

## A Tale of Two Heavens: Escaping North Korea

**GRADE LEVEL:** 9-12

**TIME ALLOTMENT:** One to two 45-minute class periods

### OVERVIEW

In this lesson, students will learn about the conditions in authoritarian North Korea that have compelled many North Koreans to attempt a dangerous escape to what they see as the “Heaven” of capitalist South Korea. Also discussed is often-successful propaganda used by the North Korean government to convince its citizens that North Korea is in fact the real “Heaven.”

### LEARNING STANDARDS

#### New York State Standards

<http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/ciai/cores.html#SOCIALSTUDIES>

#### Standard 2: World History

Use a variety of intellectual skills to demonstrate their understanding of major ideas, eras, themes, developments, and turning points in world history and examine the broad sweep of history from a variety of perspectives.

- Key Idea 1: The study of world history requires an understanding of world cultures and civilizations, including an analysis of important ideas, social and cultural values, beliefs, and traditions. This study also examines the human condition and the connections and interactions of people across time and space and the ways different people view the same event or issue from a variety of perspectives.
- Key Idea 2: Establishing timeframes, exploring different periodizations, examining themes across time and within cultures, and focusing on important turning points in world history help organize the study of world cultures and civilizations.
- Key Idea 3: Study of the major social, political, cultural, and religious developments in world history involves learning about the important roles and contributions of individuals and groups.

### MEDIA RESOURCES

#### Video:

Selected clips from *Crossing Heaven’s Border*, an episode of the PBS documentary series *Wide Angle*

### **Worth the Risk?**

A glimpse of the human drama—and tragedy—which unfolds regularly on the Tumen river dividing North Korea and China.

### **Heaven on Earth**

The history of North Korean defection, which mainly dates from “The Great Famine” of the mid 1990s, when government mismanagement under “Dear Leader” Kim Jong Il resulted in 2 million starvation deaths.

### **Brainwashed**

A North Korean defector attempts to convince her younger sister to stay with her rather than return to North Korea.

### **Flight To Freedom**

A North Korean defector living illegally in China must leave her son behind to attempt an escape to South Korea with a forged passport.

### **Web:**

#### **“The Escape Route”**

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/wideangle/episodes/crossing-heavens-border/map-a-circuitous-escape-route-from-north-to-south-korea/5020/>

An annotated map from PBS’s *Wide Angle* website tracing the circuitous route taken by many North Korean defectors to South Korea.

#### **“Helping North Korean Defectors”**

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/wideangle/episodes/crossing-heavens-border/helping-north-korean-defectors/5051/>

A list from PBS’s *Wide Angle* website of several organizations that work to support human rights for North Korean citizens and refugees like those featured in *Crossing Heaven’s Border*.

### **OBJECTIVES**

Students will be able to:

- Summarize the conditions in authoritarian North Korea that have led to large-scale attempted defection.
- Summarize the appeal of South Korea’s capitalist democracy to the defectors.
- Understand the power of a government tightly controlled media apparatus to “brainwash” its citizens.
- Describe the nature and necessity of the circuitous escape route taken by most North Korean defectors to South Korea.

### **PREP FOR TEACHERS**

Although this lesson does not strictly require them, five internet-enabled computers are optimal for the completion (as written) of step #8 in the Learning Activities and the Culminating Activity.

### **LEARNING ACTIVITIES**

1. Ask students if they can think of any heavily guarded national borders, either today or throughout history. (*Answers will vary, but may include the Great Wall of China, the Berlin Wall, the U.S./Mexico border, and the demilitarized zone—or “DMZ”—between North and South Korea; ensure that the latter is mentioned.*) For every example given, ask students if they think the border is (or was) guarded to keep people in, or to keep people out. (*Answers will vary.*) Frame *Worth The Risk?* by telling students that they will now be taking a look at a lesser-known Korean border—that which lies between North Korea and China. Provide a focus for students by asking them what risks North Koreans run by attempting to cross this border? Play *Worth The Risk?*
2. Follow up the clip by reviewing the focus question: what risks do North Koreans run by attempting to cross this border? (*Imprisonment, potentially torture, and possibly even execution.*) Ask the class what a person is called when they “illegally” attempt to leave their own country. (*A defector.*) Frame the next clip by explaining that it describes much of what motivates defectors to try and escape from North Korea despite the risks. Provide a focus by asking students what these motivations are. Play *Heaven on Earth*.
3. Follow up the clip by reviewing the focus question: what are some of the motivations for North Korean defectors? (*The Great Famine, which killed up to 1 million people; economic collapse in the early 1990s and subsequent poverty; Kim Jong Il’s repressive secret police; lack of hope.*) Ask students what the twin meanings of “Heaven” are to North Koreans? (*Official propaganda maintains that North Korea is itself “Heaven on Earth,” while defectors see the political freedom and material wealth of South Korea and the rest of the “First World” as the Heaven they aspire to reach.*) Ask students if they imagine that North Korean propaganda is effective among North Koreans. If so, why? (*Accept all answers.*)
4. Frame the next clip, “Brainwashed,” by explaining that many North Koreans do in fact believe the official propaganda because North Korea is a closed society; Kim Jong Il and his authoritarian secret police do not allow access to any outside media, let alone travel to other countries, so most North Koreans only know what they’re told by the government. Provide a focus by asking students what the North Korean education system teaches its students. Play *Brainwashed*. Pause

the clip at 00:46, after the Korean journalist says “They teach that the ‘Dear Leader’ is the best, and that North Korea is the strongest and most independent country in the world.”

5. Follow up the clip by reviewing the focus question: what does the North Korean education system teach its students? (*That the “Dear Leader” is the best, and that North Korea is the strongest and most independent country in the world.*) What does the South Korean journalist call this type of teaching? (*“Brainwashing.”*) Frame the remainder of the clip by explaining that it features two sisters: Park Gum Suk, who has already defected to China, and her younger sister Park Un Suk, who has been smuggled out to join her sister. Provide a focus by asking students how Park Gum Suk tries to convince her sister to leave North Korea for good, and how Un Suk responds. Play the clip through to the end.

6. Follow up the clip by reviewing the focus question: how does Park Kum Suk try to convince her sister to leave North Korea for good, and how does Un Suk respond? (*Kum Suk explains that millions have died in North Korea because of “General” Kim Jong Il’s policies, but Un Suk replies that people only died because “they didn’t work hard enough,” and insists that her sister’s criticism of the socialist North in general—and of “The General” in particular—are based on capitalist propaganda.*) Ask students if they can imagine themselves so successfully brainwashed? (*Accept all answers.*)

7. Explain that, like Park Kum Suk, almost all North Korean defectors attempt to escape across North Korea’s northern border into China. Ask students why they think defectors wouldn’t try to cross directly into the “Heaven” of South Korea? (*Because that border—also known as the “DMZ,” or “demilitarized zone”—is in fact heavily militarized on both sides, and has been a carefully monitored potential geopolitical flashpoint ever since the 1953 ceasefire which ended the Korean Conflict; technically, North and South Korea remain at war!*)

8. Divide the class into five groups and have each group log onto “The Escape Route” website (at <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/wideangle/episodes/crossing-heavens-border/map-a-circuitous-escape-route-from-north-to-south-korea/5020/>) and assign each group one location marker in the sequence. After allowing each group a minute or two to read their location’s annotation, have each group give a brief report about the role their assigned location plays in the circuitous route taken by most defectors from North to South Korea.

9. Frame the next clip, “Flight to Freedom,” by explaining that it depicts an attempt by Gum Hee—a North Korean defector currently living in China—to skip the difficult overland journey and fly directly to South Korea by using a forged Chinese passport. She is planning to leave her son Bo Song behind and have him

smuggled out later—assuming she isn't caught herself. Provide a focus for students by asking them what particular fear Gum Hee has as she passes through the Chinese immigration control. Play Flight to Freedom.

10. Follow up the clip by reviewing the focus question: what particular fear does Gum Hee have as she passes through Chinese immigration control? (*That her accent will give her away as Korean rather than Chinese.*) Based upon what they learned from “The Escape Route” website, what might Gum Hee’s fate had been if her true identity had been discovered by the Chinese immigration authorities? (*As an illegal immigrant, she would probably have been “repatriated” to North Korea, where she would have faced imprisonment or worse.*) Ask students if they can imagine themselves taking such a risk, especially with the fate of their own child hanging in the balance? (*Accept all answers.*) What does this say about life in North Korea or as an illegal North Korean refugee in China? (*Accept all answers.*)

### **CULMINATING ACTIVITY**

1. Have students reform their five groups and have each group log on to the “Helping North Korean Defectors” website (at <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/wideangle/episodes/crossing-heavens-border/helping-north-korean-defectors/5051/>). Assign each group one of the five organizations listed to research, explaining that after 20-30 minutes they will be expected to make a brief presentation to the class about their assigned organization and the ways in which it is attempting to help North Korean refugees.
2. After all groups have made their presentations, have the class as a whole vote on which organization they feel offers the best opportunity for the students themselves to help North Korean refugees.
3. Either as homework or as an in-class activity, have the class follow through and actually undertake what they decided was the best course of action to help North Korean refugees. (*Note that options range from raising awareness in their own community to writing letters to the Korean and/or United States governments.*)