

Sheena Chestnut Greitens, Politics of the North Korean Diaspora. Cambridge University Press, 2024. 102 pp. ISBN 9781009197281.

Anqi Gao & Adam Cathcart

University of Leeds

Published: 18 February 2026

In *Politics of the North Korean Diaspora*, Sheena Chestnut Greitens provides a nuanced analysis of the global dispersal and political engagement of North Korean émigrés, highlighting how the authoritarian nature of the North Korean regime shapes the experiences and oppositional activism of its diaspora. By using North Korea, “one of the most closed and repressive regimes in the contemporary world”, as a central case study, Greitens contributes to broader discussions on the management of diasporas and their political roles, making it an important text within both Korean diaspora studies and studies of authoritarianism.

Greitens highlights the differing patterns of North Korean asylum applications and resettlements across various countries. An early illustration Figure 2 (p. 6) visualises the global spread of North Korean refugees and asylum seekers from 1990 to 2020, with significant numbers resettling in countries such as the United States, Canada, Russia, Germany, Australia, France, and the United Kingdom, demonstrating the wide geographic dispersion of North Korean émigrés. This illustration helps set the stage for understanding the subsequent political dynamics within the North Korean diaspora. She also examines how contested citizenship affects North Korean émigrés, particularly in host countries where they may struggle to obtain refugee status due to their ambiguous legal standing. Despite being theoretically recognised as citizens of South Korea, they often experience discrimination in South Korea. This discussion underscores the limi-

tations of international resettlement policies, which further complicate their ability to fully engage in political activities.

Greitens offers a unique perspective, arguing that within authoritarian politics North Korean authorities view the diaspora as a potential threat to its security and employ various tactics to manage and undermine it, including extraterritorial repression, propaganda campaigns and transnational violence. For example, the North Korean government has held press conferences featuring defectors who returned to North Korea, where they publicly criticise the quality of life in South Korea. At the same time, Greitens highlights how the diaspora challenges the legitimacy of the regime by participating in human rights activities and raising awareness, even while facing significant pressure from the North Korean government. The narrative traces the shift from state-led emigrants to an increasingly oppositional diaspora that challenges the regime’s legitimacy. These dynamics shape the diaspora’s political behaviour, as many North Korean émigrés internalise democratic norms from host countries and maintain or develop a critical stance toward their homeland’s authoritarian rule. The personal stories and commitments of key diaspora members have shaped North Korean human rights advocacy in visible and specific ways.

Greitens notes that North Korea has actively worked to discredit the legitimacy of defectors, targeting well-known defectors such as Jeong Kwang-il and Shin Dong-hyuk. Shin Dong-hyuk’s story became

¹Blaine Harden, *Escape from Camp 14: One Man’s Remarkable Odyssey from North Korea to Freedom in the West* (New York: Viking, 2012), 7–9.

famous through Blaine Harden's *Escape from Camp 14*.¹ In 2015 Blaine Harden conceded factual errors in *Escape from Camp 14*.² Similarly, the book delves into the story of Yeonmi Park, a defector who has gained significant media attention. Greitens highlights their narratives as examples of North Korea's efforts to discredit defectors but is on firmer ground when it effectively incorporates empirical data, such as survey results, to show that North Korean émigrés in democratic countries often demonstrate high levels of civic engagement. For example, Table 3 on page 41, titled "Dimensions of citizenship among North Koreans in the United States," highlights their roles in advocacy and policy influence. Similarly, Table 4 on page 45, titled "Forms of political participation by North Koreans in the United States," outlines various ways they engage in political activities. These tables underscore the significant contribution of the North Korean diaspora to democratic processes in their host countries. Greitens's findings show that many North Korean émigrés actively engage in civic activities, demonstrating their ability to adapt and integrate into democratic societies, filling a critical gap in existing research. This reflects a shift from authoritarian suppression to democratic engagement, further highlighting the positive changes in their political identities. Such democratic engagement becomes even more pronounced when contrasted with the "contested citizenship" previously experienced by the North Korean diaspora.

In some cases, the survey sample size is relatively small, with only 52 respondents, this limitation is understandable given the challenges of accessing such a specific population. Additionally, the fact that most participants transited through other countries like China, Thailand, or South Korea before arriving in the U.S. complicates the interpretation of their responses, particularly in discussions about identity and political behaviour. Greitens's assertion that "many more North Koreans in the United States opt to cheer (solely) for the United States than (solely) for South

Korea" (as shown in Table 1) seems tenuous. Given that not all respondents had lived in South Korea, this claim may not fully capture the complexities of diasporic identity or the varying experiences of North Koreans based on their time spent in different countries. Furthermore, while Greitens attempts to "reconfirm the distinction between civic patriotism and ethnic nationalism," this conclusion feels somewhat overstated, particularly given the mean length of residence in the U.S. (7–8 years), and the fact that not all respondents had previously lived in South Korea. A more nuanced analysis could have offered a more thorough understanding of how the length of residence in the U.S. shapes the political behaviour of émigrés.

In the appendix on pages 64–65, the text does not explicitly clarify whether all respondents had obtained U.S. citizenship or permanent residency. It is reasonable to infer that many respondents likely had not yet acquired U.S. citizenship given their relatively short length of residence (7–8 years), as U.S. naturalization laws typically require permanent residents to have held their green card for at least five years before applying for citizenship. However, without explicit clarification on the legal status of respondents, the discussion around civic patriotism may raise questions. Readers might be led to question whether these respondents, many of whom may not yet be full citizens, can meaningfully express or engage in "civic patriotism" in a U.S. context. A deeper exploration of their legal status and how it shapes their political identity would strengthen the book's analysis.

If the survey results had distinguished between North Koreans who resettled in the U.S. as refugees under the 2004 North Korean Human Rights Act and those who previously lived in South Korea before moving to the U.S. for study or work, it would provide more meaningful insights. Upon receiving refugee status in the U.S., North Korean refugees are entitled to the same benefits as other refugees, including cash or material aid during the first 30–90 days after arrival,

²Will Sommer, "A North Korean Defector Captivated U.S. Media. Some Question Her Story." *Washington Post*, July 16, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/media/2023/07/16/yeonmi-park-conservative-defector-stories-questioned/>, accessed October 17, 2024.

³Jane Kim, "North Korean Human Rights and Refugee Resettlement in the United States: A Slow and Quiet Progress" (report, SAIS, Johns Hopkins University, 2008), 143–59.

amounting to around \$400.³ This amount is smaller compared to the resettlement benefits offered in South Korea. Likewise, to gain U.S. citizenship, refugees must reside in the U.S. for at least one year before they can apply for permanent residency (a green card). After receiving a green card, they must wait an additional five years before applying for citizenship.⁴ North Koreans who have resettled in South Korea and received benefits and South Korean citizenship cannot be designated as refugees if they later decide to move to the U.S. Since they are automatically naturalised as South Korean citizens, they cannot file for refugee status. Instead, they must apply for a visa, such as an F-1 (student), H-1B (employment), or B-1/B-2 (visitor) visa, to immigrate to the United States.⁵

Greitens's conclusion on page 59 "diasporic migration choices, perceptions of politics, and patterns of engagement in political action are all shaped by the nondemocratic nature of the North Korean homeland." While the role of the regime is indeed significant, based on the above discussion of resettlement policy the argument overlooks how other factors, such as international resettlement policies and transnational networks, influence the political activism of North Korean émigrés. The book underestimates the impact of these policies, which can either enable or limit diasporic action depending on the resources and opportunities available.

Nevertheless, Greitens's work makes an important contribution by detailing how the authoritarian nature of the North Korean homeland significantly shapes the diaspora's political perceptions and behaviours. This contribution is crucial for understanding both the challenges of the North Korean diaspora, particularly in their adaptation to democratic environments.

Greitens also mentions WeChat on page 60, suggesting its potential role in the diaspora could mirror that of Twitter during the Arab Spring. How-

ever, this connection is underexplored. Simply stating that WeChat is a platform from the PRC and popular among the Chinese diaspora does not adequately explain why it is relevant in the context of North Korean émigrés or authoritarian regimes. A more thorough analysis is needed to justify why WeChat, specifically, is highlighted over other platforms that could also serve as tools for communication or activism within authoritarian settings. Greitens attempts to link North Korean and Chinese authoritarianism through this platform, yet the argument would benefit from deeper exploration of how WeChat's unique features and restrictions align with North Korean diaspora dynamics. Understanding these connections could clarify its significance for both regimes and the broader implications for diaspora political engagement.

³David R. Hawk, with Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, *The Hidden Gulag: The Lives and Voices of Those Who Are Sent to the Mountains*, 2nd ed., U.S. Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, 2012, pp. 175; Adjustment of Status of Refugees, 8 U.S.C. § 1159(b).

⁴Eric Ryu, "Why the Number of North Korean Refugees in the United States Is So Low," *NKHIDDENGULAG* (blog), August 2021, <http://www.NKhiddengulag.org/1/post/2021/08/why-the-number-of-north-korean-refugees-in-the-united-states-is-so-low.html>, accessed July 18, 2025.