

DAN CHUNG

CO-FOUNDER, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
CROSSING BORDERS



Dan Chung has spent more than twenty years on the front lines of the North Korean refugee crisis. Co-founder and executive director of Crossing Borders, a ministry that has worked in China since 2003 and South Korea since 2020, Dan has interviewed hundreds of North Korean refugees and is one of the foremost experts on their journey out of the world's most repressive country. His debut book, [*A Hard Freedom: The Dreams and Trauma of North Korean Refugees*](#) (Bloomsbury, June 2026), chronicles what he has witnessed and what he has learned about healing after unimaginable suffering. Dan holds an MA in journalism from the CUNY Graduate School of Journalism and covered inter-Korean politics and refugee issues for the Associated Press in Seoul. He lives outside of Chicago with his wife, Betty, and their three children, where he plays guitar and loves to cook for his family.

CREDENTIALS

- 20+ years serving North Korean refugees in China, South Korea and the U.S.
- Co-Founder and Executive Director, [Crossing Borders](#)
- Has personally interviewed hundreds of North Korean refugees
- Former Associated Press journalist, covering inter-Korean politics and refugee issues
- MA in Journalism — CUNY Graduate School of Journalism
- Among the foremost experts on the North Korean refugee crisis, with ties to organizations and scholars studying the Korean Peninsula

DOWNLOADS

- [Headshot](#)
- [Book cover image](#)
- [Advanced reader copy](#)

AVAILABILITY

- Central Time (Chicago)
- Unavailable Sunday mornings

EXPERTISE

- **North Korea:** What life is actually like inside the world's most closed country, beyond the politics and headlines
- **The refugee journey:** The Modern-Day Underground Railroad out of North Korea through China and Southeast Asia, and why it is so dangerous
- **Trauma and healing:** Why escape is not the end of suffering, and what real recovery looks like beyond the clutches of authoritarian control and trauma
- **Human trafficking:** How North Korean women and children are sold and exploited, and how they rebuild
- **Faith and resilience:** How people who have endured loss, tyranny and devastation have found community, meaning and peace
- **The humanitarian front line:** Two decades of lessons from costly, often unseen work

ONLINE



[Crossing Borders](#) is a Christian nonprofit that helps North Korean refugees and their children rebuild their lives. Founded in Illinois in 2003 by Mike Kim and Dan Chung,

Christians of Korean and Chinese descent who felt a burden for the North Korean people during a time of severe famine, the organization restores broken lives through physical care, emotional healing, and spiritual guidance in a safe community. Its work includes care for refugees hiding in China, support for orphaned children, and Elim House, a South Korean shelter for North Korean women recovering from trafficking and abuse. Crossing Borders openly shares the gospel with those it serves, but never requires faith as a condition of help.

- Originally operated in China for 17 years, supporting North Korean women hidden in forced marriages
- Programs include: Elim House (safe house for vulnerable North Korean women in South Korea ...named after the oasis of twelve springs and seventy palm trees where the Israelites camped after crossing the Red Sea (Exodus 15:27)); Elim Community (community-building, English classes, line dancing, social support)
- All royalties go directly to Crossing Borders
- Mission statement: To show the compassion of Christ to North Koreans and their children.

TO BOOK AN INTERVIEW, CONTACT:

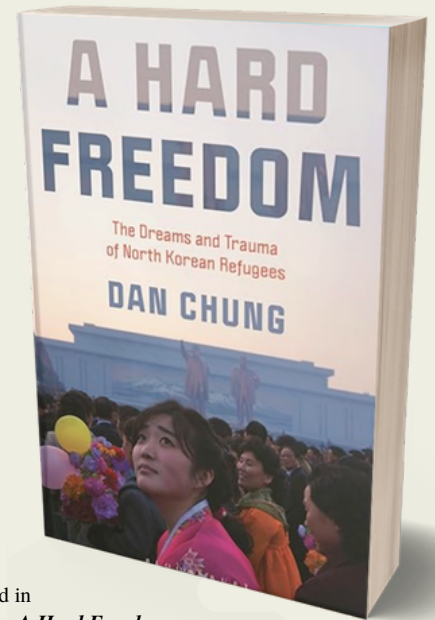
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ABOUT THE BOOK

- Release: June 25, 2026
- Publisher: Bloomsbury
- ISBN: 978-1538191729
- [Amazon link](#)



Over the past twenty years, 33,000 North Korean refugees have made it to South Korea — survived one of history's most brutal regimes, escaped through a 6,000-mile modern-day underground railroad across China and Southeast Asia, and arrived in a land of safety and plenty. And yet they are struggling. The trauma they carry out of North Korea does not stop at the border. *A Hard Freedom* tells the story most people never hear. Drawing on more than two decades of front-line work with Crossing Borders and dozens of personal accounts, Dan Chung bears witness to what actually happens after the escape: refugees who can't move on, can't turn off the memories of what they've survived and can't find rest, even when the danger is finally gone. It's an honest, unflinching account of the wounds that freedom alone cannot close — and of the slow, fragile work of rebuilding trust, identity and hope.

- Faith does not enter *A Hard Freedom* as an argument. It enters as something refugees encountered through community — often in the dark, often quietly, often because nothing else reached them.
- Mike Kim's *Escaping North Korea* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2008) — the predecessor book — was a Christian crossover hit. Dan's book is the sequel that answers the question Mike's book left open.

RELEVANCE, THEMES

- **Faithfulness over heroism.** The book is a portrait of what sustained faithfulness looks like: unglamorous, organizational, often administrative, filled with disappointments and betrayals.
- **The Gospel as the only thing that heals what geography and politics cannot.** North Korea destroys the self. Freedom of movement doesn't restore it. South Korea's system can't restore it. Money can't restore it. Dan has watched what does — community formed around faith, where people are seen and loved as human beings for the first time.
- **What it looks like when people told “the state is god” encounter the real God — freely, for the first time.** This is the heart of every conversion story in the book. These are not people who grew up with Christianity and wandered away. These are people who were told Kim Il Sung was divine, who lived under a regime that executed Christians, who crossed 6,000 miles of danger, and who in a cold apartment or a concrete farmhouse encountered something that the state could not manufacture or control.
- **The cost of Christian persecution.** The underground church in North Korea has an estimated 200,000 members — singing behind closed windows in the dark, watching their children sleep so they won't accidentally report them. Being caught as a Christian is a prison camp offense. Dan's own uncle was tortured and his family killed for being a pastor.
- **Meaning vs. survival.** Chapter 9 wrestles directly with Frankl, Ecclesiastes, and the question that every defector faces when the sprint toward survival finally ends: now what? Dan's answer is explicitly and honestly Christian. "Whether they are trapped in a communist dictatorship with no freedoms, in the bondage of forced marriage, or trapped in the bondage of debt and financial pressures in a capitalist country — our hope is, if they are willing, to point them to something greater."

SUGGESTED QUESTIONS

- Margaret — a woman with a permanently bent back from two years of slave labor in China — described the boy who sold her into trafficking as "God's helping hand." She said it near the end of her life, with a smile. How do you hold a faith like that without flinching?
- The underground church in North Korea is estimated at 200,000 members — singing hymns at night with the windows closed, children sent outside so they can't accidentally report their parents. What does that do to your experience of Sunday morning worship?
- Your uncle James was a pastor in Pyongyang after World War II who was tortured by communists — his wife and three children killed while soldiers searched for his whereabouts. You grew up in his pews for years without knowing any of it. When you finally learned his story, what did it do to you?
- One of the most striking moments in the book is Deborah — a woman who had trafficked other North Korean women — breaking down at a retreat and being immediately, instinctively embraced by the very women whose suffering she helped cause. What did that moment teach you about grace that twenty years of ministry hadn't already?
- You're honest that the faith you see in these women wasn't argued into them. It came through someone sitting with them in the dark, through a meal, through a community that showed up when nothing else did. What does that tell you about how the Gospel actually travels — and what it says about how the church in America goes about evangelism?
- Crossing Borders has a mission statement: "To show the compassion of Christ to North Koreans and their children." Twenty-plus years in — what has that cost you personally, in ways you didn't anticipate when you started?
- You describe the North Korean underground church — closed windows, children sleeping, neighbors who could report them at any moment. What do you think they understand about the Gospel that the comfortable Western church has largely lost?
- The book wrestles with Ecclesiastes — vanity of vanities, everything empty without God. Defectors reach South Korea, stop running for their lives, and then don't know what their life is for. Faith doesn't answer that question automatically. What does the answer actually look like in practice?
- You document North Koreans who arrived in South Korea carrying so much trauma they physically cannot identify it as trauma — it manifests as body pain, as numbness, as the inability to name what happened to them. Faith communities are often the first place they encounter someone who asks. What does the church need to understand about meeting people at that level of brokenness?
- You close the book urging readers to act "out of gratitude for all that you have." Not guilt. Not duty. Not compassion — gratitude. Why gratitude specifically? And why does it matter which motivation you start from?

STORIES INSIDE ...

The guitar with three strings (Introduction)

On a dark, cold night in rural China in 2009, Dan and a staff member walk in silence to a concrete apartment where a North Korean woman is hiding with her child. On the wall is a guitar with three strings. Dan tunes it badly and plays what he can. She starts to cry. Dan whispers Christian songs with her — quietly, because the neighbors can't hear. He didn't fully understand why she was crying until years later. The book is an attempt to understand what was happening in that room.

The hymn that crossed the Iron Curtain (Chapter 2)

At a Sunday service at Elim House in South Korea, the hymn "Fill My Cup, Lord" is sung. A North Korean defector named Heidi immediately recognizes it — her grandfather used to sing it in North Korea when he was drunk. The hymn was written by a minister in Coral Gables, Florida in 1959, after North Korea had sealed itself from the world. Somehow it broke through the information fortress onto Heidi's grandfather's lips. Dan is left with unanswerable questions: was he a member of the underground church? Was he sneaking a Christian message to his granddaughter? "We'll never know. What we do know is that this song broke through the impenetrable information fortress of North Korea."

Dan's uncle — tortured by communists, family killed (Chapter 2)

Dan's uncle, James In Kyu Baik, was a pastor in Pyongyang after World War II. When communists took power, they began eliminating pastors. His uncle was tortured — hands tied, forced to kneel on sharp stones with firewood pressed behind his knees, subjected to water torture, eventually thrown into a river and held under. His wife and three children were killed while soldiers searched for his whereabouts. He somehow survived, escaped to the South, and eventually became one of Chicago's first Korean-speaking pastors. Dan grew up in his uncle's pews for years without knowing any of this. "Little did I know that I would later devote my life to helping people like him, refugees from North Korea."

Missionary Yoo and the underground church (Chapter 2)

Mike Kim's book describes an elderly Korean-Chinese woman leading a network of 116 Christian families inside North Korea. She meets with them at night, teaches them the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and hymns. "We sing late at night. We gather with one or two other people and sing very quietly. When we sing or pray we have to make sure the kids are sleeping, or if we meet during the day we send them outside. When we sing, we close all the windows." The underground church in North Korea is believed to number 200,000 members.

Belinda and the bridge (Chapter 5)

On the Modern-Day Underground Railroad, running through the dark toward a bridge connecting China and Laos, a woman in the group stops the other eight refugees and says: "I believe in Jesus. We have to pray." Belinda had never heard those words before. She didn't know who God was. But she followed. All nine people prayed together in the dark. Then they ran. "We couldn't see anything. It was dark, and I could only see the person in front of us." They made it across.



Eunice's letter from Hanawon (Chapter 5)

Eunice was a North Korean teenager hidden by Frank and Sunny (an older American couple serving with Crossing Borders) in their apartment in China for months, then smuggled through a Korean art gallery into the South Korean embassy in Beijing. She waited three years inside the embassy before China allowed her to fly to South Korea. Upon her release into Hanawon, she wrote Frank and Sunny a letter that includes: "I matured a lot in the Beijing Embassy. I was there for the longest time; it was such suffering, but I overcame it with patience and faith. My faith grew so much... I am not afraid as I am a believer."

Margaret — the woman who chose to see eternity (Chapter 3)

Margaret's back was permanently bent from slave labor on a pig farm in China, her torso at 90 degrees from her legs. When Dan first met her, she greeted him with a permanent bow. She had watched her children die of starvation in North Korea. She had been sold, enslaved, and abused. In China, she found a church supported by Crossing Borders and converted to faith. She described Jesus as "a man who didn't look to take from her but gave himself for her." She gave every dollar Crossing Borders sent her to the church. She became a maternal figure to over 100 refugees across China — calling them, listening, mediating conflicts. When she died in 2018, she had no legal existence in China. "She repeatedly told us this belief lifted her gaze from her circumstances to eternal hope. Though her life was void of good options, she chose to look upon something greater, something eternal." The boy who sold her into trafficking, she said near the end of her life, had been "God's helping hand."

Cathy on the bridge (Chapter 9)

The first resident of Elim House, South Korea, was found by police on a bridge above the Han River, about to jump. She was homeless, broke, and had sold her last possession — her phone. Frank and Sunny fed her dinner, held her hands, and prayed before the meal. She began to cry. It was the first time anyone other than her mother had served her food. "She was like a wet bird who had finally found shelter."



NORTH KOREA: DID YOU KNOW ... ?

Sourced from Dan Chung's twenty years of field research and documented in *A Hard Freedom*.

- North Korea operates a hereditary class system called Songbun — 51 subcategories, assigned at birth based on your ancestor's perceived loyalty to Kim Il Sung. It determines where you live, who you can marry, whether you eat, and what your children inherit. It is essentially permanent. Roughly 60–70% of all defectors come from the lowest "hostile" class.
- Between 2.5 and 3 million people died in the Great North Korean Famine of 1995–1998. The government told its people they were on the "Arduous March" — a patriotic test. Kim Jong Il simultaneously flew in pizza chefs from Italy, sushi chefs from Japan, and was the world's largest individual purchaser of Hennessy cognac.
- 72% of all North Korean defectors who have reached South Korea are women. Studies suggest that up to 80% of those who passed through China were trafficked and sold as forced brides to Chinese men — for prices ranging from \$120 to \$1,200, set by supply and demand.
- China has 33 million more men than women — a direct result of its One-Child Policy and sex-selective practices. This gender gap created the demand that fuels the trafficking of North Korean women.
- North Korean defectors in South Korea report suicidal thoughts at a rate of 15% — triple the rate of South Koreans generally. South Korea itself has the highest suicide rate in the OECD, roughly 2.4 times the average among member countries.
- Under Kim Jong Un's 2020 Reactionary Ideology and Culture Rejection Act, watching foreign media — including South Korean dramas — is punishable by death. In 2022, a teacher was arrested for teaching her students dance moves from a foreign video. Her students were arrested, too.
- North Korea's neighborhood watch system — the In-min-ban — divides citizens into groups of 20–40 households. Each group has at least one government informant. Citizens can be visited by monitors at any hour, day or night. All guests must be reported. Conversations in homes are recorded.
- North Korea's prison camps include cells specifically designed so inmates must crawl in and out like animals. One documented camp — Kyo-hwa-so No. 12 — was specifically retrofitted after 2008 to punish women caught trying to escape to China.
- An estimated 30,000 children have been born to North Korean mothers in China with no legal identity — no birth certificate, no citizenship, no access to education, healthcare or the economy.
- North Korean defectors arrive in South Korea and often don't recognize that what happened to them was wrong. They lack the language for it. One aid worker in West Africa found that women who had been raped didn't know the word for it because it was so universal. Dan draws the same parallel for North Korean defectors and their trauma.
- North Korea's SEK Studio has done animation work for *The Simpsons* and is rumored to have worked on *Pocahontas* and *The Lion King*.
- The underground railroad that helped tens of thousands of North Koreans escape to South Korea is now effectively dead. China's AI surveillance can identify people by their gait even when masked. The pandemic sealed North Korea's border completely. Researcher Andrew Natsios believes North Korea has been in its second famine since 2018 — but the world can't see it because no one can get in or out.
- North Korean troops are currently fighting in Ukraine. Dan's assessment, backed by famine researcher Andrew Natsios: Kim Jong Un made a food-for-troops deal with Putin — artillery shells and soldiers in exchange for grain.
- South Korea has the highest per-capita alcohol consumption of any country in the world, according to Euromonitor. South Koreans drink twice as much as the average Russian.
- 82% of North Korean defectors in South Korea report experiencing discrimination. North Koreans are trained from childhood to mask their accent — in grade school, South Korean children were once taught to call a hotline if they heard a North Korean accent, to report a possible spy.



On one of my last visits to China, my close friend Jack, who is a physician, came with me. We asked him to do basic medical checkups on North Korean refugees. I took notes as Jack took measurements such as height, weight, and date of birth. When one woman responded, I couldn't believe what I heard. We were born on the same day, about 200 miles apart. I was born in Seoul, and she was born in Chongjin, close to North Korea's border with China.

Our paths diverged from the day we were born. She was born into a totalitarian dictatorship, and my family emigrated to the United States when I was eight months old. I experienced a level of freedom that she could only dream of. In the 1990s, she endured the Great North Korean Famine, where up to three million of her fellow citizens are estimated to have perished from the effects of starvation. Meanwhile, I was in college, where the cafeterias gave us as much food as we wanted to eat. I often complained about dorm food. The famine drove her to China, where she was sold to the highest bidder.

I was able to make mistakes as an adult. I switched careers, lost jobs, went to graduate school, and eventually followed my passion and started working full-time for Crossing Borders in my mid-thirties. I was given the time and freedom for luck to find its way to me. Not her.

Two hundred miles was the difference between my life and hers. And these 200 miles ground me in the gratitude I feel every day for my life, family, and freedoms.

This is the heart of what I have learned in more than twenty years of this work. The refugees I have come to know did not stop carrying North Korea when they crossed a border. The journey out is only the beginning. What comes after — the slow work of rebuilding trust, identity, and hope — is the harder freedom.

It is also where I have watched people find healing that defies everything they have survived. That is the story I wanted to tell.

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