Bridging Policy and Community: How Government and Locals Shaped Refugee Experiences in 1990s Korea and 1960s Hong Kong

Tam Ho Yau Yo Yo
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Abstract

Refugee issues are not only contemporary but have long historical roots. This essay highlights how local residents' attitudes shape refugee settlement through two historical case studies: Democratic People's Republic of Korea refugees in the Republic of Korea during the 1990s and People's Republic of China refugees in Hong Kong during the 1960s. Drawing on primary sources such as surveys, polls, and newspapers, the research examines how public opinion influenced both refugee integration and developing a sense of belonging.

Previous research suggests that when people are emotionally connected to refugees, they are usually more willing to help refugees (Cha 2021), and when refugees build a sense of belonging, they tend to settle down better (Madokoro 2016). This essay connects these ideas to demonstrate local attitudes were important in shaping refugee experiences. It also explores how public opinion interacted with government policies, revealing that integration was negotiated not only from above but also through everyday community responses.

Understanding these dynamics is particularly relevant today when public attitudes now amplified by social media play a powerful role in shaping refugee experiences worldwide. This research contributes to refugee studies by highlighting the importance of local communities and offers a new perspective on how refugee belonging emerges at the intersection of public opinion and policy.

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Introduction

“Independent? You think you’re Yu Gwan-sun (a Korean independence activist under Japanese colonial rule) or something? You’re from the North, so wave the North Korean flag then.” This was what Player 101, Deoksu, told Player 067, Saebyeok, in the first episode of Squid Game Season 1 (00:35:21) (Hwang 2021) when she told him that she is quitting his gang. Although the series is known for its violence, this line carries deeper meaning than simple aggression.

Figure 1:Saebyeok (person on the left), who worked for Deoksu (person on the right) before asked for independence. Taken from netflix.com. Accessed on August 26, 2025.

Figure 2: Deoksu then told Saebyeok to “wave the North Korean flag. Taken from netlix.com. Accessed on August 26, 2025.

The way that Deoksu talked to Saebyeok, who worked within his gang, demonstrates how South Koreans perceive “North Koreans” as different—an attitude the film captures precisely because it exists in reality.

In reality, many North Korean refugees face the same exclusion. This mirrors the broader experience of refugees worldwide who are often not fully accepted in host communities. In the United States, Gallup (2015) found that since 1939, an average of 57% of the public opposed admitting refugees. Looking at specific examples, during the Syrian Civil War, when many Syrians fled to the United States seeking refuge, 60% of respondents opposed admitting these refugees. Globally, Ipsos (2025) reports that 49% of online respondents support closing their borders entirely to refugees, while only 44% oppose such closures. Anti-refugee sentiment has become a phenomenon worth our attention at a time when the number of refugees is soaring higher than ever, with 1 in 67 people being refugees worldwide (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2025).

There are numerous questions concerning humanitarian missions. Many studies have examined the roles and effects of different stakeholders in refugee relief including governments, NGOs, refugees and even individuals in third countries. But how about citizens of host countries? Cha (2021) found that the way refugees are portrayed is crucial for gaining support. Back in the 1950s, American Donors were more likely to help if they were emotionally connected with the image of refugees in South Korea. At the same time, studies have explored how a sense of belonging affects refugees' integration into new societies. Madokoro (2016) has shown that a sense of belonging influenced Chinese refugees' integration and mental health. Early Chinese refugees saw themselves as temporary outsiders, which made them less willing to settle and improve their lives in Hong Kong.

Although scholars have linked host citizens' attitudes to refugees' sense of belonging, historical research on this relationship remains limited (Fraser and Murakami 2021). Building on this, I suggest that when citizens lack an emotional connection to refugees, they are less willing to accept them, thereby hindering refugees' ability to develop belonging.

In this essay, I examine the interplay between government policies and local attitudes in shaping refugee integration. While government policies are a factor influencing citizens' views of refugees, they are unlikely to generate genuine acceptance on their own. In other words, top-down approaches like providing direct aid are often insufficient to foster local willingness to accept refugees. Engaging communities through bottom-up policies is generally more effective in helping refugees gain acceptance.

To explore this idea, I use two case studies: the arrival of refugees from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea to the Republic of Korea in the 1990s (hereafter referred to as North Korea and South Korea for ease) and the arrival of refugees from the People's Republic of China (hereafter referred to as China) to Hong Kong in the 1960s.

For South Korea, I focus specifically on the years 1994 to 2000, covering the North Korean famine (1994–1998) and its aftermath. For Hong Kong, I focus on 1960 to 1967, which includes the period during and after the Great Leap Forward (1957–1961) but before the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). The two case-studies contain some similarities and differences. Both South Korea and Hong Kong experienced rapid economic growth during the Cold War, faced geopolitical pressures, and received large numbers of ethnically similar refugees. However, refugee flows differed in scale and difficulty: escape into Hong Kong was relatively easy, while entry into South Korea was highly restricted. In this essay, I use these two cases not to compare them directly but to show how locals responded to refugees in different contexts. Each case should be read individually as an illustration of broader processes of community response rather than as directly equivalent examples.

Another reason for choosing these two case studies relates to the practical feasibility of research. As a Hong Kong student, I had access to the HKU Libraries and other local collections. During a four-month exchange program at Yonsei University, I was also able to consult materials at the National Library of Korea and being in both places allowed me to gather a wider range of materials which shaped my choice of case studies.

Taken together, these two case studies remain valuable for understanding the historical context, which can help illuminate today's refugee challenges by showing how people's emotional connections and reactions shape the experiences of refugees like 067. I believe this

essay can contribute to a better understanding of refugee challenges and offer a fresh perspective on refugee relief.

South Korea and North Korea Refugees in the 1990s

After the Korean War (1950–53), South Korea and North Korea were divided into two countries, with South Korea becoming a capitalist regime and North Korea a communist one under the Cold War system. From that time on, although limited, a few people fled from the North to the South mainly due to political reasons from time to time. When North Korea's economy began to crumble in the 1970s, the number of refugees escaping to South Korea significantly increased, and it rose to a record high in the 1990s due to the North Korean famine (which resulted in between 2 million and 35 million deaths) that began in 1994 (김 [Kim], 기 [Ki], and 이 [Lee] 2021). Although the overall number of defectors was not large (below 500 people per year), the number of refugees nearly doubled each year from 1996 onward, according to the numbers currently disclosed by the South Korean government (이 [Lee] 2003).

Stepping into the soil of "freedom" that they had been seeking, many defectors found they were not welcomed as the "heroes who escaped communism" they had imagined. A question also arises: why would they think of themselves as "heroes who escaped communism"?

This could actually be traced back to the policies of the South Korean government. Hoping to gain support and funding from the capitalist bloc, and to justify its rule and suppress dissent more easily as a new government established after the Korean War, South Korea regularly used "nationalism" and "anti-communism" to justify its policies and mobilize its citizens: from promoting economic plans as patriotic duties (Seth 2010, 411), to rallying support for military and diplomatic actions through anti-Japanese rallies and dramatizing minor fishing disputes in the media (Brazinsky 2010, 1–12, 251–60). The general public was educated and grew up under this "nationalist sentiment."

Figure 3: A propaganda poster from South Korea written 조국의번영을 원하는 반공애국자 북한해방을 위하야 싸우는 그들을 지지하라! [Anti-communist patriots who want the prosperity of our homeland, support those who fight for the

liberation of North Korea!] Taken from https://www.fmkorea.com/index.php?document_srl=4242013128&cpage=2. Accessed on August 26, 2025.

This emphasis on anti-communism and nationalism led to defectors being politically framed by South Koreans and even by themselves as "people fleeing communism" rather than "people seeking a better life from poverty and hunger." They should have been treated like any other refugees seeking asylum without prejudice, given the hardships and trauma they had experienced (Lim et al., 2024). The public could have helped North Korean defectors integrate by showing empathy, respect, and support. They should have avoided discrimination, encouraged friendships, understood their past hardships, and included them in community life. These actions would have made it easier for them to feel they belonged and to adapt. (Yu, Eom, & Jeon, 2012), not just a tool of showing "anti-communism" and "nationalism". Instead, their presence often prompted comparisons between the two Koreas, reinforcing a sense of competition, and South Koreans subconsciously viewed defectors as not fully part of the same nation.

When not seen as part of the nation, North Koreans would easily feel alienated while living in South Korea. To explain this, I draw on surveys by 한국갤럽 [Gallup Korea] (1989), 한국윤리학회 [The Korean Association of Ethics] (1991), and 민족통일硏究院 [Institute for National Unification] (1995) to illustrate why North Koreans feel alienated in Korean society.

Gallup conducted the Gallup Poll for a New Unification Plan with 800 adult Seoul residents (20+), using multiple-choice questions on unification issues (e.g., preferred system, policy directions, military talks, U.S. troop withdrawal). While Gallup was a U.S.-based firm that could potentially have biases, its sampling method aimed to represent a broad cross-section of the population without favouring any particular viewpoint. In this survey, 54.5% of respondents preferred "우리나라 식 [our country's system]," while none favoured the North Korean model, suggesting many believed their system was superior. The Korean Association of Ethics surveyed 676 university students from Mokpo University and Chonnam National University on Korea's democratization, North Korea, and reunification. If reunified, 45.6% favoured a liberal democratic system, while 25.1% chose "any system other than socialism." The South Korean proposal for reunification received largely positive evaluations (54.7% "relatively good," 9.6% "very good"), whereas the North Korean proposal was less favourably rated (47.9% "not very good"), echoing Gallup Korea's findings. Moreover, the 1995 survey by 민족통일硏究院 [Institute for National Unification], a government-funded organization under Kim Young-sam's administration known for being pro-North Korea (KBS World 2015), included 1,500 adults. It showed that 59.6% viewed North Korea as 경계대상 [Country to be Watched] or 적대대상 [Hostile Country] when asked what North Korea is to South Korea. This marks a key divide: South Koreans, taught that the North Korean regime had malicious motives, generally viewed the North negatively, often as a competitor or even an enemy.

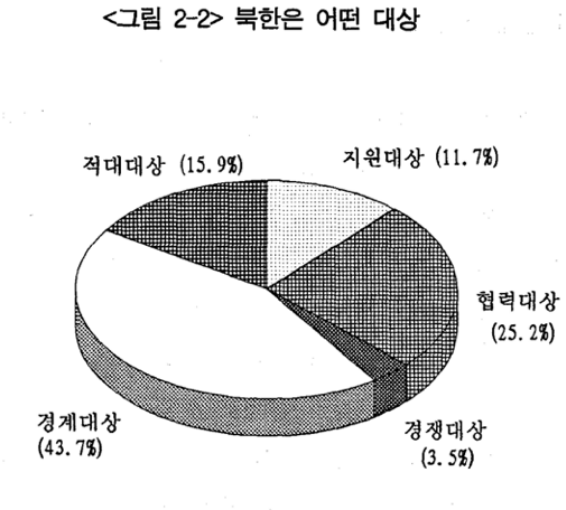

Figure 4:Figure showing when respondents are asked,"what is North Korea to South Korea". From left to right: country to be watched (43.7%), hostile country (15.9%), country to support (11.7%), country to collab with (25.2%), country to compete with (3.5%). Taken from 1995 年度 統一問題 國民與論調查結果 [Results of the 1995 National Public Opinion Survey on Unification Issues]. Accessed on August 26, 2025.

As with broader views toward North Korea, North Korean defectors were often seen as "inferior," like their "mother country" in real life. South Koreans considered them "cruel," as they "abandon family for their survival", like how they were often portrayed in government propaganda (they often say that they gave everything up in their hometown and came for freedom) (신 [Shin] 1999). They also considered North Korean defectors "lazy, incompetent, uncreative, and lacking initiative, civic spirit, and future preparedness," holding the stereotype that, despite receiving all kinds of aid from the South Korean government, defectors were still incapable of finding a good life in Korea while blaming the country for their hardship (평화문제연구소 [The Institute for Peace Affairs] 1999, 8–9).

These perceptions, as noted by defectors interviewed in 평화문제연구소 [The Institute for Peace Affairs] (1996), added to their sense of mystery and misunderstanding—but more importantly, hindered their integration. Many defectors, mostly in their 40s and 50s, struggled with English, new technologies, and cultural adjustment, which could be one of the reasons behind stereotypes of them being "stupid and lazy". Furthermore, according to 평화문제연구소 [The Institute for Peace Affairs] (1999), 62% of South Koreans believed it was the defectors' own fault if they couldn't adapt, reinforcing harmful stereotypes and fuelling a vicious cycle. Most respondents even saw North Korean defectors as untrustworthy, with 1 in 5 saying they couldn't accept them as friends or coworkers.

These perspectives toward North Korean defectors affected their ability to assimilate into South Korean society. A North Korean defector, Kim Ho, mentioned that he often faced prejudice and felt like an "outsider" in South Korean society and that he could never feel accepted as "one of them" (평화문제연구소 [The Institute for Peace Affairs] 1999). This lack of true inclusion also occurred in the workplace. South Koreans often saw North Korean defectors as not useful, but they did not want to push them out because of their special status and because of "political correctness." One North Korean defector shared that his employer once told him that 봉급을 줄테니까 나오지 말라달라 [they would pay him his salary, therefore that in return he should not go to work] (신 [Shin] 1999).

These perspectives of North Korean defectors also contributed to high unemployment rates among them, creating a vicious cycle, with over half reportedly unable to adjust well to South Korean society (李 [Lee] and 金 [Kim] 1996, 23). These “scary” and “uneducated” North Korean defectors were never the first choice of South Koreans to befriend or work with. These factors made North Koreans often feel isolated and unwelcome in society.

These fears worsened after the 1990s famine when concerns grew that a sudden North Korean collapse could bring 2 million defectors into the labour market (서 [Seo] 1997). These anxieties deepened public reluctance to offer support. In the end, while South Koreans may have felt sympathy and seen North Koreans as victims especially through via government propaganda, they often didn’t trust them. Such attitudes reinforced prejudice and made defectors’ lives even harder. They were only accepted in name, but not truly welcomed as fellow Koreans. They did not see them as part of the imagined nation, subtly distancing them by saying “they” instead of “us.”

Hong Kong and Chinese Refugees in the 1960s

Hong Kong was under British rule until 1997, while mainland China had been governed by the Communist Party of China since 1949. Migrants consistently arrived from mainland China throughout its history, but their numbers increased significantly after 1949 mainly due to instability resulting from the new government. During the Great Leap Forward (1957–63), 140,000 Chinese entered Hong Kong in 1962, with 80,000 entering illegally in a single month (The New York Times 1964). One might ask: how could people enter Hong Kong illegally so easily? To answer this, we can examine the attitude of the Hong Kong colonial government toward mainland China and refugees fleeing unstable political conditions.

Figure 5: Picture taken on May 1962 showing Chinese refugees queuing for water. Taken from https://www.gettyimages.com. Accessed on August 26, 2025.

Although Britain was the largest recipient of U.S. aid, the colonial government maintained a neutral stance in its diplomacy, particularly toward communist China. This neutrality allowed Hong Kong industry to flourish as the territory could trade freely with countries across different blocs. The colonial government reinforced this neutrality by suppressing clashes between Nationalists and Communists, avoiding conflict with both the U.S. and the PRC, and minimizing Cold War tensions in Hong Kong (Yeh 2021). It even permitted communist

activities, allowing the CCP to operate through front organizations such as the New China News Agency (NCNA) (Mark n.d.). Regarding refugees, the government was relatively lenient. Rather than expelling those who entered Hong Kong illegally, the police guided them to immigration authorities to register for a legal identity, where there was even a special counter for them. At times when numbers were high, the government even prioritized issuing identity cards to refugees over local residents (Zheng and Wong 2018, 1–150).

In parallel with government attitudes, locals were generally willing to help and accept incoming refugees as well. According to Yuen (2014, 39–78), whose study focuses on the development of the Frontier Closed Area, Ms. Yip, who lived near the Shenzhen River, recalled that once while she was helping her grandmother in the fields, a number of refugees came asking for food, and they eventually gave the refugees some tea leaves. Even the police encouraged them, saying, “Give them some; it’s so sad to see them starving.” Another interviewee, Mr. Yip, who served as the village leader and assisted the British with constructing iron mesh fences, often helped refugees. He said, “I gave bread to those defectors. When the Garden Bread truck (Garden Bread is a famous bread company in Hong Kong) came, I would take some bread, walk all the way up to the mountains, and hand it to the refugees.” Although Yuen does not make a specific argument about local attitudes toward refugees, these anecdotes show how villagers’ everyday lives and attitude at the border intersected with both refugee flows and the tightening of frontier controls.

Figure 6: Picture of Chinese refugees being given drinks to. Taken from https://hongkongfp.com/. Accessed on August 26, 2025.

There are other examples of local support in 1960s Hong Kong newspapers. Although they do not directly state that how many or how Hong Kong residents supported Mainland Chinese refugees, given their commercial nature of earning revenue through sales, they were likely to publish articles relatable to the public readership and would therefore likely reflect public opinion.

In Sing Tao Daily, the oldest existing Chinese-language newspaper in Hong Kong and widely read by local citizens since its founding in 1938, there were frequent articles about helping refugees. For example, in 1962, they published an article titled 百名難民寄語香港親友 [Messages from One Hundred Refugees to Their Friends and Family in Hong Kong] (Sing

Tao Daily 1962), showing the newspaper's support towards refugees. On the other hand, in 1966, there was an article written:

> 港九若干街坊會領袖，現正考慮向本港人民入境事務處與人事登記處進行一項請求：凡由中國大陸來港的人，包括非法入境而未獲有職業者，一律准予由各區街坊會出具證明書擔保，可向人事登記處辦理登記手續，不虞遭拘捕或遣回 [Some leaders of neighbourhood associations in Hong Kong and Kowloon are considering submitting a petition to the Immigration Department and the Registration of Persons Office: that all those coming from Mainland China, including illegal immigrants without employment, should be permitted to obtain a certificate of guarantee issued by their local neighbourhood association, with which they could complete registration procedures at the Registration Office, without fear of arrest or deportation] (Sing Tao Daily 1966).

This is significant because it shows that a number of Hong Kong residents were sympathetic towards refugees and even were willing to help newcomers they did not know personally, acting as guarantors and taking responsibility.

Another newspaper, Ming Pao, was founded by the famous writer Louis Cha. Although it started small, its sales skyrocketed after the 1962 influx of refugees. Many attributed this increase to Ming Pao's bold coverage of the refugee situation, especially in its editorial which displayed enthusiasm towards helping refugees. For instance, one was entitled: 既出生天，何忍將之驅回死地？[Now that they have come to the land of freedom, how could one cruelly cast them back into the land of death?] (Ming Pao 1962a) and one entitled 火速！救命！請立刻組織搶救隊上梧桐山 [Urgent! Help! Please immediately organize a rescue team to Wutong Mountain!] (Ming Pao 1962b)

既出生天，何忍將之驅回死地？

Figure 7: Editorial from Ming Pao (April 8, 1962) titled 既出生天，何忍將之驅回死地？[Now that they have come to the land of freedom, how could one cruelly cast them back into the land of death?]. Taken from https://www.facebook.com/vanishedarchives. Accessed on August 26, 2025.

Moreover, a search of newspaper archives in the Digital Collection of the Hong Kong Public Libraries show over 1,300 items related to “來港 [coming to Hong Kong]” and “難民 [refugee]” from the 1960s alone, suggesting a recurring pattern of local attention and support for refugees. Zheng and Wong (2018, 1–150) summarized local attitudes toward new arrivals, noting that 香港人對待身無長物的貧苦新移民，不但沒有表現出排斥和抗拒，反而大開中門 [Hong Kong people at the time did not show rejection or resistance toward impoverished new immigrants who had nothing to their name; instead, they opened their doors wide], and that it resembled 久別重逢的同胞兄弟 [long-separated brothers finally reunited]. This evidence suggests Hong Kong residents were very welcoming toward refugees, and such openness helped newcomers settle successfully in the city.

One key reason Hong Kong people were welcoming toward refugees was their enduring emotional attachment to China. Professor Stephen Hoadley’s *“Hong Kong is the Lifeboat”: Notes on Political Culture and Socialization* (written in 1970 when he was teaching at the Chinese University of Hong Kong) observed that despite long-term residence in the colony, many still regarded themselves as “foreigners,” which was reflected in the names of organizations that used 旅港 [living/traveling in Hong Kong] (Hoadley 1970). People also used terms like 同胞 [countryman], which frequently appeared in newspapers to describe incoming refugees. According to Ma (2007), most Hong Kong residents had relatives in mainland China and continued to maintain close ties by remitting money and sending daily necessities to their families, especially during difficult years. Identification with their hometowns also remained strong. Many deliberately preserved their dialects and taught their children the language of their place of origin.

A vague sense of belonging to Hong Kong began to emerge during the 1960s (Turner and Ngan 1995, 2–12, 80–91). Both the British and Chinese governments avoided fostering strong nationalist sentiments to preserve stability, leading to a process of “de-sinicization” that differentiated Hong Kong from Mainland China. A younger generation gradually shed their parents’ “refugee mentality,” embracing local identity and viewing Hong Kong as superior to China economically, culturally, and politically (Ma 2007). For instance, Hong Kong residents holding Hong Kong identity cards needed a Home Return Permit to visit mainland China. They were also closely monitored during their visit, which reinforced their sense of difference (Zheng and Wong 2018, 1–150). Expressions like telling others to “go back to Mainland China if you don’t like it here” (Hoadley 1970) and descriptions of China as “一窮二白、饑貧交迫 [utterly poor and blank, with hunger and poverty pressing hard]” (Zheng and Wong 2005) further underscored this emerging local identity. Refugees were often portrayed as needy. For instance, The Kung Sheung Daily News, one of the biggest Chinese-language newspapers in Hong Kong, once reported, “夜冷雨凄風 今晨邊境山頭發現不少病倒難胞 [After a night of cold rain and piercing wind, many sick and weakened refugees were found this morning on the border hills]”, calling attention to the situation of incoming mainland Chinese refugees (Kung Sheung Daily News 1962).

Figure 8: Kung Sheung Daily News (May 20, 1962) with headline 夜冷雨凄風 今晨邊境山頭發現不少病倒難胞 [After a night of cold rain and piercing wind, many sick and weakened refugees were found this morning on the border hills]. Taken from https://www.hkpl.gov.hk/en. Accessed on August 26, 2025.

This dual identity of being Chinese by origin but privileged in Hong Kong made locals more inclined to help refugees in severe situations. Hong Kong residents recognized their shared connections and moral responsibility. With local acceptance, refugees adapted relatively well, and by the 1970s many saw themselves as part of the “local” population while othering mainland Chinese as a monolithic collective of 'uncivilized masses' (Ma 2007). Ironically, some then opposed new arrivals from Mainland China, fuelling hostility toward incoming refugees – an area for further discussion beyond the scope of this essay.

Conclusion

When it comes to refugee settlement, government policies are important in shaping local residents’ attitudes. Yet it is often the response and attitude of local residents seems most important in shaping newcomers’ experiences.

In South Korea, although the government was inclined to help North Korean refugees, many locals viewed them negatively, which led to alienation. In Hong Kong, residents were more welcoming, often offering active help, which echoed the government’s stance and made it easier for newcomers to blend in. Taken together, these cases show that while government policies may provide physical aid, they cannot meet refugees’ emotional needs or guarantee long-term integration. It is the willingness of residents to accept newcomers that determines how well refugees settle down. As Cha (2021) notes, how refugees are portrayed directly affects people’s willingness to help, and when they are supported, they gain a sense of belonging. This echoes Madokoro’s (2016) argument that a sense of belonging leads to better livelihoods, as seen in Hong Kong. My study connects these insights by showing that local acceptance is as decisive as policy.

In today’s world, the role of local opinion is critical. With the rise of the internet and especially social media, perceptions spread quickly and shape refugee experiences on a large scale. This highlights the need to reconsider how online narratives influence attitudes whether in stories about Syrians or debates over borders. I hope that through this essay, the needs of

refugees like Saebyeok, whose name translates to “dawn,” will be better recognized, and that after dawn, they may finally experience their own sunrises.

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