



Kim Young-hwan, right, and three other activists detained in China for almost four months arrive in Incheon International Airport on July 20, 2012, upon being released by Chinese authorities. | Via JoongAng Ilbo

*Speculation about reformist twinges in North Korea notwithstanding, there can be little doubt that the DPRK has been making a series of what could be characterized as hard-line moves in and along its northern border area. The recent assertions that [Chinese territory is being used as a literal launching ground for acts of “political terrorism” against the DPRK](#) indicate that the trend toward vigilance is continuing. China’s reluctance to pick up on, much less amplify, Pyongyang’s recent media offensive on the subject of defectors and cross-border violence indicates that Beijing regards the matter with more than a bit of squeamishness, and does not wish to encourage spontaneous cross-border “preventative action” by North Korean border guards.*

*China and the DPRK appear to be united in the desire for order along the border, if not without areas of disagreement. China has been undertaking an ongoing crackdown on illegal activity in Yanbian, while expanding the public discussion of the problem in PRC media. [According to Asahi Shimbun](#), the question of North Korean troops on islands leased to China near the border city of Sinuiju has become another stumbling block to security cooperation in the border zone. A series of recent meetings took place between the Public Security officials on both sides. [Witness to Transformation](#) runs down some of the recent activity, but there is still much to document in the [“border security” category](#).*

*Brian Gleason, observing events from Seoul, deconstructs the case of one man whose treatment in captivity in Dandong dwells in an unpleasant recess in the façade of Sino-North Korean security cooperation. – Adam Cathcart, Editor-in-Chief*

## **Torture and "Public Security": Kim Young-hwan's Captivity and Sino-ROK Relations**

by Brian Gleason

North Korean human rights activist Kim Young-hwan was finally released on July 20 after 114 days in a Chinese prison, but emerging details of his incarceration and alleged torture have sparked a growing sense of outrage among many South Korean citizens and human rights advocates around the world.

Kim's promotion of democracy and human rights from the Chinese city of Dandong had clearly vexed the authorities in Beijing and Pyongyang, who may have been cooperating when they interrogated Kim and three other South Korean activists in the Chinese port /border city in Liaoning Province. Kim, however, was a complicated target, having once been a leading South Korean proponent of *juche* ideology, imprisoned and tortured in the ROK in the 1980s for his pro-North Korean proclivities.

In a twist of fate, Kim Young-hwan eventually turned against the North Korean regime; some believe this betrayal is one of the prime reasons that Kim was arrested and interrogated on the Sino-North Korean border. In order to fully understand the context of Kim's arrest, surreptitious detention and alleged torture, it is essential to first look back at his storied past to gain insight into the man who transformed from Kim Il Sung's disciple to ideological enemy.

**Kim Yong Hwan's Ideological Transformation** | In 1982, Kim Young-hwan entered Seoul National University's School of Law, where he spread North Korea's *juche* ideology among his fellow students. [NKnet provides a full summary](#) of his pro-North Korean activities, including his establishment of the Save the Nation Student Federation (구국학생연맹) in 1986, which was regarded as the "the first illegal *juche* faction" in the history of the South Korean student movement. Kim was imprisoned for two years due to his affiliation with the organization, but upon his release, he formed other pro-North organizations and remained determined to spread the *juche* ideology in South Korea. In 1991, Kim Young Hwan even traveled secretly to the North via submarine, where he established relationships with North Korean officials and twice met his ideological idol, Kim Il Sung.

Ironically, it was his meeting with Kim Il Sung that changed everything for Kim Young-hwan. [According to the New York Times](#): "The activist said he found a babbling, ignorant autocrat, not the fierce nationalist and former anti-imperialist guerrilla leader he had helped lionize. On his return home, he became a vocal opponent of North Korea."

Back in South Korea, Kim Young-hwan eventually met the original creator of the *juche* idea, [Hwang Jang Yop](#), who had defected to the South in 1997. The two became close, and in 1999 they started working together on a plan to restore the

“true juche” ideology that Kim Il Sung had distorted. Two years later, Kim Young Hwan became a key founder of the [Network for North Korean Democracy and Human Rights](#), whose mission is synonymous with its name.

**Arrest and Secretive Incarceration** | In his newfound capacity as promoter of North Korean human rights, Kim Young-hwan often traveled to the Sino-North Korean border to help North Korean refugees. Getting swept up into a larger national and regional crackdown in the PRC, Kim and three of his fellow South Korean colleagues were arrested in the large port city of Dalian on March 29 for “endangering national security.” [The Daily NK highlighted the strange circumstances](#) surrounding the group’s subsequent incarceration, including plausible North Korean involvement in the interrogation:

The actions of the Chinese authorities in the case to date serve to lend weight to the hypothesis of North Korean involvement. First, it is odd that while Kim was arrested in Dalian, instead of being questioned there or taken to provincial HQ in Shenyang, he was transferred across to Dandong on the Sino-North Korean border. That a foreign national arrested as a risk to national security would be taken to a small city on the margins of the province in question certainly looks suspicious, particularly when that city is one that is regularly visited by anti-espionage agents from North Korea’s National Security Agency or General Reconnaissance Bureau of the Ministry of the People’s Armed Forces.

While there is [DPRK Consulate in Shenyang](#) and North Korean agents could presumably travel there with ease if authorized, Kim’s detention in Dandong would appear to support the hypothesis that the activist was being held in the border city to facilitate Chinese security collaboration with North Korean colleagues with regard to his case.

Despite South Korean officials’ repeated demands for information about the charge of “endangering national security” – which can lead to the death penalty under the PRC’s stringently-worded legal code – the ROK efforts were repeatedly rebuffed. The South Korean government requested consular contact with Kim, but they were denied for a month before finally gaining access on April 26. The other three South Korean men detained along with Kim – namely Yoo Jae-gil, Kang Shin-sam, and Lee Sang-yong, all pictured above - purportedly waived their right to a meeting with the South Korean Consulate-General, this story is highly doubtful.[\[1\]](#)

Due to the combination of international publicity, Chinese secrecy surrounding the incarceration and interrogation of the men, and pressure from the South Korean government mounted, and the European Parliament eventually [drafted a resolution](#) on May 24 demanding Kim Young-hwan’s release and asking for other improvements in human rights in both PRC and DPRK.

**Ministerial-Level Attention** | Kim's case almost certainly came up at meetings between Meng Jianzhu and Korean counterparts and leaders:



ROK President Lee Myung-bak (Right) and Chinese State Councillor and Minister of Public Security Meng Jianzhu meet in Seoul to discuss, among other topics, Kim Young Hwan and other South Koreans in Chinese captivity. | Image via Xinhua.



Approximately 2 weeks later and a week after Kim Young Hwan released Meng Jianzhu (Right) meets with Ri Myong-su, DPRK Minister for Public Security in Beijing. | Via NK Leadership Watch

**Torture and Release** | In spite of the international attention, the Chinese authorities were apparently undeterred in their decision to torture Kim via electrocution and other undisclosed methods.<sup>[2]</sup> Although the Chinese authorities have denied the allegations of torture, Kim claims that his interrogators went so far as to play loud music while they tortured him to cover up the screams.

Ultimately as Kim tells it, the Chinese authorities released Kim on two conditions; that he must admit to violating Chinese law and promise to “never mention a thing about the cruel treatment” he received from state security. Kim firmly rejected both demands, stating that due to his study of Chinese law while

in prison, he was certain that neither he nor his colleagues had “endangered state security.” Now safely back home in South Korea, Kim is revealing his treatment in China to the world, drawing the ire of many South Koreans and other human rights activists.



Kim Young-hwan, center, faces the media at a July 25 press conference after his release; Saenuri Party lawmaker Ha Tae Kyung sits at his left | Image courtesy Daily NK

**Strained Sino-ROK Relations** | Despite China’s status as South Korea’s top trading partner, Sino-ROK relations are often fraught with controversy, and this case touched upon a number of raw nerves. Kim Young-hwan’s case highlights several aspects of the bilateral disputes, especially perceptions of China as a human rights violator and domineering neighbor that lacks the proper respect for South Korea.

By initially denying South Korea’s requests for consular access to the four men and then subsequently brushing aside allegations of torture, South Korean officials have been embarrassed and forced by a public outcry to [ask China for a reinvestigation](#) into the matter. Ha Tae-keung, a human rights activist and member of the South Korean National Assembly, noted that “China is treating a campaigner for democracy in North Korea as if he were one of its dissidents. I believe North Korea is behind this and that China is effectively acting on its behalf.” After [protests earlier this year](#) in front of the Chinese embassy regarding the repatriation of North Korean refugees, some South Korean editorials are now [demanding that China apologize](#) for torturing a South Korean citizen.

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**Preferred Citation:** Brian Gleason, "Torture and 'Public Security': Kim Young-hwan's Captivity and Sino-ROK Relations," *SinoNK.com*, August 1, 2012.

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[1] According to the Committee for the Release of North Korea Human Rights Activist Kim Young Hwan, which also fought for the release of the other three men, their rejection of consular contact was likely coerced.

[2] Kim has declined to elaborate on the other methods of torture, stating, "If I get into specifics, I think the North Korean human rights issue will get buried beneath the Chinese human rights issue, and I understand the diplomatic authorities have already raised the issue."