

Chen Fu, 26, looks like a 40-year-old, and unless you heard him talk, you wouldn't realize that that he's from North Korea, where he suffered malnutrition.

He came to China knowing that it would be easier to feed himself here and got a job at a restaurant in the city of Dandong, just over the border from North Korea.

Chen Fu isn't his real name, but that's how he is addressed in the restaurant where he works, because the owner doesn't want to draw attention to his North Korean employee.

Chen is his most diligent worker - he serves food from 10 a.m to midnight and earns 1,200 yuan a month and gets two daily meals and a dormitory bed.

"He does whatever he's told and doesn't complain," said Chen's boss, adding that the North Korean is also cheap and obedient.

The owner of one local trading company in Dandong said that "foreign workers" have been in the area for a long time.

They're used in hotels and on construction sites as well as in workshops making shoes, clothes, circuit boards, hotels and other labor works. There are agencies that connect the workers with firms and factories and their businesses have been booming.

There are limits to the number of North Korean workers who can work in China. Foreigners need a work visa to get legal employment in China and the only people with such visas tend to be qualified professionals, sailors and staff at multinational companies.

Beyond its border, North Korea only allows citizens work at national enterprises or institutions. Many of the workers can only get into China on study visas.

The textile industry in Pyongyang and other cities grew substantially after South and North Korea held a joint summit in June 2000 and trade restrictions were loosened, said an executive from a Dandong trading company.

However that commerce dried up after the sinking a South Korean warship, the Cheonan, in March 2010 and the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island in November that year.

Since then many North Korean workers have been made redundant, and the

textile firms that employed them have been trying to export workers to China, with the tacit consent of their government.

"You only [need to pay them] 1,300 yuan to 1,500 yuan a month, there's no need to consider anything else," said the Dandong trader.

Another Dandong businessman, Li Qiming (李启明), who runs a construction firm, said that he can slash the wage bill by a third if he hires North Korean workers on 100 yuan a day. He also says that they work at twice the speed of Chinese and don't haggle or take shortcuts.

At Li's construction site, the North Korean workers only really speak to the Chinese people when there is a celebration or they're drunk.

"As well as the normal cross-border trade, some of the trading companies are also involved in introducing illegal North Korean workers'," said Chen Fu's employer, the restaurant owner.

"There's a long border between China and North Korea...you can just swim across the river," he said, adding that people have turned a blind eye to the escapees, many of whom were feeling awful conditions.

The restaurant owner said that those trading companies that act as illegal employment agencies set a minimum monthly salary of 1,200 yuan for the North Koreans and that businesses also need pay a lump sum of 3,000 yuan to cover the agencies' expenses for transit, medical examinations, training and short-term accommodation.

Chen Fu lives not far from the restaurant where he works. Every day, when he goes to bed, he looks at a picture of Kim Il Sung that he brought with him from North Korea.

One of his colleagues, Liu Dali, said that every time people mention North Korea, Chen Fu walks away or says something in Korean.

Xu's restaurant was reported to the authorities last October for hiring illegal workers, but when the inspectors came, they didn't find any.

An official from the local labor department said that when the Bureau for Letters and Calls gets a public tip-off, they pass the details to the Human Resources Bureau. That office has to then join up with the public security department to investigate and expel any migrants who have entered China illegally.