

Temporary Workers from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in Mongolia

Mitsuhiro Mimura (The Economic Research Institute for Northeast Asia)

Yuji Fukuhara (University of Shimane)

This presentation is based on fieldwork and interviews from 5 to 8 September 2017 in Ulan Bator, Mongolia. We went to construction sites and companies employing North Korean workers, and looked at the places of construction. We will report the contents of this fieldwork and discuss the significance of sending and receiving the North Korean workers from the viewpoint of Mongolia and DPRK relations.

Mongolia has a population of 3 million whereas the DPRK has 24 million. Although North Korea is very small, it has 8 times more population of Mongolia. Ulan Bator is the only large city in Mongolia and has a population of 1.5 million. Because the economy is growing, there is a lot of construction work.

In terms of history, Mongolia was established in 1924, and the DPRK was founded on 9 September 1948. After the USSR, the second country that established diplomatic relations with the DPRK was Mongolia in October 1948. During the Korean War, Mongolia supported North Korea together with the USSR and China, providing material support and horses. It also received many war orphans. From 1948 to 1989 was a honeymoon period for Mongolia-DPRK relations. North Korea had some flexibility about doing business with the USSR and China. Mongolia, on the other hand, was a landlocked country, located between the Soviet Union and China. Speaking bluntly, usually countries next to China don't like China. Of course, the countries next to Russia don't like Russia. Nevertheless, Mongolia chose to be a part of the Soviet Bloc, not China, and became a member of COMECON in 1962. The same year, North Korea withdrew from COMECON because of the bad relations between China and the Soviet Union. When the DPRK stepped back from the Soviet Union and China, Mongolia became a very good brother of the USSR.

There are differences on the attitude towards the big brothers. Nevertheless, North Korea and Mongolia had very good relations. Kim Il Sung visited Mongolia twice, and mutual visits of leaders, government parties and students were often made, and continuous cultural exchange was also performed. However, the honeymoon suddenly finished because of the democratization of Mongolia between the winter of 1989 to the spring of 1990. Mongolia introduced a multi-party system and abandoned the one-party dictatorship of the Mongolian People's Party which was the communist party. Mongolia decided to ask the Soviet Union to withdraw its army. Mongolia also started free trade that was monopolized by the state.

Mongolia recognized the Republic of Korea, the enemy of the DPRK, on 26 March 1990. This change happened in only six months. The DPRK then prohibited the entry of Mongolian citizens to North Korea with South Korean visas or an entry stamp of South Korea in their passport.

For Japanese citizens, it was permissible to go to South Korea and subsequently to enter North Korea. However, before Kim Dae-jung met Kim Jong-Il, those who had stayed more than three months in South Korea were prohibited from visiting North Korea. That is the reason why I (Mitsuhiro Mimura) didn't go to South Korea to study Korean. The two countries also maintained embassies.

In 1994 Mongolia started a new diplomatic policy. Mongolia expanded interactions and friendly relations with the former socialist communities and also with developing countries. The DPRK was included in developing countries. Mongolia established the Eastern Thought University, that taught the Juche ideas — not a philosophy, but anyway, a tool of governance of North Korea. North Koreans are happy to hear about foreigners learning Juche ideas. Whenever I go to North Korea, there is a lecture of Juche ideas for at least two hours. I have to pretend to listen very eagerly in order to have good relations with North Korean counterparts. The Mongol-Korea parliamentary group also visited the DPRK together with foreign ministers in 1997 and 1998. In the 1990s, therefore, the Mongolians tried to establish new relations not only with North Korea but also other countries in Asia.

As for more recent Mongolia-North Korea relations, in 2000 President Kim Dae-jung of South Korea visited Mongolia. The North Koreans were furious and temporarily closed their embassy in Ulaanbaatar. As well as providing a new embassy building, Mongolia also exempted North Koreans from a tax on foreign workers in an attempt to improve relations with the DPRK. This tax exemption remains and is one of the reasons why North Korean workers go to Mongolia. In August 2002, Paek Nam-sun, the DPRK Minister of Foreign Affairs, visited Mongolia, and revised the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation. In 2004 Mongolia signed an agreement with the DPRK to receive 10,000 North Korean workers. Many of these workers are employed on construction sites in and around Ulaanbaatar as the city expands.

Previously, more than 10,000 female workers were employed to engage in sewing at Gobi. Gobi was a state-owned enterprise that makes cashmere products and embroidery craftwork. Because the wages were relatively high, this was popular work. However, due to pressure by the United States, these workers were sent back to North Korea. As a result, currently most of the North Korean workers in Mongolia are male and working in construction.

How do North Korean workers come to Mongolia? Mongolian companies who want workers apply to one of about 60 larger companies. These larger companies communicate the job description and the number of workers required to the Ministry of Labor of Mongolia. If the documents are valid, the Ministry of Labor sends a request to their counterpart in North Korea. The DPRK Ministry of Labor then orders temporary staffing agencies in North Korea to recruit those workers to be sent to Mongolia. Some of the workers recruited are teachers, party officials and public servants in North Korea. Once the necessary number of workers have been recruited, the Ministry of Labor checks their identities to ensure each individual will be unlikely to defect. One reason for the mismatch of people sent, to work engaged in, is because of this identity checking. Real construction workers in North Korea are not always sent to construction sites in Mongolia. When selection is completed, a list of workers is sent to the Mongolian Embassy in Pyongyang. The Mongolian Embassy issues

visas and once the workers receive the notification that they are able to get a visa, they go to Mongolia. After arriving in Mongolia they receive training when necessary, and start to work.



Figure 1

Photographs of North Korean workers in Mongolia



Figure 2



Figure 3

What are the terms of a typical contract? From 2017, no workers over 50 years are allowed. The terms of contracts can vary significantly. They range from six months to one year to five years. Different contracts provide different conditions so some include travel expenses from North Korea to Mongolia or an allowance for clothing, food, and shelter. Some include response to accidents, health insurance and the possibility of temporary return home during the contract period. The wages also vary significantly. A sum of \$1000 is high-end.

For the Mongolian side, the merits of Korean workers are firstly acceptance of low wages, secondly willingness to engage in heavy labor, and thirdly obedience. North Korean workers do not go on strike and accidents can be overlooked. Also, because North Koreans are exempt from the foreign workers' tax the wages paid can be lower than for other nationalities such as the Chinese.

Problems include the mismatch between the needs of employers and the skills of workers. Also, some employers don't pay wages. Such treatment increases the complaints of North Korean workers. In addition, the workers are occasionally unfamiliar with the machines and tools they are provided with. In North Korea most machinery is that of the 1960s and 1970s while in Mongolia it is of the 21st century.

These photographs (Figure 1,2 and 3) show an apartment building under construction.

North Koreans are doing the work.

These photographs also show North Korean workers, this time in the service sector. This is the White Flower (Figure 4), one of two North Korean restaurants in Ulaanbaatar. The other is called the Pyongyang Restaurant (Figure 5). We were not allowed to take a photo of the workers working inside the restaurant. Chinese and North Korean workers often work together in construction and also on farms and at hospitals and restaurants. Female workers are usually working in restaurants and the light industry sector. In North Korea many of them are engineers, teachers, researchers and soldiers.



Figure 4



Figure 5

What is the significance of sending and receiving workers for Mongolian-DPRK relations? Mongolia has retained friendly terms with North Korea (despite there having been fluctuations) since the Cold War ended depending on the Mongolian-South Korean relations. In 2011, Mongolia's new foreign policy guidelines and the country's labor shortage meant there were 'pull' factors for North Korean workers. For North Korea, the chance to earn foreign currency is attractive. For individuals, going to Mongolia to work represents a chance to live outside of North Korea. Many Mongolians are critical of the regime of the DPRK, but rarely directly to the people in Ulaanbaatar. The flow of workers from the DPRK to Mongolia is accepted in terms of mutual cooperation. The DPRK government does not regard the treatment of its North Korean workers as exploitative. In return, the Mongolian government says nothing about North Korea's development of nuclear power and armaments. This complicates relations with Japan, South Korea, and the US.

[Iwashita] We Japanese, in particular, often think that North Korea has been isolated by other countries, but the fact is not so simple. We have five minutes remaining so I will take a couple of questions.

[Question] I am interested in China. There are also many North Korean workers in China. What similarities and differences do you see in the case of North Korean workers in China and Mongolia?

[Fukuhara] Well, in the Mongolian case, the Ministry of Labor of Mongolia and the Ministry of Labor in North Korea cooperate on selection. In the case of China, there is much less government to government cooperation. Also, most of the North Korean

workers in China are female and work in the service sector and in light industrial production.

[Question] Can you give us some information about how you found the people who you interviewed? Also, did you have someone watching you when you were doing interviews? Did you just go to the building site and say you want to talk to people?

[Fukuhara] One of the foreign students in the University of Shimane is Mongolian, and her sister is a politician in Mongolia, so she has a lot of connections. Using that kind of path, we tried to find the companies that employed North Korean workers.