean refugee hearing, described that the camps were generally known and feared: "[E]very North Korean knows [about the camps]" Seoul Public Hearing, 22 August 2013, afternoon (01:07:50); "Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea", United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, February 17, 2014, retrieved July 1, 2014.pp. 230-231

<sup>19</sup> The COI report specifically recommend the DPRK to "Reform the Criminal Code and Code of Criminal Procedure to abolish vaguely worded "anti-state" and "anti-people" crimes." The report further accuses that the sentence of camp incarceration is usually given not only to the direct offender but also his or her family members up to three generations, based on the principle of "guilt by association(Yeon-jwa-je)" (COI 237, 381) KINU comments that it is common to incarcerate not only the absolute political criminals but also rather "relative political criminals," such as theft of public property, belief in Christianity and even being a family member of a defector. See: Center for North Korean Human Rights Studies. 『북한 정치범 수용소 (*Bukhan jeonggibeom suyongso*, or North Korean Political Prison Camps)』 Seoul: Korea Institute for National Unification, 2013. Print. p.10 Based on its extensive archive of interviews with persons who fled the DPRK, the non-governmental Database Center for Human Rights in North Korea (NKDB) re-constructed the reasons for the incarceration of 832 political prison camp inmates. The largest number disappeared to the prison camps for political reasons directly linked to them personally (48.3 per cent). A smaller number of prisoners were held for economic, administrative and ordinary crimes (7.1 per cent) or for having fled to China (8.0 per cent). Yet, more than a third of all inmates (35.7 per cent) were incarcerated for no other reason than an assumed guilt by association. See: "Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea", United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, February 17, 2014, retrieved July 1, 2014. p.241 The narratives of Shin and Kang also comment that most of the prisoners are not aware of the exact reason of their guilt; they only can assume. (*Suyongsoui* 66) (*Sesang* 21)



ideological as those of North Korean prison camps. This may explain why North Korean refugee authors are so exceptionally sensitive to the issue of ideology or the logic of the oppressive regime in their narratives. Holocaust narratives, for instance, tend to show less awareness of the political implications of their experience; rather, they focus on issues that are rather humanitarian, such as the trauma of imprisonment, survivor's guilt, and questions about the notion of humanity itself. As for North Korean refugee life writings, on the other hand, the texts show clear awareness of the political nature of their afflictions and the possibility of political involvement. On top of the description of the author's dreadful experiences, as is typical of conventional prison camp narratives, North Korean refugee authors also engage themselves in the direct and severe criticism of the North Korean regime. Sometimes these authors specifically refer to a certain political party or nation for advocacy or dissension.

Here, yet another answer can be made to the question on human rights issues that appears in the texts of North Korean refugee life writings. Human *rights*—not just 'human'—is a legal, political and even ideological term. While the 'human' in the term human rights represents the universal compassion and sentiment, the word 'rights' alludes to various institutions like power, justice, rule, and activities for such values. As the stories of North Korean refugee's sufferings represent the 'humane' feature of the narrative, their peculiar enthusiasm for discussing human rights can be interpreted as an outcome of their experience of strong political and ideological conditions.

In sharp contrast to their writings, North Korean refugees as represented in their narratives exhibit submissive attitudes toward the political ideologies of the state

in the form of fear and anxiety about power. In their narratives, Kang and Shin tells of the absurdity that the existence and ‘logic’ of the camps is perceived as normal, or even “just,” by the North Korean people. What is even more striking is that the guards and inmates of the prison camps, and even the children of both groups, seem to assent to the claim that the inmates deserve inhuman treatments, because they are “anti-revolutionary actors” whose family in three generations must be eliminated for the establishment of “the prosperous and strong nation (kangsŏngdaeguk).” While the inmates do express their resentment against the unfairness and brutality of the camps, it goes not further than a vague sentiment of mortification: they often blame their own fate or “sin” (*Sesang* 319) rather than raging against the regime’s ideology, which is repeatedly infused, or “revolutionized” inside and outside the camps.<sup>20</sup> Regarding such absurdity where the horrors of the prison camps in North Korea are somehow embraced in acquiescence by the people, Shin cynically comments: “the situations in the camps just make you think that way.” (*Sesang* 312) However, instead of dismissing “the situations in the camps” as mere irrationality and North Korean ideology as brainwashing propaganda, I suggest that we should read the situation in light of the very ideology in question.

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<sup>20</sup> Such awareness and fear for the ideology haunt the refugees after their defection— the pressure doubled by the ideological conflicts between the two Koreas. As it will be discussed in following chapters, North Korean refugees show great awareness for their political status and possibility of political interpretation not only in giving their testimonies but in their everyday life—or their existence itself. Here can be found one of the reason why North Korean refugee life writings tend to speak in the general context of human rights which is considered to be rather universal, unconditional above ideologies and politics.

## 2.2. “Our Style of Human Rights” : North Korea’s State Ideology and Human Rights Theory

As mentioned above, nearly all aspects of North Korea including public policies and provisions, are centered around the ideology of *Juche*. Accordingly, North Korea, in contrast to the global preconception, has a rather concrete and idiosyncratic theory of human rights which is known as “our style of human rights (*Urisik ingwŏn*).” It was constituted in 1995 as the official theory of human rights by Kim, Jong Il. (Song 145) In an article titled as “For the protection of true human rights” from *Rodong Shinmun*, the North Korean official news paper of Korean Worker’s Party (KWP), states that “in order to protect and fully realize ‘our style’ socialism along with ‘our style’ of human rights, one should thoroughly comprehend *Juche* Ideology and be loyal to the KWP and the leader, by whom the greatest rights and true human rights can be granted.”<sup>21</sup> As Kim emphasizes *Juche* and loyalty to the regime, these two factors, in the contexts of patriotism (or nationalism), correspond to each other. Indeed, many scholars have indicated two cultural and historical backgrounds for the

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<sup>21</sup> "참다운 인권을 옹호하여 (ch'amdaun In'gwŏnŭl Ong-hohayŏ, or the True Advocacy of Human Rights)." *Rodong Shinmun* [Pyongyang] 24 June 1995: n. pag. Print. Original reference and translation excerpted from Song, Jiyoung, *Human Rights Discourse in North Korea: Post-colonial, Marxist, and Confucian Perspectives*. London: Routledge, 2011. Print . p. 56. In this book, Song indicates Kim Jong Il as the author of the article. However, there are several different indication of the author from other references, some of which do not faithfully disclose the source. Since the the original article is inaccessible, here in my thesis I indicate the original author as unknown.

development of *Juche* ideology<sup>22</sup>: the traditional philosophy of Confucianism on the one hand, and the country's post-colonial experience which includes the historical struggles with the Japanese colonization and the subsequent national conflicts, on the other hand.

Confucianism, a predominant branch of thought in East Asia, has been particularly significant for both Koreas since ancient times. (COI 19) Song, Jiyoung, giving a thorough culture-sensitive analysis on human rights theory of North Korea, argues that Confucianism's teaching of 'virtuous governance,' which emphasizes harmony and hierarchical social order, has empowered the Kims to reign in the image

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<sup>22</sup> Followings are some of the notable analysis on *Juche* and North Korean human rights in historical, cultural and sociological aspects:

Song, Jiyoung introduces overall development of North Korean human rights discourse, focusing on confucianism, post-colonialism and *Juche* ideology in her book *Human Rights Discourse in North Korea: Post-colonial, Marxist, and Confucian Perspectives*. The major part of my understanding in North Korean human rights theory is refer to this book and her earlier writings including: "The Discourse of Human Rights in the DPRK: Historical, Political and Cultural Perspectives (dissertation for Ph.D in politics, 2009)", "Human Rights and the DPRK since the end of the Cold War: a constructivist approach (dissertation for M.Phil in IR, 2006)", "Rights Approaches to North Korea: Combining Criticism and Constructive Engagement (dissertation for LL.M, 2002)", "North Korean "Our Style" Foreign Policies towards South Korea, the United States, and Japan (dissertation for M.A in political Science, 1999)"

Choi, Sung-chul also provides with analysis on human rights in North Korea in broader perspective focusing on the influence of confucianism and *Juche* ideology in his books *Understanding Human Rights in North Korea* (Seoul: Institute of Unification Policy, Hanyang University, 1997) and *Human Rights and North Korea* (Seoul: Institute of Unification Policy, Hanyang University, 1999).

Han, Hongkoo focuses on the post-colonial aspect in *Juche* ideology and its influence on the policies and provisions of North Korean human rights discourse in his book *Wounded nationalism: The Minsaengdan incident and Kim Il Sung in Eastern Manchuria* (University of Washington, 1999)

Song, Choi and Han, commonly indicate Confucius influence and the experience of colonization and war in Korean Modern History as the most significant influence on the development of North Korean ideology and its subsidiary provisions of human rights in common; and present marxism and socialism as rather minor influence. For the different opinion, refer to: *A Socioeconomic History of North Korea*. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011). In this book, the author Daniel Schwekendiek gives analysis on the socio-economic aspect, including communist and marxist ideology in North Korean human rights discourse.

of a 'good king (sǒnggun)' and fathers of the nation. Confucian thoughts assert the hierarchy within a society as a mandate from heaven, which is symbolized by the familial relationship of father and children, husband and wife, and older and younger brothers, and that one's faithful adherence to the given roles and duties as the way of harmonization of a community. North Korea applies such fateful, duty-based relationship to "the relationship of the fatherly ruler and filial subjects in the state."<sup>23</sup> (Song 149) Further, other religious traditions of Korea, such as the *Dangun* mythology and the early modern influence of Christianity, combined with the Confucian culture, have assisted in developing the image of the Kims as the heaven-sent, virtuous father of the state. Indeed, Kim Jong Il, in an article title "Socialism is Science," states that "for the implementation of virtuous politics, a political leader with endless love for his people must lead the socialist ruling party as a 'mother party',"<sup>24</sup> emphasizing the state's resemblance of a family and his role as its benevolent, fatherly ruler.

In the practical provisions of North Korean human rights, Confucianism's characteristic emphasis on social hierarchy and the duties of the governed subject appear more drastically. Che, Sung-ho points out North Korea's collectivist principle

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<sup>23</sup> Also see: Armstrong, Charles K, 'A Socialism in Our Style: North Korean Ideology in a Post-Communist Era', in Samuel S. Kim (ed.), *North Korean Foreign Relations*. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press. 1998. pp.222-223; and Kang, Thomas Hosuck, *Why the North Koreans Behave As They Do*. Washington, D.C.: Center for Dao-Confucianism.1994. p. 123

<sup>24</sup> Kim, Jong Il. "Sahoejuūinūn Kwahagida." *Rodong Shinmun* [Pyongyang] 1 Nov. 1994: n. pag. Print. Original reference and translation excerpted from Song, Jiyoung. *Human Rights Discourse in North Korea: Post-colonial, Marxist, and Confucian Perspectives*. London: Routledge, 2011. Print . p. 148

(“One for all and all for one”)<sup>25</sup> and the state-assigned class system (*songbun*)<sup>26</sup> and lists the three features of North Korean human rights as nationalistic collectivism, state-assigned ranks and individual’s duty to the fatherland. (Che 279) All these three features reflect in the extreme the applicability of Confucianism’s emphasis on hierarchical social system and duty of the governed subject.

Another background for the *Juche* ideology is the nation’s post-colonial experience. The two Koreas share a tumultuous history of frequent foreign invasions and the Japanese colonization, not to mention the Korean War. In contrast to South Korea where variants of open-door policies were practiced in alliance with the US and many other countries, North Korea have come to emphasize isolation, self-sovereignty, self-determination, nation-consciousness, and nationalism.<sup>27</sup> (Song 75) To protect the people’s rights by sheltering them from the threat of the “hostile forces” and “threats to the stability of the state,” North Korea prioritizes the security and sovereignty of the nation and act of the people in collectivity over individual’s rights.

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<sup>25</sup> The Chapter 5: Fundamental Rights and Duties of Citizens of North Korean Constitution states: “In the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea the rights and duties of citizens are based on the collectivist principle, “One for all and all for one.”” Socialist Constitution of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea §5.63 (1972). Print.

<sup>26</sup> *Songbun*, the social class system of North Korea is consist of 51 ranks in three broader castes and assigned to all citizens according to their loyalty to the regime. For more informations on *Songbun* system, refer to: Collins, Robert M. *Marked for Life: Songbun*, North Korea's Social Classification System. Washington, DC: Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, 2012. Print.

<sup>27</sup> Such emphasis on self-reliance of the nation is a common symptom of many other post-colonial nations, including South Korea at some part of its history; It of course differs in degrees by nations, however, in case of North Korea, such nationalistic tendency is so extremized to the degree of obsession crystalized as its policy of “anti-colonial”, “anti-Japanese” and “koreanization” in every social aspect. See: Song, Ji-young *Human Rights Discourse in North Korea: Post-colonial, Marxist, and Confucian Perspectives*. London: Routledge, 2011. Print. pp. 89-90

(Chang 182,184) “With regards to anti-revolutionary forces,” *Rodong Shinmun* states, “they are...the scum of society....[to them] the term human rights itself is completely inappropriate.”<sup>28</sup>

In such context of the obsessive defense for the regime’s self-sovereignty, or *Juche* which is followed by an allergic reaction to alleged “hostile enemies” and “disobedient traitors,” North Korea justifies its human rights violation against the political prisoners as a “rightful method.” (Song 66) Not only by the public policy but also legally, the political prisoners are no longer considered as registered citizens of North Korea: the COI reports and Shin both indicate that shortly after the imprisonment, the inmates are deprived of their identification cards, and that by doing so, their statuses of citizenship officially lapse. (*Sesang* 21) In comparison to the ordinary criminals who at least keep their citizenship, the political prisoners are totally deprived of their rights, being guaranteed by no sanction or protection of law. (COI 238, 243) Thus the prison camps indeed becomes a space for those who “do not deserve to live,” as a prison guard from Kang’s memoir describes. (*Aquariums* 58)<sup>29</sup>

Here lies an aporia: the grave degree of brutality and dehumanization in North Korean political prison camps is actually in accordance with and firmly anchored in a rather concrete structure of human rights theory. Moreover, Song bravely argues in her book that such features of North Korean human rights theory—the prioritization of citizen’s duties over individual protection, the collective view of

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<sup>28</sup> "참다운 인권을 옹호하여 (ch'amdaun In'gwönül Ong-hohayö, or the True Advocacy of Human Rights)." *Rodong Shinmun* [Pyongyang] 24 June 1995: n. pag. Print. Translation excerpted from Song, Jiyoung. *Human Rights Discourse in North Korea: Post-colonial, Marxist, and Confucian Perspectives*. London: Routledge, 2011. Print . p. 56.

<sup>29</sup> Kang, Chol-hwan, and Pierre Rigoulot. *The Aquariums of Pyongyang: Ten Years in a North Korean Gulag*. New York: Basic, 2001. Print. p.58

human beings, and the emphasis on nationalistic loyalty—are not so different from some of the western approaches to human rights. Citing as examples the utilitarianism of Bentham and Burke, Marxism, and contemporary liberal communitarianism that are theoretical foundations of such approaches, Song insists that it is not difficult to find cases of oversized power of the state reigning over individual rights in the name of national security in other parts of the world. (178) The National Security Act of South Korea and the post-9/11 policies of the US and the UK are some contemporary examples of a state limiting individual rights in the interests of a community, though theirs may differ from the case of North Korea to a considerable degree in severity.



### 2.3. Between 'Human' and 'Rights': Arendtian Discussion

In fact, the history of the development of the modern-day notion of human rights itself has been a contentious balance game between the 'humanistic' demand of individuals versus its practical legalization in the community.<sup>30</sup> As I mentioned before, the term human rights itself harbors a certain degree of ambiguity, as it is a combination of a humanitarian feature ('human') and a legal/political feature ('rights'). The former, 'human,' calls for the protection of what is fundamental and universal for the dignity of mankind, such as life, freedom, and safety. These are all individual rights that are inevitably in conflict with the latter part of the pair, 'rights,' which assumes its inevitable political and social tension with a sovereign state.

Such confrontation can be glanced in the French *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen* (1789), one of the most significant founding documents in the history of human rights. (Nickel n.p.) Hanna Arendt aptly points out that the declaration contains the two colliding formative notions in the discourse of human rights:

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<sup>30</sup> The notion of human dignity is inherited throughout the long history of philosophy and humanities, which can be traced back to the thought of Aristotle, Roman understanding of natural law and Christianity; yet the development of such a notion coming together as legitimated *rights* is, as Samuel Moyn, a historian of human rights explains in his book *The Last Utopia*, fairly a modern notion—or rather, an invention along with the modern nation-states and its citizenship in the eighteenth century. Many other scholars including Jeremy Waldron, James Nickel, Lynn Hunt and Paul Gordon Lauren explains the present notion of human rights have developed within the Western tradition of human dignity, came to understood as 'nature' of man combined with the early modern notion of social contract and rights of individual property which are accelerated by the mercantilism of the eighteenth century, and finally settled as major contents of international law after World War II. Refer to: Moyn, Samuel. *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap of Harvard UP, 2010. Print; Hunt, Lynn. *Inventing Human Rights: A History*. New York: W. W. Norton&, 2007. Print.; Lauren, P., 2003. *The Evolution of International Human Rights*, 2nd end., Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. Print.; Waldron, Jeremy. *Theories of Rights*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1984. Print.; and Nickel, James, "Human Rights", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.)

citizenship and universality, or the 'nature' of human being. In the face of the sudden, yet grand rise of human rights movement and its struggle amid the atrocities and the outbreak of wars at that time, Arendt problematizes the strained relationship between the natural rights of man and citizenship. In her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), Arendt the last chapter of the second volume, "Decline of Nation-State; End of Rights of Man," to criticize the hollowness of most declarations of human rights which fail to be "universally" granted to all men. Citing refugees and minorities as examples, Arendt claims that human rights have been guaranteed exclusively by the sovereign state which protects its citizens, while those who do not belong to any state have nowhere to find their basic rights. (OT 284-6) Therefore, in the twentieth century, where only nation states give guarantees, by law and power, safe territorial residence and national identity, i.e., citizenship, the sacred natural right of a human being, which is supposed to be to solely stand alone by humanity itself, has proved to be a fallacy.

Interpreting Arendt's attack on human rights, one should keep in mind the fact that the questioned critique, which is usually excerpted and discussed separately, is actually a part of a larger work dedicated to analyze the origins and alteration of the characteristics of totalitarianism.<sup>31</sup> Arendt presents her critique of human rights in the crossway of imperialism and totalitarianism, suggesting that the notion of human rights which is the foundation of modern nation-state, whether it was intended or not,

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<sup>31</sup> Here Arendt refers to the totalitarianism in particular situation in the regimes of Nazi Germany and the Bolshevik Russia, however, as many scholars and the most recently, the COI report admits, North Korea resembles these eighteenth century totalitarian states in many aspects. (COI 280) Especially when one considers the foundational theory of the states are common in collectivism and nationalism, North Korea in the sense of its policy of human rights can also be inspected in the same context of Arendtian observation on totalitarianism.

has contributed to the establishment of the totalitarian regime and its atrocities. Arendt points out that, before anything, the Nazis abolished the civil rights of the Jews and by doing so deprived them of the right to life. Many have witnessed the violence committed to the Jews, but no one was ‘authorized’ to ‘claim’ their rights (OT 296).

Further in her accusation on totalitarianism, Arendt argues that the most dreadful feature of totalitarianism is that it reduces the individual distinctiveness of human beings into a collective ‘One Man’ (OT 466) or ‘Mass man’ which turns the mankind into “mass organizations of atomized, isolated individuals.” (323) It is “the fabrication of mankind,” (465) because in her understanding, the very decisive condition of human being—what makes human to be human, i.e. the Arendtian term for human rights, if there is any—is the individual personality which can be come into the world by one’s involvement in human togetherness.

Arendt’s understanding of the human is further articulated in her later work *Human Condition* (1958). In extension with her earlier indication of the terror of repression of humanity by totalitarianism, Arendt turns to the human condition, instead of human nature, and asks what “something much more fundamental than... rights of citizens” (OT 296) is. In other words, instead of seeking the essence (natural rights of men) or the instrument (citizenship) of human rights, Arendt tracks down the decisive condition that allows human to be human, distinguished from other animals. In Arendt’s own explanation, the question to be asked is “*who* are you?” instead of “*what* are you?” Arendt argues that only in human communities is it observed that members open a space for communication, discussion and decision for creating their own world of value and norms; and here what is to be is that a

individual who by speech and *action* participates in the community appears as his or her own personality and uniqueness among others and by doing so acquires the significance and meaningfulness of his or her existence. “They [speech and *action*] are the modes in which human beings appear to each other, not indeed as physical objects, but *qua* men.” Such activity, in Arendtian terms, is called “(political) *action*.” (HC 176) which, again, Arendt refers to as *action* that is the most essential and characteristic of human activity, a normative feature that characterizes human life, or life among men. By focusing on individual’s distinctive character, Arendt sees the further potentiality of mankind to form a solidarity and begin a new history. (Hong 149)

What Arendtian understanding of human gives significance to the human rights discourse, is that by recognizing the value of each individual as a distinct personality which cannot be reduced to a plural or collective term, she refutes the legitimacy of sacrificing an individual for the sake of any community. According to Arendt, mankind should not be recognized as “all of you,” but “each of you.” Therefore, the modern notions of human rights and totalitarianism, although they seem to be opposite to each other, are in fact following a similar logic: instead of recognizing human by one’s individual and personal potentiality which makes human a political agency, both of the two notions treat mankind—whether it is a dignified species or a collective beings—as plural subjects. While the concept of the natural rights of man merely reveals the reality that the rights which are expected to be universal and inalienable actually cannot be fully enforced, and that the rights of citizens which presume the guarantee of sovereign protection leave out or even “create” the existence of the excluded in the form of refugees, prison camp inmates,

and so on. Therefore, in an Arendtian view, North Korea's justification of its "our style of human rights," which seemed to be somewhat persuasive under cultural relativism and its common feature with some international approaches to human rights, can be aptly denied.

Another significant point of Arendt's theory, especially in my discussion of human rights in North Korean refugee life writings, is her emphasis on an individual's potentiality of participation in a community— or the ability of political *action*<sup>32</sup> as a fundamental condition of human. As I have suggested earlier, North Korean refugee life writings are heavily involved with the issue of politics not only in the context of the authors' relations to the regime and present status as defectors, but also in their narratives. The life writings of North Korean refugees, especially those of Kang and Shin which I deal with in this thesis follow their journey from the dreadful situation of prison camps in North Korea<sup>33</sup> to the outside liberal and capitalism states. Their stories can be easily expected as a simple anecdote of a escape from 'the hell,' a testimony of the past experience of horror in retrospect from the safe and pleasant

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<sup>32</sup> Here I want to emphasize that one should not confuse the potentiality of individual as a political actor with the general notion of political rights in international human rights. There are many provisions of political rights of man which are specified in international human rights law, e.g. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). However, as Michael J. Perry fairly points out in his article on "liberal Democracy and Human Rights," the holding of "democratic" system such as elections does not directly guarantee the political rights, or even it risks undermining human rights in larger aspect. See: Perry, Michael J. "Liberal Democracy and Human Rights." *The Political Morality of Liberal Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010. 9-26. Print.

Again, what I credit on Arendt's discussion is that she focuses on the society that recognizes individual, or 'I' which contradicts general understanding of society or public realm as a certain system, policy or institutional stratages which works as separated power.

<sup>33</sup> Here again, I would like to clarify that the focus of the narratives of Kang and Shin as human rights literature is the North Korean regime itself; I also discuss human rights issues in prison camps as symbol of North Korea as a whole state and vice versa.

present. However, as I will investigate in following chapters, the narratives of Kang and Shin describes not only their humane isolation in collectivity under the totalitarian regime, but also their confusion and isolation in after fleeing to the ‘world of freedom,’ and their resettlement of life and identity as writers and human rights activists. Their continued confusion and resentment in their understanding of political and human rights-related notions, such as democracy, equality and freedom challenges to revisit the common-sensical understanding of politics and human rights itself, as Arendt does in her revisions to human rights.

In the following chapters, I will examine how such confusion and trauma of Kang and Shin in the extremes of different political spaces appear as unique complexities in their narration; and by doing so, I argue that, just as Arendt problematizes both of the seemingly opposite concepts of totalitarianism and human rights, the narratives by Kang and Shin also suggest that human rights are not acquired just by fleeing from the extreme situation, but it should be fundamentally sought from the condition of human *action* to participate and create the political space to raise one’s voice and tell stories—i.e. the act of writing as righting.

### 3. Between the Two Worlds

The 20th century saw numerous atrocities against humanity in the form of prison camps, including the Soviet Gulag, Nazi concentration camps, and Tuol Sleng Genocide Security Prison 21 of Cambodian Killing Fields, which shocked many with their unprecedented horror. As Hannah Arendt puts it, such horror “can never be fully embraced by the imagination.” (OT 444) It is not merely the brutal conditions of forced labor, extreme hunger, and physical or psychological abuses which make the camps so problematic; many thinkers take note of the camps’ objectives and conclude that they are a unique space of modernity which poses questions about humanity and politics. Arendt, for one, accuses the camps of degrading human beings into things or animals, calling them “laboratories.”(OT 455, 437) More recently, Giorgio Agamben agrees with Arendt’s notion of *condition inhumana*, which is the exterminated human feature of the camp, and further argues that the camps expose the space of lawlessness and rightlessness:

On the paradoxical status of the camp as space of exception: the camp is a piece of territory that is placed outside the normal juridical order; for all that; however, it is not simply an external space. According to the etymological meaning of the term exception (*ex-capere*), what is being excluded in the camp is captured outside, that is, it is included by virtue of its very exclusion." (*Means Without End* 40)

Agamben defines the camp as a paradoxical space, and when one considers the case of North Korea, where the camps are named *political* prison camps, the paradox appears twofold: though it is called ‘political,’ all political features and systems such as law, morality, and civilized social standards seem to be absent. Moreover, as I have mentioned in the previous chapter, the inmates of the North Korean camps are officially denied of their citizenship and even regarded as subhuman. In this sense, my attempt to discuss human rights in North Korean political prison camp may seem rather ironic. What does it mean to discuss ‘human rights’ of the people who are intentionally considered as *non-human being* in the place which is excluded of *any rights* by its nature? Here appears an interesting point of human rights: the notion of human rights, in fact, only rises in where the place is lack of human rights. In where human rights are considered to be guaranteed, the question of human rights is not so asked; but the notion of human rights is questioned and claimed only where exposes the deprivation of humanity, by observing what is lacking and what causes its absence.

The prison camp narratives by Kang, Chol-Hwan and Shin, Dong-Hyuk are particularly relevant in our discussion of human rights. In this chapter, therefore, I examine how the theme of human rights—especially in the context of North Korean human rights as I have discussed in the previous chapter—is articulated in the texts of Kang and Shin. I particularly focus on Kang and Shins’ experience in the prison camp as a special space,<sup>34</sup> in comparison with their resettlement in the ‘world of freedom,’ i.e. South Korea and the U.S. My premise is that North Korean refugee life writings

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<sup>34</sup> Here, I also suggest political prison camp as a pivotal symbol of North Korean regime. As Arendt indicated the concentration camps are the backbone figure of totalitarianism, (OT 437) North Korea, the whole nation has been often referred to a giant political prison camp. Among the texts, Kang actively introduces the metaphor to North Korea and prison camp. <sup>34</sup> See: preface to *Aquariums*. p.vii and Conclusion to *Suyongsoui norae*. pp.388-9;



follow the Arendtian discussion which problematizes both the brutality of totalitarianism and also the infertility of the present notion of human rights; and her emphasize on individual personality carried out by *action*. I explore Kang and Shin's recollection of their experiences clustered around the two concepts—interaction and political power, both of which are significantly important in understanding Arendt's notion of *action*.

### 3.1. Introduction to the Life Writings by Kang and Shin

Before moving on to the texts, a brief look at the background information of the authors and the texts is necessary.

#### Kang, Chol-hwan: *The Aquariums of Pyongyang* and *Suyongsou Norae*

Kang, Chol-hwan, a North Korean refugee who fled to the South in the early 1990s<sup>35</sup> as one of the early defectors,<sup>36</sup> is considered to be one of the most well-known North Korean refugees not only for his books but also thanks to his activities as a journalist and a human rights activist. Kang is also known as one of the earlier North Korean refugee writers. A year after his settlement in South Korea, Kang published his testimony under the title 『대왕의 제전』(*Taewangŭijejŏn*, or *The*

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<sup>35</sup> Kang escaped from North Korea in 1987 and acquired South Korean citizenship in 1992.

<sup>36</sup> South Korean government categorizes North Korean refugees entered the South before 1998, which are estimates to be little less than a thousand, as one category and define as the earliest settlers; and collects the annual statistics on North Korean refugees from the following year, which number is varied from 1,000 to 2,000 each year. See: *Major Statistics in Inter-Korean Relations*. Rep. Ministry of Unification, n.d. Web. 23 Nov. 2014. <<http://eng.unikorea.go.kr/content.do?cmsid=1822>>.

celebration of the great king, 1993)』,<sup>37</sup> based on his experience in the political prison camps with a co-author, Ahn, Hyuk who was Kang's camp inmate that escaped North Korea with him. The main text for my study of Kang's narratives, 『수용소의 노래』(*Suyongsoui norae*, or the song of a concentration camp, 2005)』 is a revision of the first volume of the three-volumed *Taewanguijejon*, the first having been solely written by Kang himself. *Suyongsoui norae*, taking the form of a collection of short retrospective memoirs, is mainly about Kang's experience of the prison camp where he spent ten years from the age of nine to nineteen. Another book, *The Aquariums of Pyongyang* (original in French, 2000; English translation, 2001) is a collaborated autobiography with a French historian and journalist Pierre Rigoulot, based on the excerpts from *Suyongsoui norae* and Rigoulot's interviews of Kang with a translator for describing other events in Kang's life.<sup>38</sup> The book covers Kang's life in a wider scope including his family history as a rich Korean-Japanese immigrant, his journey of defection after the camp, and the resettlement in South Korea; and with their vivid descriptions of his experiences, the book became bestsellers in many parts of the world and attracted a great deal of interest when the former U.S. president George W. Bush recommended one of his books.

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<sup>37</sup>The book was published for special mail-order only but was relatively in great success, about seven million copies were sold; and it was also translated into Japanese (『北朝鮮脱出』, 姜哲煥, 安赫. 池田菊敏 譯. 東京: 文藝春秋, 1994.). I take *Suyongsoui norae* for the main text of my thesis instead of *Taewanguijejonto* to avoid confusion with the testimony of Ahn.

<sup>38</sup> See: Rigoulot, Pierre. Introduction. *The Aquariums of Pyongyang: Ten Years in a North Korean Gulag*. New York: Basic, 2001. Print. P. 11-12.

Shin, Dong-hyuk: *Escape from Camp 14* and *Sesang Pakkeuro Naoda*

Shin, Dong-hyuk, who fled North Korea in 2006, is also known as one of the most famous and influential North Korean refugees, as well as one of the most active polemicists against the DPRK regime for its human rights violations. Shin, born and raised in the prison camp 14, the “total control zone”<sup>39</sup> where no inmates are expected to be released, escaped at the age of twenty-four and arrived in South Korea after a year-long refugee status in China. Known as the first and only escapee from the total control zone which has been only witnessed by the inmates from other camp areas, Shin’s defection both thrilled and shocked the South Korean officials and activists who are concerned about North Korean refugees. However, his memoir 『세상 밖으로 나오다(*Sesang pakkeuro naoda*, or *Emerge to the Outside World*), 2007』, in spite of its shocking contents, attracted very little attention from the South Korean public<sup>40</sup> who had already become indifferent to North Korean refugees and their situation after the massive influx of North Korean refugees that was at its peak in the late 1990’s and early 2000’s. The book is a collection of Shin’s page-long notes on his life in the no-exit camp which were actually written during the recovery treatments for his

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<sup>39</sup> Or “Wanjönt’ongjeguyök” in Korean; Harden, Blaine. *Escape from Camp 14: one man's remarkable odyssey from North Korea to freedom in the West*. New York: Penguin, 2012. p. 17

For more information on “total control zone,” refer to: United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, “Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea”. United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, distributed on 7 February 2014 p.243,<sup>39</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Only up to five hundred copies of *Sesang pakkeuro naoda* was sold; Shin confesses that he was skeptic on publishing the Korean translation of *Escape from Camp 14* for his concerns on the failure of his first work. See: Kim, Jeong-un, “Han, pukhan inkwöne moksoli tö naetalla” t'alpukcha hoso(North Korean refugee appeals for more voices for the North Korean human rights in South Korea, “韓, 북한 인권에 목소리 더 내달라” 탈북자 호소”, *Yonhap News*, N.p., Web. 2 May 2013

post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).<sup>41</sup> Another text that I considered as a narrative of Shin is *Escape from Camp 14*, a biography of Shin's life from his earliest memories in the camp and his recent activities after the escape, written by American journalist Blaine Harden through his two-year long interviews and personal contact with Shin. The difference between Shin's first memoir and the other written by Harden is similar to those of Kang's: while the Korean memoir, *Sesang pakkeuro naoda*, dedicates most of its contents to the life in and system of the prison camps and is more about being 'informative' than describing the personal experience, the western version written by the professional writer covers Shin's entire life journey up to the very recent situation, along with an explanation of the situation between the Koreas from an outsider's perspective.

As I juxtapose the texts of Kang and Shin, and also the texts written entirely in Korean side by side with those written in collaboration with Western authors, there are several interesting points as objects of comparative literary studies. In this chapter, I focus on the affinities and differences between the texts of Kang—*The Aquariums of Pyongyang* and *Suyongsoui norae*— and the texts of Shin—*Escape from Camp 14*, *Sesang pakkeuro naoda*. As one can see from the introduction above, while Kang and Shin share a similar course of experience in the camps, they nevertheless differ widely in their backgrounds: Kang was raised in a respectable, upper-class family in Pyongyang

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<sup>41</sup> Blaine Harden writes that Shin was encouraged “to turn his therapeutic diary into the memoir” by a counselor from the Database Center for North Korean Human Rights (NKDB) while Dr. Yoon Yeosang, the head of the NKDB states in his introduction to Shin's memoir states that Shin urged the publication of his testimonies first but they encouraged him to wait until he gains physical and psychological well-being. See: Harden, Blaine. *Escape from Camp 14: one man's remarkable odyssey from North Korea to freedom in the West*. New York: Penguin, 2012. p. 168; Shin, Dong-hyuk. 『세상 밖으로 나오다(*Sesang Bakkeuro Naoda*)』 Seoul: NKDB, 2007. pp.6-7)

— a drastic contrast to Shin who was born and raised in the prison camp. Therefore, their experience in the camps might have been similar but their descriptions and recollections show much difference. On the other hand, they have been on the same boat after defection. Both of their activities are notable among other former North Korean refugee human rights activists; Kang has been the head of several human rights groups and NGOs that support refugees in South Korea, while Shin is more involved in working with international human rights groups.

### 3.2. Two Families in the Camps: *Action* as Interaction in the Narratives of Kang and Shin

In the previous chapter, I suggested that according to Arendt *action* as decisive conditions that realize the potentiality of life of human being, “not only as a biological being but also as an existential being.” (Hong 149) Here, what Arendt means by defining human as an existential being is that one acquires his or her significance and meaningfulness among others. As a way of doing so, Arendt suggests *action*, an essential activity that is unique to human beings, who, by communicative interaction with others, form solidarity and decide the values and norms within a community. Based on the human condition of plurality, Arendt explains that one’s action is conducted in relationships with other people— hence *action* as *inter-action*. (Mage 196)

The issue of interaction, or human togetherness in the narratives of Kang and Shin appears differently in each phase of their lives. The description of the

experience of interaction in their time in North Korea, especially in the prison camps, centers on familial experience. Family, obviously, is linked to the notion of human connection;<sup>42</sup> most would agree that family, especially for children, is acknowledged as the most fundamental unit of social relationship which provides the first experience of human interaction. As Kang and Shin share family life in their childhood in the camp, which is a rather unique experience, they spend a large proportion of their narratives to describe their relationships and experiences with family. However, their narratives differ in tone. While Kang spent his childhood in a well-to-do family before the incarceration and maintained a close bondage with family even after the incident, Shin, born of an authority-arranged “prize marriage”<sup>43</sup> couple, recollects no special attachment to his parents or brother.

Family is an important subject that appears frequently in Kang’s narratives. In the opening of *The Aquariums of Pyongyang*, Kang talks about his happy memories with family in Pyongyang and accounts how his paternal grandparents immigrated from

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<sup>42</sup> I should clarify that my notion of family here is, as I stated in the text, solely as the first start point of human relationship, not in the context of Western tradition of private-public distinction. Arendt, in *the Human Condition*, comments on the modern fall of traditional distinction between private space of family (household, or *oika*) which man shares with other animal life; and public realm (*polis*) where human can act as a political subject. Further, see HC p. 6

However, again, while Arendt largely deals with the notion of family as a spatial concept, i.e. a private place excluded from public intervention, I take a notion of family as rather a primary unit which act as the catalyst for human interaction.

<sup>43</sup> COI report provides detailed explanation on “prize marriage” “The Commission finds ... that inmates of the existing prison camps are generally not allowed to form new families or have children. This policy is consistent with the stated objective of eliminating the seed of class enemies. Only on rare occasions do the camp authorities arrange “marriages” between model prisoners who distinguished themselves through hard work and absolute obedience. The prisoners selected have no say in the choice of partner. “Married” couples are not allowed to live together, but are brought together for several nights per year for the purpose of intimate contact. In some cases, this results in the birth of children. Children born from such relations themselves become prisoners.” Refer to: COI p. 246

Japan to North Korea, and it is clear that he is very much attached to his family. Later on, reporting his experiences in the prison camp, he emphasizes that his family played a crucial role in his survival at the camp. Kang, as a boy of nine, was imprisoned in the camp with his parental grandmother, father, uncle and his younger sister Miho for their “guilt by association” to his grandfather who were forcedly disappeared for unknown reason. Kang’s mother was by forced divorce to Kang’s father exempted from imprisonment because of her noble background. As the Kangs lived in a family residence area in the camp, they centered around the grandmother, who played both a role of head of household and mother figure. Kang reminisces on those occasions when his family encouraged and helped each other to overcome the extreme condition of the camp. In particular Kang attributes the survival of his family to his grandmother’s diligence on providing food and comfort to the family; his uncle and he himself also participate in obtaining extra nutrition sources, such as mice and snakes when the grandmother and Kang’s sister are suffering from malnutrition.

Such solidarity was not uncommon among other families in the camp. Kang states that most of the people who thought of suicide or escape were young single prisoners, and those who were there with family did not dare to attempt such things, lest their families should be left behind (*Sesang* 148). Kang’s Uncle, for instance, confesses that he has overcome temptations to commit suicide by thinking of his family (*Aquariums* 48); Kang’s grandmother repeatedly says that she “must endure life for the sake of the children,” (*Aquariums* 109), and urges her family members to survive and leave the camp someday, somehow. Such efforts give the Kangs hope and encouragement during their time in the camp.

Kang's positive interaction extends from his attachment to family to other kinds of relationship. Kang describes several moments of solidarity with other inmates. Especially his friendship with classmates appears to help his survival. For example, Kang joins his friends to steal meat, breed mice for their nutrient supplements, and to help the weaker classmates' work quota, for otherwise they would be beaten until being seriously injured or even to death. Kang's narratives explain these companionship between Kang and his friends is primarily formed by their common backgrounds as descendants of Japanese immigrants. The inmates, though silenced by the oppression in the camp, make their speech and *action* meaningful to each other and thus enable themselves to be actors for higher purposes than mere obedience or survival.

Shin's narratives, on the other hand, tell of different situations. Camp 14, where Shin was born and raised is one of the "the total control zones,"<sup>44</sup> from which one rarely gets released. Shin looks back on the camp where he was born in as a place where "there is no sense of community." (*Escape* 49) He is therefore unable to "really understand basic things like friendship and family." (*Escape* 195) The marriage of Shin's parents, for one, was a reward for their diligence arranged by the guards, not a choice of their own. They were rarely allowed to see each other even after the marriage. Shin was raised by his mother, who, as he recalls, was always bitter and exhausted from the harsh day-long labor. He barely caught a glimpse of his father and

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<sup>44</sup> COI report gives comparative explanation on revolutionizing zone and total control zone: "The Commission finds that the majority of prisoners who remain in the camps have no prospect of ever being released. They are held in total control zones and are incarcerated until they die. Only prisoners held for relatively minor wrongs who are kept in the revolutionizing zone of Political Prison Camp No. 15 could hope to be reinstated as citizens and achieve their release after a number of years in the prison camp." COI p. 243; also see: *Escape* p. 17.



brother who lived in single men's dormitory. Shin says that he thought of his family just as he regarded other inmates: as competitors for food and someone to be monitored for any suspicious speech or behavior. When Shin overheard his mother and brother's escape plan, he writes, he was merely jealous of their having rice, so he reported their escape plan to the guards in exchange for the promise of more food. (Escape 53) This event later became the most traumatic memory to Shin, but at the time he merely thought he was doing the right thing according to his obligations. (COI 243) For some of the provisions of "the ten rules of Camp 14" which Shin still memorizes, states that one should not try to escape (Rule One), no more than two prisoners can meet together (Rule two), and that Prisoners must watch one another and immediately report any suspicious behavior (Rule six) (*Escape* 198-199) .

Having no other than their parents who are "exhausted, distant and uncommunicative" (Escape 18) to learn from, the children of Camp 14 let the guards and their teacher-guards in the school to shape their mind and values. (*Escape* 28) They act in extreme selfishness and harass each other. Shin says that, not to mention that he hated his teacher-guards, he did not have "any regret or sadness" (*Sesang* 214) when he was separated from his friends after graduation, even though he has spent all his childhood and adolescence with them in the same class.

Shin refers to his past self back in the camps as an "animal." (*Escape* insert p. 6) It is not due to the extreme condition of the camp but to the kind of person he was at that time: he did not know "how the world works—how human beings interact each other" (*Escape* 122) and "normal human emotions." (*Escape* 192) Such things were beyond his understanding until he befriended Kim, Jin-myeong and Park, Yongcheol, who opened his eyes to the world (*Sesang* 25) and awakened the long dormant

yearning to lead a life outside even when his own parents failed to do so. (*Sesang* 182) Kim, whom Shin meets in a prison after being tortured for his mother and brother's escape plan, nurses Shin devotedly and even offers his own food. Shin says it was his "first exposure to sustained kindness" (*Escape* 63) which at first puzzled him, but it slowly changed his way of forming relationships. Kim was the first and only one who carefully listened to Shin's life story and then urged him to go and see how the outside world was. Shin is grateful for the hope given by Kim and recollects him with greater attachment than that of his own parents. (*Escpae* 65) Park, another friend of Shin, was a newcomer to Shin's labor unit who steadily told him about the freedom of the outside world. Shin confesses that he actually relied much on Kim, since his stories kindled his dream for the outside world. Shin writes that his friendship with these two people changed for life the way he connects with other people (*Escape* 106) and led him to make "the first free decision of his life" (*Escape* 101)—to escape from Camp 14.

Both Shin and Kang point out that there are two reasons for the lack of unity in the prison camps: first, the extreme condition of hunger and malnutrition force the prisoners only to focus on their own survival; second, excessive forced labor hinders the inmates from having either enough time or energy to have meaningful interaction with each other. This reminds one of Arendt's concern about the modern era where labor and work are the dominant aspect of human society and thus threaten the public place for *action*: Arendt defines labor as an activity for life sustenance and work as an activity for creating an artificial world. She argues that these two forms of human activity become indistinguishable in the modern 'waste economy' (HC 134) and transform human into a mere *animal laborans*, whose aim of *action* is none other

than the sustenance of life. Arendt's comment on the extremes of such condition which reduces human interest only to one's physical life, resembles the situation in which Kang and Shin find themselves in the camps:

Nothing, by the same token, ejects one more radically from the world than exclusive concentration upon the body's life, a concentration forced upon man in slavery or in the extremity of unbearable pain. (HC 112)

The experiences of interaction continued to influence Kang and Shin's lives during and after the defection. In contrast to Shin, who left the camp without any hesitation, Kang is very much regretful for his family lover he had to leave behind and is reliant on his conspirator Ahn Hyuk, who became a friend in the camp and lived together with Kang's family after his release. During their stay in Dalian, Kang and Ahn also form a quasi-familial tie with a Korean lady who runs a prostitution and smuggling business. Kang says in some interviews that he and Ahn are still close friends long after their resettlement in South Korea and their co-foundation of a North Korean human rights group. One of the notable features in Kang's writings is the emphasis on brethren love and sympathy in appealing for help for North Korean human rights.

It is also interesting to note how Shin gets to learn about companionship after his defection. In his books, he describes how he was shocked and bewildered but at the same time overjoyed by forming new connections with people who showed affection. Through such relationships, he says, he began "evolving from animal to human," (*Escape* insert p.8) a slow, painful, yet significant progress in his life.

As such, in the narratives of Kang and Shin, human togetherness plays a significant role: the Kangs' familial bondage and its effects on their relationship with others enable them to endure their time in prison; and Shin's experience of intimate interaction allows him to learn human emotions and endure the harsh condition of the camp. Therefore one might say that solidarity not only supports one's survival but also stimulates his freedom and will; and thus opens the place for change. It is the very feature of *action*—or *inter-action*, as Arendt emphasizes on plurality as its base (HC 175) : the activity, which is constituted by human interaction with other humans, interrupts the present situation which would have proceeded, and brings changes for the future. (Arendt, *Crises of Republic* 13) By doing so, the people who are voiceless and devoid of rights will begin to claim, discuss and attempt to escape.

### 3.3. Escape from Zones of Voiceless: *Action* as Political Power in the Narratives of Kang and Shin

Indicating *action*, or political action as the decisive feature of human being, Arendt defines human being primarily as a political being which “seeks its political action to reveal one's individuality by claiming his or her opinion before others.” (S. Kim intro. *The Promise of Politics* 15, my translation) In the Arendtian understanding of politics, the political significance of a person can only be grasped by one's realization of its potentiality by speech and *action*; and when an *action* is conducted in concert with multiple agents, it constitutes *power*. The Arendtian understanding of politics, therefore, presumes one's active participation, which differs from the general notion

of politics that allows the engagement of a person without his or her intention and *action*, for instance, by being subjected to a certain regime or other political space.

In this section, my reading of Kang and Shin as political entities is twofold. First I explore the status of Kang and Shin appeared in their narratives as commonsensical understanding of what constitutes a political being, that is, based on one's significance to a political subject regardless of their intended *action*. By doing so, I aim to show that regardless of whether they are meaningful in a certain political realm or not, they cannot emerge as political agents. Then I focus on their *actions*, particularly those conducted through their storytelling, voicing, or writing, that eventually enables them as an examples of the Arendtian concept of a political being by which Kang and Shin achieve meaningfulness as individuals.

The inmates of political prison camps in North Korea, as subjects of the regime, oscillates between the contrary extremes of being *political* and *apolitical*. The first and foremost explanation is obviously that they are 'political' prisoners: judging by the country's regime, the camps primarily serve to segregate symptoms of "political dangerousness." (COI 239) At the same time, however, as I have explained via Arendt's analysis of totalitarianism, the inmates of concentration camps are apolitical in the sense that they are not guaranteed any legal protection. Moreover, considering that these prisoners are often not even informed of the grounds for being 'dangerous' to the regime, (*Suyongsoui* 66, *Sesang* 21) the apolitical aspect of the inmates increases in double degree.

Kang and Shin both have experienced such extremes of political and apolitical statuses in the camps. Interestingly, Kang and Shin again shows sharp contrast in awareness of their political situation. Throughout his narratives, despite his

young age in the prison, Kang seems to be fully aware of the notion of politics. Kang describes that his life in the prison camp, from the cause of incarceration to the moment to be released, as well as daily life in the camps, has always been involved with political significance—with his engagement with politics.

In the second and third chapters of *The Aquariums of Pyongyang*, Kang talks about his family history of immigration to North Korea, and then the next chapter is about their arrest and imprisonment in the political prison camp. Kang states that their immigration was purely a political decision: his grandmother, as a devoted communist and a zealous member of *Chochongryon*,<sup>45</sup> the pro-DPRK federation for Korean residents in Japan, was won by North Korea's ideological persuasion and led her family to defect their settlement in Japan and move to Pyongyang. Thrilled by North Korea's propaganda which proclaims the country as “the last hope for reunification and the defense of national identity” (*Aquariums* 19) and thus calls for “the Korean elites” to join building their motherland as the paradise with “no material worries,” Kang's grandmother, along with many other Japanese residents, was rendered “utterly blind to believe and hope in illusions.” (*Aquariums* 24) Kang refers to the outcome of the decisions of his grandmother and other Japanese residents to immigrate to North Korea as a “big fall,” which caused them isolation, poverty, duly surveillance and finally, incarceration at the concentration camps. (*Aquariums* 24) In fact, the COI report on human rights in the DPRK indicates that the reason for

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<sup>45</sup> Or *Chosen Soren* in Japanese. Historical Dictionary of DPRK give its definition : “General Association of Korean Residents in Japan ... This pro-DPRK organization in Japan in generally known outside the Korean Peninsula by the Japanese reading of abbreviated version of its title, Chosen soren ... Chosen soren has been a major economic supporter of the DPRK over the years.” Hoare, James E. *Historical Dictionary of Democratic People's Republic of Korea*. Lanham: Scarecrow, 2012. Print. p.149

massive forced disappearance and political camp imprisonment of the returnees from Japan in the 1950s and 1960s was that North Korean authorities who “felt that they might spread subversive information about what they had seen abroad” carried out the policy of isolation from “capitalist” outside influences (COI 240) —it explains the mystery of “a crime of high treason” (*Aquariums* 39) which was said to be committed by Kang’s grandfather who was always thought to be “an honest citizen, entrusting his all to the Party” (*Aquariums* 39) and which brought the Kangs’ ten years of incarceration in prison camp.<sup>46</sup> The North Korean regime’s fear of “outside influences” might be correct at least some point, considering that Kang’s later flight from North Korea was because of his listening to South Korean radio programs which gave him a sense of freedom and sharper criticism of the North Korean regime and eventually made him to escape the country to avoid another threat of camp incarceration. (*Aquarium* 189)

The cause of Kang’s family’s immigration and incarceration and his defection from North Korea is unfortunate, but still all three incidents involve political issues and decisions. Kang’s life in the political prison camp continues in the same vein. Even though both the purpose and system of the camp are to isolate its inmates from public political space, the inmates in the camps were not an exception to the propagandas of the Kim Il-sung regime. Living in a “revolutionizing zone (*bykmyunghwakooyeok*)” (COI 232) of Political Prison Camp No.15, where the chance of release, though rare, exists, Kang was a “offspring of sinner” who did not deserve

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<sup>46</sup> Kang mentions that there were less than six thousand prisoners in the “immigrants’ zone,” which is the residence for the family members of political offender who have immigrated to North Korea. The Kangs also stayed in this area. Kang, Chol-hwan. 『수용소의 노래 (*Suyongsoui norae*)』 Seoul: 시대정신 (Zeitgeist), 2004.

to be treated as human (*Aquarium* 63) but still a “beneficiary of the widest grace of Kim Il-Sung and Kim Jung-Il” (*Suyongsoui* 64) so he should learn and work for the completion of revolutionary tasks. (*Suyongsoui* 210) In short, he no longer had any right but obligations as a citizen. Besides working from the afternoon till evening, Kang attends morning classes; most of the classes he remembers as rather mundane, but the “history of revolution” class which teaches Kim Il-Sung’s anti-Japanese fights, and thus “one must not be remiss” was taught the same as schools outside the camps (*Suyongsoui* 68).<sup>47</sup>

Kang recollects memorizing revolutionary songs as a child, and one of the songs is called “the song of a concentration camp (*Suyongsoui norae*)”<sup>48</sup> and later becomes the title of Kang’s memoir in Korean. The lyrics of the song, sung only by the inmates of the camps, displays the irony of apolitical (as slave-like prisoners) and political (as the subject of the regime) status of the camp inmates:

*We are the owners of our ideology and technology*

*We crush flunkeyism, we crush revisionism;*

*On our ideology, technology, culture and revolution*

*Let us push more and more efforts;*

*Live as the subject of revolution!*

*Live as the subject of revolution! (Suyongsoui 63, my translation)*

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid. p. 68

<sup>48</sup> Or “revolutionizing song (*bykmyunghwanui norae*),” *Suyongsoui* p. 63



In contrast to Kang's narratives which lean toward displaying a political aspect of the camps, Shin gives almost no connection with his camp life and political issues except that he knew of himself as "an offspring of traitors." (*Escape* 73) Shin mentions that he never heard of the word *politics*—as well as other related words such as rights, nation, citizen, freedom and justice—before his arrival in South Korea.<sup>49</sup> Shin's life in the political camp itself seems absolutely apolitical.

Shin, born *as* a political prisoner and known to be the only escapee from the total control zone (COI 243) represents an exceptional status not only compared to Kang's but among all other North Korean refugees. Shin remembers no pictures of Kim Il-sung nor Kim Jong-il, (*Escape* 27, *Suyongsoui* 99) which are to be displayed in each and every household, (COI 54) classrooms (*Escape* 27) and buildings mandatorily in order to represent the omnipresence of Kims' sovereignty (COI 53); "I had no idea who he [Kim Jong-il] was," (*Escape* 27) Shin says in his earlier interview with Harden. According to Shin, schools in the total control zone give no political instructions such as the achievements and teachings of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il, or the official version of the revolutionary history of the Korean Worker's Party, which are considered to be the de facto standard of most of the education in North Korea. (COI 46) The only propaganda he had seen was the slogan on a mountain slope near his school, saying: "altogether follow the rules and regulations!" (*Sesang* 58) Shin was never taught any song, whether it is "revolutionary" or not, until a few months before his escape with Park, Yong-chol, who taught Shin his first song, "*Dongjiga* (or song of companionship)." (*Suyongsoui* 271)

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<sup>49</sup> Refer to: Kang, Chol-hwan. 『수용소의 노래 (*Suyongsoui norae*)』 Seoul: 시대정신 (Zeitgeist), 2004. Appendix II (time of Korean terminology recognition chart of Shin, Dong-hyuk), P. 359

As well as Shin's life in the prison, the motive of his escape from the camp and eventually from North Korea is far from any political recognition. Even in Blain Harden's book on Shin's life, which provides a rather large amount of explanation of political contexts of North Korea such as its uncanny dictatorship system, the testimony of Shin is steady with his political ignorance: "He did not thirst for freedom or political rights," (*Escape* 192) Harden clearly states, citing from Shin's speech at a church. Shin himself also comments that his motive for the escape was far from the idea of "criticism of the camp system" or "exposure of human rights deprivation." (*Suyongsoui* 320) The motive was a mere evasion of harsh reality, (*Suyongsoui* 312) hunger for meat (*Escape* 192) and a little bit of curiosity about the outside world. (*Suyongsoui* 320, COI 243)

Shin blames the political vacuum of the prison camp of depriving the human awareness of problematization and resistance. Shin repeatedly impress that the inmates were ignorant of their ability to claim themselves. Commenting on his aunt's rage toward guards who raped her daughter to death, Shin says that what allows her to cry out for her daughter is the sentiment she learned before coming to the camp—"Inmates born in the camps would not do so; we do not know the idea of complaints itself. We dare not to let ourselves to have a such sentiment of grievance because we are fundamentally sinners." (*Suyongsoui* 319) Now working as a human rights activist, Shin says he is rather cynical about the possibility of collective *action* from the inmates. "The prison camp just makes you so [not to have an awareness of resistance]," (*Suyongsoui* 312) he adds, "Such awareness cannot be arisen without the influence from the outside." (*Suyongsoui* 320)

Irrespective of the difference between the political awareness of Kang and Shin, they both are the subject of a political system—of which gravity is doubled because of the totalitarian regime and the concentration camp system, and are not able to enforce their own political potentiality. Then what about their lives after their escape from North Korea and political camps? After defection, the two narrators, as renegades from North Korean prison camps, inevitably and almost immediately have earned rather uncommon attention from political agencies inside and outside Korea, including South Korean government officials including the National Intelligence Service, media, human rights activists and other groups and workers concerned about North Korea. (*Escape* 161, 169; *Aquariums* 224) Shortly after their arrival in South Korea, both Kang and Shin were encouraged to publish their stories and participate in North Korean human rights activities (*Escape* 168, *Aquariums* Foreword xxiii); the influence of human rights activity on Kang and Shin is particularly apparent in their books written in Korean, both supported by human rights groups. In the foreword to his Korean book, Kang even states that “the one and only hope” he had when he entered South Korea was “to expose the reality there [the political prison camp] for my friends and many others who are merely waiting to die in the camp even now” and “to urge the international community to completely abolish the prison camps in North Korea.” (*Suyongsoui* Foreword i) The testimonies of Kang and Shin are generally welcomed, but they are also doubted and even denied by various political agencies. Whether they are intended or not, Kang and Shin recollect several cases where they

got involved in political debates with media, North Korean human rights groups and political parties including both right-wing and left-wing parties.<sup>50</sup>

In summary, as prison camp escapees, Kang and Shin did acquire 'political' significance in the general sense. It may be confirmed by their multifarious activities in relations to North Korean refugees and human rights. It is rather ironic that when one considers the power of influence of Kang and Shin, the two former camp inmates find themselves now became the real "threat to the Regime," which was the very reason they had to spent their lives in the political prison camps. *Aquariums of Pyongyang* and *Escape from Camp 14* have succeeded in a timely accordance with the international attention on human rights issues in North Korea and thus contributed in a groundbreaking way for numbers of cases of national and international decisions toward North Korean policy.<sup>51</sup> As the books became international bestsellers and were

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<sup>50</sup> To be further discussed in Chapter Three. For the examples of the scene, see: *Aquariums* p. 224-233 and *Escape* pp.165-6, 169,171, 178-193.

<sup>51</sup> For example, by 2001 when the English translation of *the Aquariums of Pyongyang* was published in succession to its success of original French version, European Union started human rights dialogue with North Korea; In 2005 with unexpected fame of Kang's book following by private invitation from George W. Bush the then president of U.S., the resolution for human rights in the DPRK first appeared in United Nations; Consensus adoption of the resolution was taken in 2012 with the publication of *Escape from the Camp 14*; followed by the United Nations Human Rights Council's decision of establishing the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the DPRK, which takes Shin as a main witness. ; refer to: COI p.5 and Shearlaw, Maeve. "The Best Books on North Korea." *The Guardian*. N.p., 27 Sept. 2014. Web. 7 Dec. 2014.

translated into numerous languages,<sup>52</sup> the authors were invited for interviews and to give testimonies and speeches around the world. They have become some of the best-known North Korean human rights activists; their speeches and testimonies are heard at international organizations, national congress, political parties and NGOs. Indeed, the narratives of Kang and Shin intervene as the distinguished political authority for North Korean issues. Where international pressure fails in breaking the secrecy of the sovereign nation,<sup>53</sup> the voices of Kang and Shin have come into a new power of politics. The narratives of Kang and Shin, in concert with other testimonies and the presence of 120,000 North Korean refugees were rather too large a voice to be

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<sup>52</sup> Eleven for *Aquariums of Pyongyang*, more than twenty-four translations for *Escape from Camp 14* in 2014.

Kim, Yong-kwon. "Yönggugöllon, Pukhan Paengi Wihan P'ildoksö 6kwön Sogae(영국언론, 북한 배우기 위한 필독서 6권 소개)." VOA Korea. Voice of America, 30 May 2014. Web. 6 Dec. 2014.

Yoon, Jung-ho. "T'albukcha Shin, Dong-hyuk Ssi 'hyumöllaich'üwöch'i In'gwönsang (탈북자 신동혁씨 '휴먼라이즈워치 인권상')." Chosen.com. ChosenIlbo, 18 Sept. 2014. Web. 06 Dec. 2014.

<sup>53</sup> Here I mean by that there is almost no official evidence of human rights deprivation in North Korea was provided in the inter-state level. Holding its infamous closed-nation policy, North Korea stays firm with its “categorical rejection” to all accusations against its human rights, contending that those are “manipulation of those hostile forces,” “desperate attempt to eliminate our social system by all means and ridiculous provocation” “in pursuit of ill-minded political objectives,” while they never have approved any visits nor invitations from international official investigation and hearings on North Korean human rights. Therefore, except for limited cases of foreign witness and hard fact materials such as satellite images of allegedly known prison camps, practically the international accusations on the DPRK is almost totally dependent on the testimonies of North Korean refugees in the international discussion on North Korean human rights issues.

silenced by North Korea's claim that they are a "fabrication" by the "hostile forces." (So n.p)<sup>54</sup>

However, although it is apparently problematic to treat the testimonies of Kang and Shin as "fabrication," (an accusation not only claimed by the North Korean regime) one might note that simply the power of political influence of Kang and Shin do not guarantee their beings political agencies. Not to mention the suspicion of political intervention in the testimonies of Shin and Kang, there may be some reasonable doubts to assume that the voices of Shin and Kang could be "hijacked" by other political agencies regardless of whether they are aware or not. In fact, even when Kang and Shin is working as human rights activists firmly claiming their life devotion for the North Korean human rights issues, at the same time their writings show signs of confusion and perplexities in their decision and plan for their lives. Especially during their earlier time of resettlement, the writings of Kang and Shin both show some aspect of contradiction in their commitment to human rights activity. They appear to accept the call for witnessing as a 'moral duty' (*Aquariums* Intro.xxiii) or even a reciprocal favor for their acceptance in a new country, however their freewill as agent is somehow limited.

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<sup>54</sup> However North Korea maintains its accusation on the former-refugee North Korean human right activists as traitors and liars; it is almost a routine to find articles in Uriminzokkiri (우리민족끼리, or Out Nation itself), North Korea's state-controlled news website insulting rising North Korean refugees, including Kang and Shin. In its sixth serial article on North Korean refugees, "Who are you, "North Korean refugees"?" Uriminzokkiri describes Kang as a fled criminal; more recently, there has been a video of Shin's father saying that Shin never has been living in prison camp. Shin confirms that the man from the video is his father, but he is likely to be intimidated by the North Korean regime and giving fraudulent testimonies; and adds "I feel guilty for the sufferings of my father, but I will never be silent." Refer to: "<<탈북자>>, 너는 누구냐?" (t'albukcha Nönün Nugunya, or Who Are You, "North Korean Refugees"?" *Uriminzokkiri*. N.p., n.d. Web. 28 Jan. 2015.; Pearson, James, and Sohee Kim. "Prominent Defector Says North Korea Has Taken His Father Hostage." *Reuters*. Thomson Reuters, 28 Oct. 2014. Web. 27 Jan. 2015.;

In this chapter, I suggested that Kang and Shin become political agents in the true sense of the word—which Arendt defined as *natality*— with their writings as *action* which is not only the record of their progress from the totalitarian state to the outside world but also the confusing, sometimes contradicting, on-going progress of acquiring their own voices. Just as Kang and Shin were once deprived of their voices by the North Korean regime, even “in the so-called free world” (*Aquariums* Preface vii) Kang and Shin have to continue fighting for their own voices. Their writings, therefore, take a twofold meaning: first, they are the records of their escape from North Korea and its prison camps; second, they are also the records of escape from other ‘competing voices’ in the free world— escape from all the doubts, indifference, interrogations and exploitation of their own voice. And by representing their progress of such escapes, Kang and Shin are finally recognized as distinct individuals, which is according to the Arendtian understanding of a human truly being human.

## 4. Writing as *Action*, Writing as Righting

### 4.1. Double Escape: Journey to Find One's Own Voice

Kang and Shin's journey of escape, in light of the Arendtian concept of *action*, can be seen as a flight from the fetters of forced silence. Speech, or the act of voicing oneself is a fairly important notion in Arendt's understanding of human condition. In the opening of a chapter on *action* in *The Human Condition*, Arendt juxtaposes speech with *action* as ways of disclosing one's unique individuality, (176) and throughout the discussion she keeps referring to the two notions simultaneously. (Canovan 131) In this sense Kang and Shin's journey can be interpreted not only an escape from North Korea and its prison camps, but also from the powers and circumstances which deprived them of voice: the predominant, collective voice of the North Korean regime and the life as refugees hiding in China.

Landing in the 'world of freedom,' however, Kang and Shin faced something unexpected. The National Intelligence Service of South Korea investigated the veracities of their stories, along with a series of news conferences and interviews where their testimonies were tested, doubted, and challenged. Kang remembers that after the first week of interrogation which left him "feeling dazed and empty," the head of the security agent 'encouraged' him with the following words: "You've cleared the first hurdle ... [B]ut there will be others. You've come from a long way off, you know..." (*Aquariums* 221) The investigation lasted almost half a year. Shin also went



through two weeks of investigation by the National Intelligence Service of South Korea and then by the intelligence agencies of the U.S. (*Escape* 161) After the official investigation, Kang and Shin acquired their status as North Korean escapee citizens in South Korea, however they continuously have had to defend their authenticity and also that they are not affiliated with any political interests or ideologies at the public news conferences and hearings. Kang recollects on his predicament and frustration to the suspicions:

Upon reaching freedom in the Republic of Korea at the end of my journey ... I shed tears of joy ... however, I was struck speechless by some of the questions asked of me by certain journalists. It was clear to me that those journalists were trying to squeeze out of me only answers they want to hear. “Did you concoct part of your story with the help of Seoul’s intelligence service?” That ridiculous question turned out to be just the beginning of my ordeal in the so-called free world. (Preface for *Aquariums* viiii)

Scenes of interrogations by intelligence agents and journalists, found in the texts of Kang and Shin, may be referred to as a *mise en abyme* of the genre of North Korean refugee life writing itself. Besides Kang and Shin, it is commonly observed in other texts of North Korean refugee writing as well, where similar stories of being suspected of fraudulence and attempts at exploitation by various interest groups like governments, political parties, religious groups, and human rights organizations. Moreover, as for memoirs written in collaboration with foreign authors, such as *The Aquariums of Pyongyang* and *Escape from Camp 14*, the presence of third-party

interpreters in their texts have invited even bigger skepticism. These challenges, all directed against the truthfulness of Kang and Shin's narratives, are in summary three different questions about the political innocence of the author, the accuracy of their accounts, and the subjectiveness of the witness. Interestingly, these three questions correspond with the three main features of the genre of North Korean refugee life writing. First, as narratives on North Korean issue as I have discussed in relation to the political complexity of South-North Korea in the previous section; second, as its formative characteristic as retrospective memoirs; and lastly, as collaborated narratives.

The question of political innocence appears most frequently in the texts of Shin and Kang. Indeed, with regard to their association with North Korean issues, they had to face a great degree of suspicion that they were acting according to certain political interests. Most interestingly, however, while Kang and Shin defend themselves against such challenges, at the same time they also display ambivalence and anxiety in their tone, which may give more evidence that may speak for the such doubts.

Kang, for example, expresses his rage and frustration against the two groups of "leftists," in *The Aquariums of Pyongyang*: one is a group of reporters from *The Hangyore*, a daily newspaper in South Korea, who doggedly pressed him for whether he had been guaranteed freedom of speech, (223) and the other is a group of college students who "tried to make [him] to see the shortfalls of the South Korean system of government." (228) However, in view of the fact that Kang wrote about these incidents when he was working for *The Chosun Ilbo*, (*Aquariums* Preface vii) a major conservative newspaper standing at the opposite end of the political spectrum to the progressive *Hangyore*, Kang may not be so free from accusations of political bias. In fact, most of his comments on North Korean-related policies and issues are in

accordance with the view of *The Chosun Ilbo*: for example, he is an opponent of humanitarian food aid to North Korea, which is a main program in the Sunshine Policy of the former progressive Kim Dae Jung and Roh Moo-hyun administrations.

Similar comments on the former progressive presidents can be found in Harden's analysis of Korea's political situation in Shin's *Escape from Camp 14*. Harden, however, introduces the policy in the context of giving South Korea's political 'schizophrenia' over North Korean issue, which he alludes that Shin is less involved in neither side. However, in the same page, Shin specifically mentions his hope that "through pressure and persuasion, [the United States] can convince [the North Korean government] not to murder all those people in the camps." (177) That comment was made shortly before Shin accepted an offer for a job from an NGO which sponsored his trip to America. Therefore, although Shin's texts show much less political references in comparison to those of Kang, other aspects of influence and involvement, especially those of human rights activists and liberalists, are observed in the former. In an introduction to *Sesang pakkeuro naoda*, Yoon Yeosang, the head of North Korean Human Rights Data Base (NKDB) a publisher and a supporter of Shin, states that the editorial board avoided "tailoring" Shin's draft note, but he also admits that the title and subtitle for each of the nine chapters were created by the editors—hence a number of less convincing titles with regard to the contents. For example, in Chapter nine which is titled as "Wishing for the recovery of human rights consciousness of the camp inmates," a note which Shin simply describes on his astonishment on women's status in China and South Korea in comparison to that of the prison camp's the editors again gave a title as follows: "I realized how democracy awakens people's consciousness," whereas it seems less likely that Shin actually meant

to address, or was even aware of, the influence of democracy in China and South Korea. (316-317)

In addition to the complex and sensitive political situation, one must note that North Korean life writings are also facing a unique situation: not only are they about the atrocities, but they are also acts of disclosure fighting secrecy. The DPRK has adhered to its strict closed-door policy, allowing no international human rights investigators to enter the country. It is certainly not an exaggeration to say that most of the present human rights review on North Korea, including the report of United Nations' Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, annual *White Paper on Human Rights in North Korea* of Korea Institute for National Unification and many other investigation conducted by NGOs, are largely dependent on the testimonies of North Korean refugees. Therefore, as the de facto single source of information regarding the human rights situation in North Korea, the refugee's testimonies, including the texts of Kang and Shin, play a critical role. This, however, also mean that their testimonies are bound to meet with even stricter tests of truthfulness.

Not just about the accuracy of their reports, North Korean refugees are often challenged by doubts about their identities, as well. When suspected of being a spy or a Korean Chinese attempting illegal immigration, a refugee might even be denied of the credibility of being "the real person." As I have mentioned, the identities of North Korean refugee witnesses are continuously denied and disparaged as a fraud or fabrication not only by North Korea, but also by several other political parties such as government of China and some extreme right-wing politicians in South Korea.

Regrettably, there have indeed been a few cases of fabrication. One notable example is the case of Kim, Uun-chol who claimed to have witnessed the tortures and executions practiced in North Korean prison camps but later turned out to be a false identity made up and acted by another refugee named Park, Choong-il. Another such example is the case of Lee, Soon-ok who also claimed to have fled from a political prison camp in North Korea and wrote 『꼬리 없는 짐승들의 눈빛 (Kkoriöpnün Chimsüngdürüi Nunbit, or *Eyes of the Tailless Animals: Prison Memoirs of a North Korean Woman* )』 (1996).<sup>55</sup> The book was frequently accused of fraud and exaggeration.<sup>56</sup> Reasons for the false or exaggerated testimonies are varied: some of them simply seek to gain public attention and financial benefits by offering them shocking stories, and some people also do it for manipulative purposes for certain political interests. Although relatively few in number, there are also cases of Korean Chinese people forging their identities as North Korean refugees in order to acquire a South Korean citizenship and spies from North Korea.

In fact, the issue of truthfulness fabrication is a question inherent in the genre of autobiography. As texts of life writing are obligated to tell the truth, they are continuously tested on its factual accuracy. As Sorenson puts it, “[e]ach memoir is always potentially a fraudulent one: at any time possibly illegitimate; at any time available to be held to account for its truthfulness.” (Sorensen, 79) For memoir qua

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<sup>55</sup> The book was translated into English and published in the United States in 1999; and translated into German and published in Germany in 2011.

<sup>56</sup> For further refer to: Lee, Yongseop. "탈북자 문제, 오염됐다고 관심 갖지 말아야 하나, (T'albukcha Munje, Oyömdwaettago Kwansim Katchi Maraya Hana, or Should we stop concerning on NK issue for its suspicion?)" *Up Korea*. N.p., 5 Apr. 2005. Web; Kang, Kookjin. "탈북자 과장증언 몸값 부풀리기, T'albukcha Kwajangjüngön Momgap Pup'ulligi, or NK refugees exaggerate their testimonies to be highly paid." *Voice of People*. N.p., 15 Mar. 2005. Web.

literary genre—wherein numerous incidents are selected and reorganized into an artificial plot—inevitably faces the perpetual dilemma of double commitment to truthful referentiality and fictiveness of representation. Sorenson says, “[biography’s] narrative is essentially an *interpretation*, a qualified reconstruction that is always open to revision, not a truthful account in an absolute sense.” (92) As to testimonies to tragic events and massive atrocities, the truthfulness of the text becomes a moral question. However, as Steven Wein indicates, facing the vast openness of historical possibilities, the ‘moral inquiry’ of narrative based on testimonies of victims is inevitably put into the question of “how?”(151) Sorenson, similarly, rightly draws from the Trauma Theory to state that history itself as a narration of events risks the mediation: “history is not merely a question of knowing, of amassing concrete, factual and objective knowledge, because past past events are always mediated through language and representation.” (83)

Further, Mark Freeman and Jens Brockmeier point out that the such narrative process of recollecting, editing and reorganizing the factual events are conducted on the basis of a certain *ethical fabric* of society, which can be varied by time, place and situation. (92) Freeman and Brockmeier propose that the primary character of (auto)biography is the “explanatory justification—or even *apologia*—for one’s life.” (83) Since autobiographical reflections serve as “the interpretive appraisal of one’s personal past,” (75) the genre becomes inseparable from the moral or ethical valuation of what is to live a “good life,” or “what a human life is supposed to be”—the *condition humane*. (86) More interesting point is that in such process of recollection, there appears a *gap* between the moral/ethical valuation of the author in the present and the recollected past:

It should be emphasized that autobiographies...are always written in the present, looking backward—and forward—with certain more or less distinct audiences in mind ... the meanings of a life takes place and makes sense only in the present, that is, the present in which this life is lived and in which its past becomes an object of (re)construction. Put differently, postulating the meaning of the past is a psychological and moral function of the here and now, of a present constellation in which an autobiographer seeks to gain acceptance not only for his or her past but for his or her present and future life. (82-83)

The bigger the gap between the moral standard of the past and the present is, the bigger the ‘anxiety’ of the narrative’s process of reconstruction becomes. In the cases of North Korean life writings, Shin and Kang, now as defectors to a whole new society and its ideologies, recollect very extreme situations of their pasts—especially those of the totalitarian camps where the commonsensical morality and ethics such as the value of life, affection and sense of togetherness were systemically “vacuumized.” Confusion, ambivalence and sometimes even contradictions which appear in the texts of North Korean refugees can be thus traced back to the schism between their identities of the past and the present, especially in terms of morality and ethics.

The narratives of Shin especially suggest that such confusion still haunts him. Shin, stating his mixed comments on democracy and human rights as I have provided examples from Chapter Nine of *Sesang Bakkeūro Naoda*, also shows hesitation and reservation in his tone when he writes about the occasions when he faced unfamiliar

ethics of a new community, by using expressions no more than “it was shocking” or “I was ignorant to such norms.” (316-320) On the other hand, Harden’s book, as it is written from the rather firm perspective of the external author, offers an observation on Shin’s changes in memory recollection following his social adjustment.<sup>57</sup> One of the critical points which shows the feature of inconstant narration of Shin will be his change on some inaccuracies of the past testimony. Shin, about a year after working with Harden on their book, confessed that he had been lying about his mother and brother’s execution. Before his collaboration with Harden, he had claimed that he was unaware of their escape plan, but he later acknowledged that he had actually divulged the plan and eventually led them to death. Giving the reason why he decided to reveal the shameful, and even more painful truth, Shin said: “[T]he people around me make me want to be honest. They make me want to be more moral. In that sense, I felt like

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<sup>57</sup> Harden mainly describes Shin’s process of social and ethical adjustment to the outside world in the Chapter 23 of *Escape from Camp 14*, especially pp.180-185



I need to tell the truth. I now have friends who are honest. I have begun to understand what honesty is.” (*Escape* 49)<sup>58</sup>

When it comes to retrospective narratives written in collaboration, the issue of truthfulness in formative and thematic feature are combined and increase its perplexities by the possibility of different perceptions of the factual event by the contributors of the texts. *The Aquariums of Pyongyang* and *Escape from Camp 14* are the biographies of Kang and Shin each in collaboration with western journalists, Pierre Rigoulet, titled as a co-author; and Blain Harden who serves mainly as a narrator for

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<sup>58</sup> More recently, Shin again admitted there has been more inaccuracy in his testimony in *Escape from Camp 14*. The statement was made followed by Harden’s pressing on him to explain some substantial difference between the story he have told Harden in the past and recently to his friends. Shin revised significant amount of details of his early life, including that he had transferred to Camp 18, which is much less harsher place than Camp 14 and in where he accused of his mother and brother; attempted escape twice in his teenage years; both of the escapes all failed and he was send back to Camp 14; he was tortured and imprisoned in the underground prison. Shin said he did not realized how would the details of the story be important; and as by now he finds out that it can question his creditability, thus “feel deeply sorry.” (Harden n.p.)

NYT comments on his changes of testimony: “It is difficult to verify the accounts of North Korean defectors because the country is so isolated. In an email Sunday, Mr. Harden said, he had stressed in his book that Mr. Shin could be an unreliable narrator of his life.”—its indication to the difficulty of veracity and reliability of the testimony and its literary form, does resonant with the issue of truthfulness in North Korean refugee life writings as I suggested.

Also the Washington Post, in an article titled as “North Korean Defectors Are Crucial—but Sometimes Unreliable—Witnesses,” offers inference on the factors that causes unreliability of the testimonies of North Korean refugees, which also corresponds to my investigation: “For one, many North Koreans, regardless of whether they were in gulags, have endured major psychological trauma, ... Some refugees find they can make a living as a “professional defector” – an alluring proposition when it is so hard to get any other kind of job ...

Furthermore, they often don’t understand the consequences of what they think are small lies. ” See: “N Korea Camp Survivor Changes Story.” Harden, Blain. “Shin Changes Key Parts of His Story.” *Blaine Harden*. N.p., 16 Jan. 2015. Web. 18 Jan. 2015.; *BBC News*. N.p., 18 Jan. 2015. Web. 18 Jan. 2015.; “Prominent North Korean Defector Shin Dong-hyuk Admits Parts of His Story Are Inaccurate.” *Washington Post*. The Washington Post, 17 Jan. 2015. Web. 17 Jan. 2015.; Sang-hun, Choe. “Prominent North Korean Defector Recants Parts of His Story of Captivity.” *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 18 Jan. 2015. Web. 18 Jan. 2015.; “North Korean Defectors Are Crucial — but Sometimes Unreliable — Witnesses.” *Washington Post*. *The Washington Post*, 19 Jan. 2015. Web. 26 Jan. 2015.

Shin's testimony and sometimes as an observer of Shin's life after resettlement. Such participation and observation of the narratives of one's life, especially with regard to historical events, suggest there exists reasonable doubt of any intervention or misrepresentation of perspective, which is likely to be that of a western and *professional* writer. Eakin, commenting on ethnographic autobiography, warns that as the works are primarily published for the purpose of the ethnographer, one must take note that the informant who is "often distanced by language, class, and culture" and therefore without such purpose, and the potentiality of "exploitation" or "colonization" of the story of one's life. (174) Such issue of "colonization" is a common accusation in human rights literature as well as international journalism; Wendy Kozel suggests that the depiction of human rights crises in the eyes of western figure is a "representational convention" which appeals to its readers and human rights advocates, "and, of course, Hollywood." (168) Furthermore, she quotes the argument of Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg, of which problematization reaches to the capacity to voicing of the event itself:

"the reins of the story, which constitute its narrative point of view, are warranted from the historic actors and handed to a privileged western observer/participant, resulting in the illusion that there is no story—no historic event—unless it is witnessed, shaped, and experienced by western agents." (199)

When one considers the world-wide success of the two collaborated narratives, *The Aquariums of Pyongyang* and *Escape from Camp 14* in comparison with the

rather poor reception of their Korean counterparts, *Suyongsoni norae* and *Sesangpakero nagada*, the truthfulness of Rigoulet and Harden's texts may be viewed with even more skepticism. Indeed, Helena Grice has commented that Kang and Rigoulet's collaboration is "heavily mediated," considering Pierre Rigoulet as a historian with certain political interests who participated in the editing of *The Black Book of Communism*. (118) Moreover, Kang and Shin's collaborations with foreign authors necessitated the presence of translators, about which Grice argues that "[it] indeed cannot be assumed that such a translation is in any way either transparent or value-neutral." (118)

For a short conclusion, as I have suggested so far, the texts of Kang and Shin as North Korean refugee life writings faces various layers of doubts, especially on their truthfulness. Although Kang and Shin have made their escape from North Korean regime and its camp which have deprived their own voices, one may see that they have come to another type of predicament in the 'free world'—which suffers, perhaps, from the confusion of *too many* voices. When Kang and Shin assume they have been escaped from the one giant voice of totalitarianism, and finally come to voice themselves, they yet again find themselves assailed by multiple voices coming from various powers, views, and interests. Such competing voices draw doubts, indifference, interrogations and attempts exploitation onto their own voice, which are even yet to be found by themselves. Therefore, I suggest, the writings of Kang and Shin record two-fold escape: first, apparently, as an escape from the North Korea's collectivist voice of totalitarianism, secondly, as an escape from the competing voices, or 'polyphony' of the democratic world.

The second journey of escape, surely by all means unexpected, confuse and perplex the refugees; thus the texts of Kang and Shin also show how the process of defending their truthfulness cause confusion, and sometimes contradiction in their narratives. The inconsistency within the texts points to the various layers of voices ranging from North Korean, defectors, camp inmates, human rights defenders, South Korean conservatives to Western collaborators.

Such characteristics of North Korean life writings are again rather unique, even considering their feature of genre as life writings; and as I have stated in the Chapter One, it is not so commonly seen in other kind of survivor's testimonies and human rights literature. Regarding such endless suffering of Shin and Kang in voicing themselves, I suggest that the very feature of North Korean refugee life writings interestingly, corresponds to Arendt's explanation on *action* and speech.

## 4.2. Arendtian *Action* and the Pang of Birth

Arendt, commenting on *action* and its most efficient channel, *speech*, explains that the pain and ordeal of finding one's voice is a natural and inevitable process of acquiring their unique personality. "[the actor] is never merely a "doer" but always and at the same time a sufferer," she says, "because the actor always moves among and in relation to other acting beings." (HC 190) To acquire his or her own significance among other men, a mere individual, or zōē need to answer the question of "who" you are by an active interaction with others. Arendt argues that such process requires

suffering as 'natality,' which can be also referred to as one's own 'throe of birth.' (HC 190)

Kristeva bases her argument upon Arendt's juxtaposition of speech and *action*, which has drawn the attention of many other scholars. One of them is Margaret Canovan, one of the most well-known Arendt scholars, who indicates that Arendt often refers to *action* and speech simultaneously, (131) because Arendt sees that speech, just as *action*, discloses one's unique individuality among other men. Canovan explains that the two activities are concerned with the condition of human plurality: while speech particularly illuminates the distinctiveness of individual aspect of plurality, *action* is associated with one's appearance among the fellow men, i.e. beginning or natality.<sup>59</sup> She emphasizes that the features of *action* and speech overlap in interaction, which is "directed towards and related to other persons" (131) : "The disclosure of the "who" through speech, and the setting of a new beginning through *action*, always fall into an *already existing web* where their immediate consequences can be felt" (HC 184; emphasis added) In the context of interaction, speech is primarily an *action* that is *shared* with other men. At this point, Kristeva expands her argument: she suggests that the Arendtian concept of human life (as meaningful life of *bios*) is primarily something that is "revealed in the language of narration." (13)

The chief characteristic of this specifically human life, whose appearance and disappearance constitute worldly events, is that it is itself always full of events which ultimately can be told as a story, establish a biography; it is of this life,

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<sup>59</sup> The different sides of plurality that action and speech each reveal was also emphasized by d'Entreves (n.p.); Also see: Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: UP Chicago, 1958 p.178, 184

*bios* as distinguished from mere *zōē*, that Aristotle said that it ‘somehow is a kind of *praxis*’ (HC 98)

Kristeva argues that in the Arendtian understanding of human, what differentiates human beings from animals is the “possibility of narrating”—the possibility of the life which can be represented by language and shared with other fellow men. (7-8) To live as a human being, therefore, Kristeva contends that one’s life should be conducted in a form of narration, quoting Arendt thus: “only *action* as narration, and narration as *action*, can fulfill life in terms of what is ‘specifically human’ about it” (HC 8) Further, whereas a narrative simply emphasizes the aspects of sharing, the narrated life is elaborated in a form of *mimēsis*, or storytelling—“an ‘imitation of *action*’ through ‘plot.’” (HC 21) In this way, the narrative, transformed into a story, can be inscribed in history: “One immortalizes one’s self by becoming a ‘who’ that acts within political space, thus giving rise only to a memorable narrative.” (HC 20-21)

Arendt shows appreciation of the functions of literature and art; because art and literature is not only the representation of the event itself but also a reification of the ‘full significance’ of an actor. Such fixed form of *action* can be seen as immortalization which allows the event to be shared not only among other men living in the same time (in horizontal community) but also among the future generations (vertical community).

The specific content as well as the general meaning of *action* and speech may take various forms of reification in art works which glorify a deed or an

accomplishment and, by transformation and condensation, show some extraordinary event in its full significance. However, the specific revelatory quality of *action* and speech, the implicit manifestation of the agent and speaker, is so indissolubly tied to the living flux of acting and speaking that it can be represented and "reified" only through a kind of repetition, the imitation or mimesis...(HC 248)

Further, suggesting that Arendt compares the role of a storyteller<sup>60</sup> to that of a historian, Kristeva extends the linkage between life and narrative to politics. A well-plotted narrative, as a work of art, acquires immortality by the remembrance of the political community which allows it to overcome the limitedness of time and space, and finally become a historical event ("historical narrative, the life of the *polis*.") (Kristeva 8)

These two functions—recollection of past sufferings and ‘natality’ of self to the political space—surprisingly resonate with the two inspirational quotes that Arendt provides at the very beginning of her chapter on *action* :

“All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them” —Isak Dinesen.

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<sup>60</sup> In the text Arendt refer to the greek poets; and suggest Homer as the clearest example. (HC 259)

“... For in every action what is primarily intended by the doer, whether he acts from natural necessity or out of free will, is the disclosure of his own image.” —Dante.

Not only by escaping North Korea and its prison camps but also writing about the experience, North Korean refugee narrators establish their distinctive individualities. In other words, the narratives of Kang and Shin are not mere records of human rights deprivation in North Korea, but are also *action* by which they engage themselves with the community and become its meaningful members.

In such context of *action* in a form of narrative, the texts of Kang and Shin, as *writings*, double their significance. Not only as the records of their progress in re-acquirement and enforcement of his repressed political potentiality, as I have argued in the previous chapter, the writings of Kang and Shin consist the most significant form of *action*, i.e. “life represented by a narrative, and shared with other men.” (Kristeva 7)—and by representing their progress of such escapes through the texts, Kang and Shin earn recognition as a distinct personality among other men which is in the Arendtian understanding, a natality to a fully empowered life of *bios*, the man of *action*.



#### 4.4. Audience, Recognition and the Community of Remembrance

So far I have suggested that the life writings of North Korean refugees face various challenges on its truthfulness; and the process of defending against such challenges grants the texts its distinction among other genres of life writings, human rights literature and testimonies. Unlike other genres, North Korean refugee life writings are uniquely *bound* to prove their truthfulness, and as for its process, their writing itself shows anxiety, confusion and contradictions in narrating which further can be traced as multiple layers of intervening voices. However, I suggest, by going through such ‘pang of birth,’ North Korean refugee life writing become *action*, a progress of finding the refugees’ own voice through recollecting their life experiences.

Here, suggesting the notion of North Korean refugee life writings as *action*, I must point out that as it repeatedly emphasizes its condition of plurality, or ‘communicative interaction of human togetherness,’ the activity itself is not solely an act of the actor alone, but also of other members of the community who ‘recognize’ the *action* and the natality of the actor. Arendt, emphasizing the importance of recognition, explains that *action* is not enforced by the act of voicing by the actor, and that its full accomplishment results from the recognition of other members of community. d’Entrees, writing on the Arendtian notion of “*action*, narrative and remembrance” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, emphasizes that the role of the hearers of the community is what immortalize the *action* as story:

However, to be preserved, such narratives needed in turn an audience, that is, a community of hearers who became the transmitters of the deeds that had been immortalized. As Sheldon Wolin has aptly put it, “audience is a metaphor for the political community whose nature is to be a community of remembrance” (Wolin 97). In other words, behind the actor stands the storyteller, but behind the storyteller stands a community of memory. (n.p.)

The role of the recognizer, or the reader of the story is particularly emphasized in human rights literature, especially in testimonies that narrates the experience of atrocities. This is because, as many scholars have suggested, such testimonial writings naturally aim to urge their readers for action, which is hard to find in other genres. The narratives which function more than a memoir but as a witness to the human rights crises work in the interaction between the narrator and the reader to convince of its truthfulness. For the text aims for more than the representation of experience, it invites the readers to be moral agents (Eakin 14); as Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, giving a definition of “survivor narratives,” states: “Victims must be *remade* as survivors through *acts of speaking out*, telling their stories in ways that move beyond a concentration on personal feelings to testimony that *critiques larger cultural forces*.” (206; emphasis added) Further, Maaja Hollo, in her study on life writings of trauma, argues that the narratives will be examined for their truthfulness in the reader’s eye by meeting the expectations of the reader for the text to be understandable. She argues that the question of truthfulness in works of life writing should be a “matter of harmony between the author's intention and the reader's *perception*,” rather than be trapped in the question of referentiality and fictiveness. (105)

As such, testimonial life writings create greater dynamics between readers and authors. Such dynamics appear more significant in North Korea life writings for its particular situation of challenging truthfulness and other voices.

Blain Harden, answering the question about the ethics of writing about something whose sources are unclear, says that when North Korea collapses, Shin's accounts will eventually be verified. It does not, however, mean one is exempted from the obligation to tell the truth simply because it is not available at the moment. This is, I believe, the ultimate aim of the truthfulness issue in the narratives of Kang and Shin: challenges their truthfulness to be verified—the truth discussion must be extended to reality, that is, the secrecy of the Regime and its ongoing human rights deprivations. Therefore, authors of testimonials are not just recorders but also survivors and escapees; from their status, the issue of truthfulness and also the challenge to veracity appears simultaneously.

In this context, a scene from the texts of Shin, where at the moment of escape from Camp 14, he crawls over the dead body of his companion on the electric fence, is especially significant. In *Sesangpakero naoda*, Shin, expressing regret at the death of his companion, Park, describes the incident: “Mr. Park *let* me escape first and died by the electric shock” (322; emphasis added) while in another part of the same book, he describes himself as “not deserved to life comfortable life” for “crawling over the man who saved my life, seeing him dying, for my own life's sake.” (preface 10) However, in other parts of his books, in Shin's description, neither Shin nor Park seem to have noticed what was happening at the frantic moment between escape and death. Besides Shin, nobody knows really happened. Such narrative can only be told by someone who successfully escaped, crawling over his dead, muted companion.

Intentionally or not, just like Shin, survivors are indebted to the sacrifice of others who failed, or those left behind, and they speak on *behalf* of them. As Shin confesses during his testimony, a survivor's narrative "is really private and sensitive," so he even want to "try to avoid talking about it as much as I can." (179)

It seems like a contradiction that he hesitates and even shows confusion in telling his stories, while he *is* willing to give his speech, recognizing that his story *must* be delivered in order to fulfill his moral duty.<sup>61</sup> Such anxiety challenges the truthfulness of his story, but at the same time it is an appeal to the readers to deliver his narrative from such challenges and thus complete his *action*. The following is Shin's closing words to his statement at the 25th session of Human Rights Council, which seems to resonate with the ultimate appeal of North Korean refugee life writings to the reader.

At this moment in North Korea, hundred thousands of political prisoners are waiting for their death ... *I do not have any power in my hand, so I like to ask this from you.* Please relieve my North Korean brothers and sisters from their predicaments. Thank you for your listening. (Shin n.p; emphasis added)

Indeed, power is brought about not only by the actor, but also by the audience, who commit themselves to remember what they hear and actually put them into practice. Recognizing the fact that *action* is accomplished by both the actor and

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<sup>61</sup> It can be observed in many other kinds of testimonial narratives and human rights literature that the speech of surviving witness is considered to be a story of hero, but at the same time it is a shame, guilt and pain for him or her self. For one, refer to: Nutkiewicz, Michael. "Shame, Guilt, and Anguish in Holocaust Survivor Testimony." *Oral History Review* 30.1 (2003): 1-22. Web.

the audience of the community, the Arendtian idea of natality could be revisited in the duality of the actor and the recognizer. Exalting natality by calling it “the miracle that saves the world,” Arendt suggests a verse from the Gospels as its “most glorious and most succinct expression”: “A child has been born to us.” (HC 257) Here I would like to remind another verse from the Gospels, which was spoken by the child from Arendt’s metaphor himself repeatedly in every significant moment of his *action*: “He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.”<sup>62</sup> His words resonate with the narratives of Kang and Shin: their speech as *action* has been taken, and they plea to those who “hath ears to hear” for their recognition—so the accomplishment of their *action* or natality of themselves can begin.

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<sup>62</sup>The expression is frequently used by Jesus and other Aram-speaking writers of Bible. See: Matthew 13:9,43 ;Mark 4:9, 23 and 8:18; Luke 14:35; Luke 9:44; Revelation 2. and 3; 13:9. On the expression, John Gill, the eighteenth century English theologian explains: “A way of speaking used by Christ, when anything serious, and of great importance, was delivered; and which required attention ... his words imply, that everyone had not spiritual ears and understandings, to hear and take in things of such an high nature, and excellent use ... such ought to attend to them, and, seriously weigh and consider the importance of them. The phrase is to be met with in Jewish writings, where it is thus expressed: "He that hears let him hear, and he that understandeth let him understand.” Refer to: Gill, John. "Exposition of the Old and New Testament." Exposition of the Entire Bible Index. Sacred Texts, n.d. Web. 22 Jan. 2015.

## 5. Conclusion

North Korean refugee life narratives, including the works by Kang, Chol-hwan and Shin, Dong-hyuk that are discussed in the previous chapters, constitute a distinctive genre which is both human rights literature and retrospective narrative. This thesis started as an attempt to challenge the common reception of such works as records of escape journey from the horror of totalitarian regime to the free world. Particular attention was then given to the political status of refugee writers, first as a refugee or a narrated self in and out of North Korea and its prison camps, and then as a narrator or an author who sometimes firmly claims his rights and sometimes seems to be exploited by other political agencies. In particular, I chose the narratives of Kang and Shin for their distinctive accounts of experiences in political camps, which, in my opinion, are the core symbol of the North Korean regime, as well as their significance in North Korean human rights activities. I also took it into account that Kang and Shin first wrote by themselves in Korean and later collaborated with Western writers and interpreters, which leads to the problem of multiple voices in their texts.

As I have shown in chapter one, which provides the theoretical background of my discussion, the general and commonsensical notion of human rights was developed in the wake of modernity and the merging between the two colliding concepts of natural rights of man and citizenship. This inherent discrepancy within the term frustrated its realization and subsequently failed to prevent mass atrocities in

history. Then, providing a brief overview of North Korea's official human rights theory, namely "'our style' of human rights," I suggested that some parts of the theory is actually in accordance with the modern and contemporary notion of human rights, even though the regime is still committing grave crimes against humanity that are no less in degree than those of its totalitarian predecessors in the past history. Hannah Arendt, accusing totalitarian states of violence, also commented on the limits of the modern notion of human rights. Albeit different in appearances, totalitarianism and the notion of human rights are actually alike in their understanding of human as 'collective beings,' overlooking the importance of individuality. As an alternative to the understanding of human rights, I have put forward Arendtian idea of *action*, which allows individuals to have their voice among others.

In chapter two, I provided analysis of Kang and Shin's works with the aim to show that the Arendtian understanding of human being as a distinctive individual can explain the twofold frustration of humanity that appears in the texts. First, I have shown that among many forms of injustice and repression in the totalitarian regime and the system of concentration camp, the fundamental repression of humanity was to deprive its inmates of *interaction* among themselves; yet, I also suggested the potentiality of interaction can stimulate and inspire one's further choice of solidarity and freedom. In later parts of the chapter, I followed the changes in the political status of Kang and Shin before and after their defection. Providing the examples of continued frustration and confusion in Kang and Shin's attempt to have their voice heard, I have demonstrated that, as Arendt suggests, the true realization of being human depends on one's conduct of *action*.

In chapter three, I focused on how Kang and Shin voice themselves within the texts. By extending the idea of *action* to include the act of telling a story, I argued that their very act of writing can be interpreted as *action*, a process of acquiring voicing their individuality among others. Following the threefold challenge of truthfulness that North Korean refugee writers face—political innocence, factual accuracy, and the subjectivity of the narrator—I examined how and why the given texts show anxiety, ambivalence and contradiction in their testimonies, thereby asserting that these writers are escaping not only from the totalitarian state, but also from the competing voices of democratic free world. On the basis of such characteristics of North Korean refugee narratives, I suggested that Kang and Shin's books constitute a distinctive genre of human rights literature by recording the narrator's progress of acquisition of his own voice in the form of storytelling; and thus the act writing itself becomes what Arendt referred to as *action*.

In sum, my thesis has shown that North Korean refugee narratives, such as the works of Kang and Shin, which at first seemed to be plain descriptions of human rights violation in North Korea that embrace uncritically the modern notion of human rights, actually problematize it by revealing that neither the totalitarian state nor the 'world of freedom' have seen its true realization. Kang and Shin's narratives in this sense correspond to the Arendtian notion of *action*, or an alternative to the understanding of human rights as I suggested— i.e. an individual with personality that acquires the meaningfulness of their existence amongst men by voicing—hence writing as righting. Therefore, it can be suggested that North Korea refugee life narratives, as a distinctive genre which shows unique features of underlying competing voices, add a new aspect to the human rights discourse, and, by doing so, contribute to



the promotion of human rights, as well as the field of interdisciplinary study of human rights, politics, and literature.

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## 국문초록

본 논문은 두 탈북자 강철환과 신동혁의 수기를 대상으로, 인권—즉 ‘인간(人)’으로서의 인문학적, 그리고 ‘권리(權)’로서의 정치적 독해를 통해 탈북난민 수기의 가치를 조명한다. 인권의 논의에는 한나 아렌트의 근대적 인권사상에 대한 비판과 인간의 근본 활동으로서의 행위(action) 개념을 그 이론적 토대로 삼는다. 본 논문은 강철환과 신동혁의 글쓰기가 담지하는 복잡성과 다성성에 주목하여, 이들의 수기가 드러내는 탈북난민자이자 서술된 대상으로서의 자아 및 저자 혹은 증언자임에도 때로 다른 정치적 힘에 포획된 것으로 보이는 다양한 목소리들을 추적한다.

목소리내기, 혹은 정치행위를 통한 개성적 인격의 현시를 진정 인간적인 것이라 하였던 아렌트적 관점에서 조명하여 볼 때, 강철환과 신동혁의 탈북 수기는 독재 전체주의 정권 하에서나 민주주의의 ‘자유세계’ 그 어디에서도 스스로의 목소리를 낼 수 없는 상황을 묘사함으로써 탈북난민의 수기는 “끔찍한 ‘지옥’으로부터의 탈주와 그로 인한 인권회복”의 단순한 이동서사라는 일반적인 이해에 저항한다. 나아가 본 논문은 탈북난민 수기가 회고록으로서의 장르적 위치에 더하여 폐쇄국가이자 정치 및 이념 논란으로부터 자유로울 수 없는 북한을 주제로 한다는 점에 있어, 자신의 진실성을 끊임없이 변론해야 한다는 특징을 가짐을 지적한다. 이때의 진실성 문제는 정치적 무관성, 증언의 사실성, 그리고 저자로서의 주체성의 세 가지 갈래를 통해 탐색 될 수 있다.

결론적으로 본고는 강철환과 신동혁의 탈북 수기는 평면적인 탈주 기억의 회고록에서 나아가 자신의 목소리 찾기/내기를 찾아가는 과정을 기록한다는

점, 또 이 서사 행위를 통해 자신의 정치적 존재로서의 개성을 드러낸다는 점에서 아렌트의 ‘행위’를 구성한다고 본다.

주요어: 탈북자, 인권, 아렌트, 행위, 수기, 강철환, 신동혁

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