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CHAPTER 1: PROFILE

Introduction
Virtually all of the nearly 25 million citizens living in the isolated nation of North Korea are ethnic Koreans who share a common background, culture, and language.¹ Their nation-state came into existence after the victorious World War II Allies divided the Korean Peninsula approximately in half at the 38th parallel, ending 1,000 years of territorial integrity. The 1945 division was intended to be temporary. However, it remains one of the most heavily militarized boundaries in the world.²

The partitioning of the country North Koreans refer to as Chosun and South Koreans call Hanguk created two mutually hostile states, the Soviet-backed Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) in the North and the U.S.-backed Republic of Korea (ROK) in the South, in competition for recognition as the sole legitimate representative of the Korean people.³ The split had more than political implications. The North has a plentiful resource base including 200 different types of minerals.⁴ The agricultural South traditionally served as the peninsula’s breadbasket.⁵ At the time of partition, the North was wealthier.⁶ Through the 1960s, the DPRK was more industrialized than the ROK and claimed a higher per capita income as well.⁷ Now it is routinely described as one of the poorest nations in the world, while the ROK may supplant Japan as Asia’s second largest economy.⁸

Area
Located in eastern Asia, North Korea occupies the northern section (approximately 55%) of a peninsula that extends south

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between two seas. The Sea of Japan (East Sea) borders North Korea’s eastern shore and the Yellow Sea (West Sea) its western shore. South Korea lies immediately to the south of North Korea; their border is 238 km (148 mi) in length. On its northern side, North Korea shares a border with China (1,416 km / 880 mi), and on its far northeastern side, it shares a short border with Russia (17.5 km / 11 mi).10

Geographic Regions and Topographic Features

North Korea consists mainly of mountains and highland areas, divided by narrow valleys. Lowland plains are found on the western side of the country. On the eastern side, a narrow coastal plain fringes the steep mountains that drop toward the shoreline.11

The Kaema Highlands, called the roof of the Korean Peninsula, extend across the northeastern part of the country, with an average elevation of 1,000 m (3,281 ft).12 Mount Paektu, with an elevation of 2,744 m (9,003 ft), is the highest mountain on the peninsula.13 Lake Chon-ji (Heaven Lake) lies inside its volcanic crater.14 The mountain, which straddles the border with China, is venerated as the ancestral home of all Koreans.15 According to legend not widely accepted outside North Korea, Kim Jong Il was born in a camp on Mount Paektu in the 1930s where his father was fighting the Japanese.16 Prior to his death in late 2011, the evening news bulletin broadcast into every home began with an emotional ballad detailing the leader’s mythical qualities; making reference to his birthplace. In the words of a scholar, “[t]his kind of flowery language…does reflect a uniquely North Korea[n] understanding of the connection between territory and race.”17

Forming a steep slope from the eastern side of the highland plateau downward to the Sea of Japan (East Sea), the Hamgyong Mountains run in a north–south direction. Referred to as the Korean Alps, they are the highest mountain range in the Korean Peninsula, and Mount Kwanmo

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is their highest peak, at 2,540 m (8,333 ft). At the southern end of the Hamgyong Mountains, the Nangnim Mountains also extend north to south. Dividing the country between east and west, they are the largest mountain range in the central-north part of North Korea. Farther to the west lie the Kangnam Mountains, near the border with China. Extending from north to southwest, they are structurally linked to the Nangnim Mountains. Large plains and valleys formed by rivers lie between the Kangnam (Diamond) Mountains and other smaller ranges in the west, and lowland plains stretch through the western side of the country.

In southeastern North Korea, the Taebaek Mountains stretch 500 km (300 mi) along the eastern coast into South Korea. The highest peak in this range is Mount Kumgang, at 1,638 m (5,374 ft) elevation. Since ancient times, this mountain has been famed for being one of East Asia’s most picturesque landscapes. The area surrounding it includes pillars of eroded stone, a variety of trees, and waterfalls flowing into ponds. Over 100 Buddhist temples dot the landscape.

Climate

Cold, dry winters and hot, humid—often rainy—summers characterize North Korea’s continental climate. Over half the precipitation throughout the country occurs in the summer (June September), when total annual rainfall is approximately 1,000 mm (39.4 in). Average temperatures in North Korea generally decrease the further north one goes, although elevation and proximity to the coast are modifying influences to this trend. Higher elevation locations also see greater extremes between daily highs and lows. Because of ocean currents and the mountain ranges that hug North Korea’s eastern coast, winter temperatures there tend to be some 3º to 4ºC (5º to 7ºF) warmer than North Korea’s western coast. At Pyongyang, located in the southwestern part of the country, the average temperature in July is 29°C (84°F) but in January falls to an average of -13°C (8°F).

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Rivers

Amnok (Yalu) River

At approximately 800 km (500 mi) in length, the Amnok River (Yalu River) is the longest river in North Korea. Beginning from its headwaters at Mount Paektu, the river flows in a general southwesterly direction along much of North Korea’s border with China, the northeastern region of Manchuria. It empties into Korea Bay, an arm of the Yellow Sea on the west coast. The river has three main tributaries in North Korea and is navigable by small craft for 678 km (421 mi). Since the 1950s, silting has greatly increased, and large ships have much more difficulty traveling upstream from the mouth of the river. From November through February, the river is covered with ice and closed to shipping.

Tumen River

North Korea’s second longest river (521 km / 324 mi) is the Tumen River. It is navigable for only approximately 81 km (50 mi). Like the Amnok, it begins at Mount Paektu, but it flows in a northerly direction, tracing the country’s northern border with China. It then turns to the southeast and follows North Korea’s northeastern border with both China and Russia before it empties into the East Sea (Sea of Japan). The Tumen River flows through mining districts as well as mountainous regions covered with heavy forests. Iron is mined near Musan, and coal along the middle stretch of the river. Sites with mineral resources are located farther downstream, and near the mouth of the river, a railway line connects the North Korean town of Unggi to Kraskino, Russia.

Taedong River

At 397 km (247 mi), the Taedong is North Korea’s third-longest river. It has a navigable length of 245 km (152 mi). The Taedong River begins in the Nangnim Mountains of central North Korea and flows toward the southwest. It passes through Pyongyang and discharges into a long, narrow inlet of West Korea Bay, the Yellow Sea that lies to the west of North Korea.

Korea’s western border.  

**Major Cities**

** Pyongyang **

Pyongyang, which literally means “flat land,” lies on the banks of the Taedong River, approximately 48 km (30 mi) to the west off the Yellow Sea. Although Pyongyang’s recorded history begins when a Chinese trading colony formed in 108 BCE, according to legend it is one of the nation’s oldest cities, founded in 1122 BCE. 

Pyongyang has a tumultuous past, synonymous with much of the nation’s history. Invading Chinese forces overran the city in 668 CE. In 1592, it came under Japanese control, and in the 17th century it was destroyed by the Manchus. Out of this, a suspicion of foreigners took root among Koreans. Still, foreigners were allowed entry in the 16th century. By the 19th century, Pyongyang had become a base for intensive proselytizing by Western Protestant missionaries. The city saw renewed destruction in the Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895), but when Japan occupied Korea (1910–1945), Pyongyang was reinvigorated as a center of industry. Although virtually destroyed during the Korean War (1950–1953), the city was gradually rebuilt with aid from both China and the Soviet Union. The skyline is dominated by buildings that are either functional residential and workplace complexes or monumental architectural testaments to the regime like the Juche Tower that rises over the city.

The national capital, Pyongyang is also the DPRK’s largest city, its economic and cultural center and transportation hub. It is the entry point of most international visitors, who are invariably struck by the nation’s isolation. Yet residence rights are a privilege reserved for those considered most loyal to the regime. They enjoy a standard of living not found elsewhere in the country. North Koreans refer to their capital as a “city within a park.” The three largest parks account for one quarter of Pyongyang’s total area.

** Hamhung-Hungnam **

Hamhung, near the coast of the Sea of Japan, was northeastern Korea’s administrative and commercial center from 1392 to 1910. In 1928, with the construction of a fertilizer plant at the seaport city of nearby Hungnam, Hamhung began to develop into an industrial center. 

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37 “City Planning.” [http://www.macalester.edu/courses/geog261/tkreit/cityplanning.html](http://www.macalester.edu/courses/geog261/tkreit/cityplanning.html)
construction of hydroelectric plants on nearby rivers also contributed to Hamhung’s development. During the Korean War, U.S. bombing raids destroyed much of the city’s industrial infrastructure. After the war it was rebuilt. In addition, Hamhung added light industry to its industrial capacity.  

**Kaesong**

Kaesong is located close to the South Korean border, just south of the 38th parallel. Seoul, South Korea, lies approximately 70 km (45 mi) to the southeast. For over 400 years (935–1392), Kaesong was the capital of Koryo, the unified kingdom of the Korean Peninsula. Formerly named Songdo (City of Pine), Kaesong is one of Korea’s oldest cities and was constructed as a castle fortification, surrounded by a stone wall with gated entries. Since ancient times, it has been a source of “red” ginseng, a medicinal herb, which remains a sought after variety today. During the Korean War, communist forces overran Kaesong, and the first truce negotiations took place here in 1951. Some researchers estimate the city lost approximately 40% of its population during the war. In the case of families who were split, and those who chose not to flee bore the stigma of having kin viewed by the regime as traitors.

**Nampo**

Only 50 km (31 mi) southwest of Pyongyang, Nampo is located at the mouth of the Taedong River. Historically little more than a fishing village, in 1897 it began to open to foreign trade and is now the nation’s main seaport. Although the harbor is frozen in wintertime, ships as large as 20,000 tons can use the port when the water is free of ice. Nampo has transportation connections to the nation’s interior by means of railway and by shipping up the Taedong River. It has an industrial base that includes shipbuilding, production of glass and electrodes, and refining of gold and copper. The city also markets shellfish and other marine products, and high quality apples are grown on the land that surrounds the city.

**Chongjin**

Located in northeastern North Korea along the coast of the Sea of Japan (East Sea), under Japanese colonial rule (1910-1945) Chongjin was developed as an iron and steel production center. After the establishment of the DPRK, the city’s strategic location and transportation links to both the Soviet Union and China helped ensured its strategic importance. The industrial base was expanded to include shipbuilding, synthetic textiles and chemicals. Residents describe the city’s economic

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decline in the 1990s as more devastating than the Korean War. It is unclear how many of those industries have resumed production or are able to pay worker salaries.

**Imperial History and Colonization**

*Ancient History*

Around 4000 BCE, the Neolithic period, archaeologists have documented that people from what are now China, Mongolia, and Russia migrated to the Korean Peninsula. All Koreans trace their ancestry to a semi-divine emperor called Tangun who descended from Mount Paektu in 2333 BCE to build a palace near Pyongyang and founded the kingdom of ancient Korea.

Following the demise of this early kingdom, various independent states ruled parts of the peninsula for centuries. In 918, the Koryo Dynasty was established. Profound social and cultural changes followed, including the introduction of a civil service examination system which led to the creation of a scholar-gentry class (yangban) that dominated the aristocracy. The Koryo gave way to the Chosun Dynasty in 1392.

In 1894, the Chosun rulers confronted an internal uprising against official corruption known as the Donghak Rebellion. They sought Chinese assistance to subdue the rebels. The Japanese took advantage of the moment and sent their forces into Korea, vanquishing both the Donghak rebels and the Chinese troops. Meanwhile, Russia was also attempting to expand into the region, precipitating the Russo-Japanese War in 1904. Japan won, the first Asian power to defeat a European army in modern times. In 1910, Korea was annexed into the Japanese empire.

*The Origins of Korean Nationalism*

Under colonial rule, the use of Korean was banned and Japanese was made the official language. Koreans were expected to profess allegiance to the Japanese emperor and adopt Japanese cultural norms like worshipping at Shinto shrines. They were required to take Japanese surnames as well. To serve Japanese needs, traditional subsistence agriculture was reorganized into cash crop production. Harvests increased, though Korean consumption decreased. When the global depression hit in 1929, the price of rice dropped dramatically. This left many Korean farmers hopelessly in debt. Several million were forced to seek off-farm employment in factories in

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Japan and across the peninsula.\(^{49}\) In 1931, Japan created a puppet state in Manchuria, present-day northeast China, and Koreans went to work there as well.

The Tangun legend allowed the Korean people to maintain a claim to being a distinct race and strengthened their resolve to resist colonial efforts to make them Japanese.\(^{50}\) Inspired by the Russian Revolution of 1917 and similar action in China on behalf of the working class and peasant class, Korean nationalism grew stronger in the face of colonial rule. In the 1920s, the Koreans established a multitude of underground communist organizations to resist the Japanese. Guerrilla groups carrying out attacks on the Japanese came to include Soviet or Chinese communists who were also fighting the Japanese. It was during this time that the Korean fighter Kim Song Ju, later renamed Kim Il Sung, based in Manchuria gained a reputation as a guerrilla fighter with notable leadership skills.\(^{51}\)

**Democratic People’s Republic of Korea**

*Division of Korea*

After the Japanese were defeated in 1945, the Soviet Union occupied the northern half of the peninsula, secured the border at the 38th parallel, and set about creating social and political administrative structures similar to their own.\(^{52}\) Amongst the local population, they found a number of candidates for leadership, including a leftist Presbyterian deacon. Instead, they chose 33-year old Kim Il Sung, who had returned home by Soviet ship a month after the war ended. The scion of a Christian family that settled in Manchuria, he had spent 20 years away from the peninsula and no longer spoke Korean like a native.\(^{53}\) He reportedly rehearsed his initial speeches in front of Soviet advisors. This was part of Moscow’s exhaustive grooming process to prepare him for civilian leadership.\(^{54}\) On 9 September 1948, when the DPRK was formally founded, Kim Il Sung was declared premier. The following year the Korean Workers’ Party (KWP) was established by merging other organizations into a single communist party.


Kim, who was elected chairman, would make skillful use of the KWP to eliminate rivals for power.55

The Korean War

Border clashes and fighting along the 38th parallel followed almost immediately after establishment of the DPRK, which followed the founding of the southern ROK by one month. On 25 June 1950, war broke out when North Korea invaded South Korea in a surprise attack. The socialist system set up by the Soviets enabled Pyongyang to efficiently identify and call up all eligible men for military service.56 The Soviet Union provided supplies, armaments, and counsel to North Korea. China also joined the North Korean effort. The UN and 16 member nations, including the US which had withdrawn its forces a year earlier, fought on behalf of South Korea under the UN Command (UNC). The conflict assumed a see-saw configuration, with the armies of each side traversing nearly the entire length of the peninsula. Authority over Seoul changed hands four times.57 After three bloody years, on 27 July 1953, the North Koreans, the Chinese People’s Volunteers, and the UN Command signed an armistice. The war resulted in a stalemate. Korea remains divided into North and South at the 38th parallel.

The war did nothing to diminish Kim Il Sung’s standing despite the fact it left his country in tatters. However, very few North Koreans were aware that their army had attacked the South, thereby precipitating a conflict in which Koreans killed Koreans. Instead, they were led to believe the North had been attacked by southern soldiers as part of an imperialist orchestrated plot. The North Korean People’s Army, which Kim helped to set up, had heroically beaten back the enemy.

The Kim Family Dynasty

Kim II Sung

After the war, Kim II Sung’s authority was solidified through the creation of a personality cult of such unprecedented proportions that it troubled others in the communist bloc, since it crowded out Marx and Lenin.58 To sustain the myths surrounding his leadership, Kim ordered all references to Soviet support, which had been critical to his rise to the top, excised from the public record.59 In 1955, he unveiled the concept of juche (independent self-reliance). Referred to as the nation’s guiding ideology in North Korea, juche established Kim II

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Sung as a *suryong*, or monarch, destined to unite Korea and lead its people toward a bright socialist future.  

Initially, the industrial economy performed well under central planning and Kim made frequent factory visits. Despite the government’s claims to self-reliance, the Soviets continued to provide critical material and technical support. In 1972, as South Korea’s economic growth was challenging North Korea’s state-socialist model, the DPRK switched to a presidential system enshrined in a new constitution. Kim Il Sung became president, a position that afforded him absolute authority over the KWP, the government and the military. This was consistent with *suryong* leadership. Though he failed to reunify the two Koreas by the time of his death in 1994, Kim Il Sung remains a revered figure in North Korea. In 1998, four years after his death, the office of president was eliminated in the DPRK. Kim Il Sung was posthumously declared “eternal president of the republic.”

*Kim Jong Il*

Kim Jong Il was officially designated his father’s successor in 1980. When he came to power in 1994, he inherited an economy that was essentially on life support. Shortages and inefficiencies characteristic of planned economies were already evident in the 1980s. Lacking the funds to import new technology, the DPRK’s infrastructure fell into disrepair and its machinery became obsolete. The abrupt withdrawal of coal, steel and subsidized oil imports after the Soviet Union was disbanded in 1991 coupled with natural disasters made a bad situation

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considerably worse.68 Per capita income plummeted from USD 2,460 in 1991 to USD 719 by 1995.69 A looming food shortage developed into a full-blown famine within a few years.

In response, Kim Jong Il declared North Koreans were undergoing an endurance test that he called the Arduous March, borrowing the name used to describe the efforts of Kim Il Sung and his guerrilla fighters against the Japanese in the late 1930s. By appropriating the name, Kim Jong Il linked the current period of hardship to the earlier revolutionary one.70 The message was clear: He expected the people to make the same sacrifices his father’s generation did. Complaints would be interpreted as disloyalty. By the end of the 1990s, the worst of the famine was over. Estimates put the death toll at anywhere from 600,000 to three million people.71 Others fled. Of the thousands that cross into China every year, some 24,000 citizens of the DPRK have successfully secured refuge in South Korea.72

Kim Jong Un

In December 2011, Kim Jong Il died. According to the local media, it was not only the North Korean people who mourned his passing; a crane circled a statue of Kim Il Sung before landing on a nearby tree to hang its head in sorrow.73 Swiss-educated Kim Jong Un, now referred to as Supreme Leader, succeeded his father, who was given the posthumous title of KWP “eternal general secretary.”74

Though he had little preparation for assuming leadership of the country, Kim Jong Un’s striking resemblance to his grandfather, whose 100th birth anniversary involved several months of commemoration in North Korea early in 2012, appears to have aided his transition. Like his grandfather, he frequently makes public addresses, something his reclusive father never did.75 He has turned up at entertainment venues with his fashionably dressed wife, unprecedented

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behavior for a North Korean leader. Yet in April 2012 he referred to the DPRK as the “Kim Il Sung nation,” indicating he does not intend to dismantle the cult of personality created by his grandfather. One visitor saw a triptych of Kim family tributes, observing the middle panel, devoted to Kim Il Sung, was the largest. He explained, “[t]hat is just a visual way of showing the message, which is that the whole country’s legitimacy rests on the Kim Il Sung myth.” It remains to be seen whether Kim Jong Un can perpetuate the political system he inherited. Analysts, however, have continually predicted the imminent demise of the DPRK. The fact they have been repeatedly proven wrong reflects the difficulty of understanding a people governed by a regime that has skillfully exploited Korean cultural norms to remain in power.

**Government**

North Korea dropped Marxism-Leninism from its constitution in the 1990s. Nonetheless, its governance system is similar to other state socialist countries where power emanates from a political party to which the administrative apparatus is subordinate. Mass campaigns are launched through the KWP, which is symbolized by a Leninst hammer and sickle, representing workers and farmers, that flank a traditional Korean writing brush representing intellectuals, in this context technocrats, a three-group alliance. Under Kim Jong II, the military assumed a more important role in national affairs, reflected in his “military first” (songun chongchi) reorientation, that is presumed to have come at the KWP’s expense. The names of military figures were listed before top party officials in rankings and public events. The current chief of state is his son, Kim Jong Un, appears to be restoring the KWP as the center of political gravity. Approximately 12-14% of the populace are KWP members. A popularly elected 687-member Supreme People’s


Assembly (SPA) only meets once or twice a year and some years not at all. The head of the SPA is the titular head of state and represents North Korea in foreign relations.

### Media

While North Koreans generally read communal newspapers, personal radio and television ownership is the norm. Traditionally procured through a state distribution system, these devices can only be tuned to official programming. Paper seals are placed over the buttons to alert authorities to tampering. Defectors have detailed harrowing unannounced visits from security officials to make sure the seal had not been damaged, which would indicate someone tried to listen or watch unapproved programming. There are two state-run television channels that broadcast intermittently during the day, with a third on weekends that shows old Chinese movies. North Koreans can now buy radios and television sets on the free market that have been retrofitted to allow for adjustable tuning. DVD players, initially smuggled in from China, are now manufactured locally. Department stores in Pyongyang stock LCD TVs and USB drives. Surveys suggest that as many as 50% of those who cross the border have watched unapproved entertainment and 25% listened to foreign broadcasts before leaving North Korea. In another development, the Associated Press (AP) opened a bureau in Pyongyang in January 2012, giving foreign journalists and photographers regular access to the country.

### Telecommunications

Most of North Korea’s 1.1 million landline phones are for official use. By contrast, cell phones are largely for personal use. Residents of areas close to the Chinese border are able to contact people outside the country with prepaid account phones smuggled in from China, though this is illegal. Despite the high cost for domestic cellular service and complicated application procedures and payment process, there are now over 1 million subscribers to the North Korean 3G mobile phone network called Koryolink that covers Pyongyang and a few other areas. So great is the demand that a black market has developed where middlemen supply phones

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registered in other people’s names. For those unable to secure a real phone, fake ones are reportedly available in the market that can be carried around for show. Koryolink operates with technology provided by an Egyptian company that has negotiated exclusive rights to the market until 2015. Users are not able to retreat into a private world; Rodong Sinmun, mouthpiece of the KWP, sends out daily texts of approved news to subscribers. While ordinary citizens do not have access to the internet, the DPRK has a domestic equivalent, known as the intranet (kwangmyong). It includes a search engine, news groups, and an email program that operates with Red Star, North Korea’s homegrown alternative to Windows.

Foreign tourists were long required to either deposit their mobile devices at the airport or place them in a pouch that could not be opened until they left the DPRK. In early 2013, the regulations changed. International visitors can now hold on to their phones while in country and even purchase a Koryolink SIM card to make international calls, including to the US. They cannot, however, connect to any Korean subscriber.

Economy

Contradictory trends best characterize the North Korean economy today, where annual per capita income stood at USD 1,241 at the end of 2011. There are reports of localized and potentially widespread hunger nearly every year in various parts of the countryside. At the same time, Pyongyang is undergoing a building boom and private automobile ownership is evident. Repeat visitors report that residents of the capital are increasingly fashionably dressed. Once an informal economy emerged and, over time, supplanted the rationing distribution system that privileged officialdom, it became important to have access to cash. Civil servants and law

enforcement officers accept and, in many cases, actively solicit bribes.\(^{103}\) North Korea now ranks as the second most corrupt nation in the world, after Somalia.\(^{104}\) This represents a vicious circle. To gain access to scarce goods or essential services, North Koreans need to pay bribes, forcing them to moonlight to raise cash which in turn sets them up for shakedowns by the police.

Prospects for Reform

In late 2009, Kim Jong Il announced a currency devaluation. In one week’s time, 1,000 North Korean won (NPW) would be worth 10 NPW.\(^{105}\) The news prompted unheard of protests when people realized their bank balances would be wiped out since the amount they were allowed to convert into new won was limited. One defector reported his family’s life savings, equivalent to USD 1,560, was reduced to USD 30.\(^{106}\) Though intended to tame inflation and presumably undercut private traders who had amassed monetary wealth, it caused a buying panic as people spent every old won they had before their money became worthless. Citizens would henceforth seek to keep their funds in foreign currencies, effectively rendering the new won worthless.\(^{107}\) A newspaper noted, the situation “combines one thing North Korean authorities don’t like (markets) with another thing they wish they didn’t need (foreign cash).”\(^{108}\)

Given the importance of *juche* ideology to the regime’s legitimacy, it has yet to undertake significant economic reform that would integrate North Korea into the global economy, in contrast to neighboring state socialist countries like China and Vietnam. The latter, however, were primarily agrarian economies that could liberalize the agricultural sector and realize immediate productivity gains. By contrast, moribund state industry dominates the North Korean economy, which more closely resembles Cold War Eastern Europe or the former Soviet Union where privatization proved more difficult.\(^{109}\)

**Employment Trends**

North Korea has experimented with establishing special economic zones in border areas. The most successful is the Kaesong Special Industrial Zone, a joint venture between the two Koreas

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\(^{103}\) Andrei Lankov, “North Korea’s Culture of Bribery,” *Asia Times*, 13 July 2012, [http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Korea/NG13Dg01.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Korea/NG13Dg01.html)


started in 2004, which now employs more than 50,000 local workers.  

An analyst cautions, however, such initiatives should be seen as an effort to boost the economy without undertaking fundamental reform. Indeed, Pyongyang has repeatedly shown its willingness to sacrifice the success of the Kaesong complex through military provocation against the South.

Though rich in mineral resources, including a large number of rare earth metals, it is estimated that North Korean mines operate at less than 30% of capacity. Lack of electrical power and poor transportation infrastructure pose significant obstacles to increasing production. The DPRK simply does not have the resources to exploit a sector estimated to be worth USD 6 trillion by the South Korean government in 2009.

Since its material exports are negligible, North Korea sends an estimated 60,000 to 70,000 workers abroad to earn hard currency and ease unemployment. According to a business analyst, “sending groups of people to foreign countries where they don’t speak the language and can be sequestered in barracks or factory dorms is a much safer option than granting to foreign investors in North Korea the kind of freedom and mobility they demand.” Men take up logging work in Siberia and do construction jobs in the Middle East. Attractive young women are recruited to staff overseas restaurants Pyongyang has set up where meals can run USD 100 per person. In 2012, China took the unprecedented step of offering work visas to 40,000 unskilled North Korean laborers. At the same time, China serves as an unofficial conduit for remittances from North Korean defectors working in South Korea that is estimated to be worth USD 10 million annually. Neither Seoul nor Pyongyang authorizes these transfers, but they have not clamped down to stop


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them. Ethnic Korean Chinese citizens who cross the border acting as couriers can deliver the money in as quickly as 24 hours after it is sent from South Korea.\textsuperscript{120}

Chapter 1 Assessment

1. Cold, dry winters and hot, wet summers characterize North Korea’s climate.
   True
   Cold, dry winters and hot, humid—often rainy—summers characterize North Korea’s continental climate. Over half the precipitation throughout the country occurs in the summer (June to September).

2. The Tumen River is navigable for approximately half its length.
   False
   The Tumen, North Korea’s second longest river (521 km/324 mi), is navigable for only approximately 81 km (50 mi).

3. Both North and South Koreans trace their ancestry to Emperor Tangun.
   True
   All Koreans trace their ancestry to the semi-divine Tangun who descended from Mount Baeku to build a palace near Pyongyang.

4. The major port city of Hungnam (Hamhung-Hungnam) is on the nation’s west coast near the Yellow Sea.
   False
   Hungnam, officially part of the city of Hamhung, is near the coast of the Sea of Japan on the country’s east coast.

5. Mount Kwanmo is the highest mountain in North Korea.
   False
   The Hamgyong Mountains are the highest mountain range in the Korean Peninsula and Mount Kwanmo is their highest peak, at 2,540 m (8,333 ft).
CHAPTER 2: RELIGION

Introduction

The Korean Peninsula has a diverse religious heritage that includes shamanism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. In contrast to the rest of Northeast Asia, Christianity made rapid inroads on the peninsula. While today South Korea claims some of the world’s largest Christian congregations, before World War II two-thirds of Korean Christians lived in present-day North Korea. In 2002, Pyongyang estimated there were some 12,000 Protestants, 800 Catholics and 10,000 Buddhists in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK). According to more recent Pew Forum surveys, Christianity is gaining adherents. There may be as many as 480,000 Christians inside the country. They presumably worship in illegal, underground house churches or within their own homes. One defector explained her family worshipped together every Saturday evening, emphasizing, “We had to be very quiet. We whispered when we prayed, sang songs or read the [banned] Bible. We often covered our heads to muffle the noise.”

In the early 1970s, the government issued pictures of Kim Il Sung, which all North Koreans were ordered to hang in their homes. Later, one of his sons and successor, Kim Jong Il, was added. No family photos could be hung on that wall. Defectors describe homes where the twin portraits were dutifully dusted every morning in preparation for family members to perform their daily bows. They were expected to offer ceremonial greetings to the Kim dynastic leadership before honoring any deceased member of their own family. After Kim Il Sung died in 1994, food offerings were left for him and his son, despite the fact Kim Jong Il was alive and therefore ineligible to receive traditional Buddhist offerings intended to provide sustenance for the spirits of the dead. His death in 2011 liberated “North Korean households from this contradiction in their domestic ritual life.”

126 “Cult of Personality,” http://www.macalester.edu/courses/geog261/tkreit/personality_cult.html
Historical Religious Background

Shamanism is Korea’s earliest documented faith. Common among hunting and gathering cultures, it is predicated on the belief that a shaman (mudang) can contact or influence gods and demons in the spirit world. There are still shamanists in South Korea today. It is unknown how many people subscribe to such beliefs in North Korea.

Confucianism became part of the Chinese imperial state’s ideological foundation as early as the 2nd century BCE. It spread to surrounding countries, including Korea. According to Confucius, centralized political control and a well defined set of hierarchical relationships are the key to social harmony and political stability. The Confucian aspects of the Kim family’s leadership are well known. For example, those higher in the hierarchy are supposed to motivate those below through positive example. Kim Il Sung’s frequent visits to factories and farms, where he provided “on the spot guidance,” are well documented in propaganda paintings. Kim Jong Il, a cinephile, is reported to have provided similar guidance to nearly 12,000 film projects.

Christianity was introduced in the 18th and 19th centuries. Pyongyang, in particular, became an active center of Christian missionary work. So successful were the missionaries that the present-day capital of the DPRK became known as the “Jerusalem of the East.” During the Japanese occupation, authorities repressed Christianity, and by the end of World War II, the foreign missionaries were gone. Land reform enabled the North Korean government to appropriate the property of religious groups. Buddhism had been introduced to Korea in the 1st century CE, and Buddhist monasteries quickly came to acquire vast tracts of crop and forest land. Without land holdings, however, Buddhist monks had no means to support themselves and were forced to leave their often remote monasteries.

Chondogyo

Chondogyo is a religion indigenous to Korea that mixes Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, shamanism, and even some Roman Catholicism into a monotheistic belief system that was

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founded in 1860 by a Confucian scholar. He quickly gained a large number of followers. Chondogyo did not incorporate the idea of an “eternal reward” for one’s good deeds, focusing instead on securing righteousness in the material world and in everyday life. Motivated by this vision, many practitioners tried to improve and reform society. They participated in both the 1890s Donghak Rebellion and the March 1st Movement of 1919, a series of nationalist demonstrations that called for Korean independence. Though its influence has waned in both Koreas, at international religious conferences, Chondogyo groups, along with Buddhist and Christian organizations approved for participation, sometimes represent the DPRK.

The Role of Religion in the North Korean Government

The DPRK is officially an atheist nation. Nonetheless, the constitution “grants freedom of religious belief and guarantees the right to construct buildings for religious use and religious ceremonies.” In reality, Pyongyang severely restricts religious activity to a few approved churches where visitors note the absence of children among the worshippers who are not allowed to bow their heads or close their eyes during services. Individuals who attempt to privately practice a Christian faith risk arrest and imprisonment. North Korean nationals caught proselytizing have been executed.

At the same time, food shortages have forced the government to accept humanitarian aid. Some of that assistance is delivered by Christian groups, who are also heavily involved in helping North Korean refugees reach South Korea. Within the DPRK, one group operates ambulances emblazoned with a “Christian Friends of Korea” logo. Missionary groups report growing interest in Christianity, even though the mere admission one is a Christian is a significant

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143 Issac Stone Fish, “Preaching the Gospel in the Hermit Kingdom,” Foreign Policy, 6 January 2012, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/01/06/preaching_the_gospel_in_the_hermit_kingdom
crime.\(^{144}\) To circumvent the authorities, practitioners create mobile congregations. According to a missionary, “A Christian goes and sits on a bench in the park. Another Christian comes and sits next to him. Sometimes it is dangerous even to speak to one another, but they know they are both Christians, and at such a time, this is enough.”\(^{145}\)

**Cult of Personality**

In practice, the only official worship allowed among the population is the cult of Kim Il Sung (known as Great Leader) and Kim Jong Il (known as Dear Leader) along with other family members including the older Kim’s parents and wife.\(^{146, 147}\) During his four-plus decades in power, state propaganda organs promoted the Great Leader as “superior to Christ in love, Buddha in benevolence, Confucius in virtue, and Mohammed in justice.”\(^{148}\) White Head Mountain (Paektusan), the purported place of Kim Jong Il’s birth where his father heroically fought against the Japanese, has assumed an almost spiritual significance in North Korean lore.\(^{149}\) According to an Asia-based journalist, “If you read North Korean propaganda, Kim Il Sung is God and the son is Jesus. When he was born, there is a star that heralded his birth and then a rainbow. There is a reason they banned the Bible, it’s because they’ve plagiarized it.”\(^{150}\)

In the 21st century, Pyongyang spends as much as 40% of the national budget on Kim-family deification, up from 19% in 1990. It is the only area of the budget that increased even as other areas, including defense spending, were cut.\(^{151}\) The funds underwrite maintenance for more than 30,000 Kim Il Sung monuments now expanded to include statues of his son, towers of eternal life found at all major crossroads, historical sites, and commemorative events.

All visitors to the Kumsusan Palace mausoleum, which contains the bodies of both father and son, are required to bow at the feet and arms of each glass-encased sarcophagus to show their


Many defectors continue to sing the elder Kim’s praises. An expert explained, “When North Koreans talk about Kim Il Sung, there can be no doubt the emotion is genuine…When they talk about Kim Jong II, [however], the language becomes more formulaic than stylized, and they begin to use the slogans.”

**Influence of Religion on Daily Life**

According to those who have travelled to North Korea and spoken with representatives of state-sanctioned religious organizations, “some members are genuinely religious” but “others appear to know little about religious doctrine.” When taken to Buddhist temples, for example, visitors have encountered elderly caretakers who are introduced as monks. This is met with skepticism since many of these “monks” do not wear traditional monastic garb and appear to be married in violation of the celibacy pledge maintained by most Korean Buddhist orders. In sum, although some of the religious activities carried out by practitioners seem authentic, many seem “staged” for visitor consumption.

**Buildings of Worship**

There are four showcase Christian house of worship (two Protestant, one Catholic and one Orthodox) in Pyongyang. The newest, the Holy Trinity Orthodox Church, opened in 2006, apparently commissioned by Kim Jong II after his 2002 visit to an orthodox cathedral in Russia. Scattered throughout the country, 60-some Buddhist temples, out of

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approximately 300, are authorized to hold religious services. All clergy, regardless of denomination, are employees of the state.

Temple restoration is ongoing. Preservation of North Korean cultural relics rather than rehabilitation as places of worship is the official objective. One such ancient Buddhist site, the Shingye or Singyesa (Holy Valley) Temple, a wooden structure destroyed in the Korean War, was restored in 2007. It is part of the Mount Kumgang Tourist Zone located just north of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). The Unification Ministry of the Republic of Korea (South Korea) and foreign visitors provided the USD 10 million in funds to complete the work. During reconstruction, a South Korean monk took up residence in the temple. The opening ceremonies were attended by 300 South Korean Buddhists.

While South Koreans can visit, the government has barred North Koreans from entering the grounds. Nonetheless, the regime has found ways to use the temple, which was twice visited by Kim Il Sung, for propaganda purposes. A stone monument proclaims, “[t]he architectural beauty of our ancestors was destroyed by the brutal air bombing of the American imperialists,” thereby legitimizing it as an eventual pilgrimage destination for citizens of the DPRK.

**Behavior in Places of Worship**

Statues and images of the Buddha should be approached quietly and with a respectful attitude. They represent North Korea’s cultural heritage.

**Exchange 1: May I enter the temple?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>May I enter the temple?</th>
<th>kyowey turaw gadoo tamneekaa?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>Yes.</td>
<td>ney</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Visitors should be neatly attired and not bring food or drink into a temple, nor should they deliberately point their feet directly at a Buddha statue or symbol. Everyone should remove shoes before entering and refrain from touching paintings or statues.

**Exchange 2: Must I take off my shoes inside the temple?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>Must I take off my shoes inside the temple?</th>
<th>kyowey trawgaltey sinbarul pasoyaa hamneekaa?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>Yes.</td>
<td>ney</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

158 Andrei Lankov, “Another Korea: Buddhism in North Korea,” *Korea Times*, 15 January 2007, [http://www.buddhistchannel.tv/index.php?id=89,3618,0,0,1,0](http://www.buddhistchannel.tv/index.php?id=89,3618,0,0,1,0)
Visitors also need to be aware of North Korea’s restrictions concerning general religious conduct, whether inside places of worship or outside of them. They should avoid behavior that could be considered proselytizing and not distribute religious materials or even give them away occasionally to a local person. Visitors should not engage in conversations about religion and avoid any kind of religious socializing in groups, unless the government sanctions it. Finally, if visitors wish to attend a religious service or presentation, they can do so only if it is state-approved.

Chapter 2 Assessment

1. In the 18th and 19th centuries, Christian missionaries were particularly successful in gaining converts in Pyongyang.
   True
   So successful were the Christian missionaries that Pyongyang became known as the “Jerusalem of the East.”

2. There are no constitutional or other legal guarantees of religious freedom in North Korea.
   False
   The North Korean Constitution grants freedom of religious belief but in practice, the government prohibits such freedoms.

3. Chondogyo does not incorporate the idea of an “eternal reward” for one’s deeds.
   True
   Chongdogyo is an indigenous faith that includes no concept of eternal reward. Adherents focus on bringing righteousness and peace to the world.

4. The North Korean government has successfully barred foreign religious groups from providing food aid inside the country.
   False
   Foreign religious groups are openly represented among the numerous organizations providing aid inside North Korea.

5. The South Korean government partially paid for the USD 10 million restoration of North Korea’s Holy Valley Temple.
   True
   Foreign tourists paid for the remainder. The temple was destroyed during the Korean War.
CHAPTER 3: TRADITIONS

Introduction

“Thank you, Father Kim Il Sung” is the first phrase North Korean parents train their toddler children to repeat. Literally, every piece of information these children encounter as they grow up has been designed to deify the Kim leadership and underscore the benevolence of the Korean Workers’ Party (KWP). It is unclear whether the regime can sustain the pretense, as the citizenry gains greater access to information from the outside world. In April 2012, the government took the unprecedented step of admitting a satellite launch had failed. Two previous attempts to launch a satellite also failed. In both instances, government propaganda claimed they were successful. Moreover, state media informed the North Korean people these circling satellites were broadcasting songs singing the praises of the Kim leadership.

The political ideology of juche, expounded by Kim Il Sung, fomented a race-based nationalism and, by extension, wariness of outsiders. According to juche, human civilization originated on the peninsula and this makes Korea the chosen land. While there is now general awareness that South Koreans have achieved a high standard of living due to their integration into the global economy, they are officially depicted as having shed their “Koreaness” in the process. A scholar explained the government’s position, “If the [North Korean] people must endure some hardship in order to maintain a Korean way of life, that’s a small price to pay.” They should emulate the winged horse of Korean lore known as Chollima, which could leap 1,000 ri (250 km or 150 mi), and complete their assigned tasks in record speed. Juche, in sum, not only legitimizes the regime’s pursuit of political self-determination, reflected in its promotion of cultural and economic autarky, but also impels citizens to maintain unwavering faith in the revolutionary cause.

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pagewanted=all
Honor and Values

Loyalty to the regime is the highest value in North Korea. Citizens of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) and their immediate kin pay a high price if they are deemed disloyal. Among the most feared forms of official reprisal is a downward adjustment in the social classification system known as songbun.\(^\text{173}\) The government assigns each North Korean citizen a songbun at birth. Infants typically inherit their parents’ songbun. Because it is a major determinant of opportunities in life, it would be unthinkable to marry someone with a radically lower songbun. The three main categories of loyal, wavering, and hostile are further divided into 51 subcategories.\(^\text{174}\) Loyal citizens can live in Pyongyang, enjoy priority access to scarce goods like food vouchers, and are eligible for admittance to top educational institutions and the best jobs. Those in the second category are presumably on the lookout for an opportunity to demonstrate their loyalty to the regime and improve their status. The government consigns members of the hostile group to the bottom in perpetuity, where they languish in the least desirable professions.\(^\text{175}\) Many of those who have fled North Korea were classified as members of the wavering and hostile classes and therefore consigned to lives with limited opportunity.\(^\text{176}\)

The categories are slightly less meaningful since the regime’s exclusive power over the distribution of essential goods collapsed during the late 1990s. The emerging private sector allows those with hostile songbun to develop alternative employment. In addition, North Koreans can now receive, without official harassment, remittances funneled through China from family members who have fled to South Korea.\(^\text{177}\)

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Greetings

Greetings among Koreans tend to be formal, accompanied by a bow. The younger or otherwise lower status individual initiates the bow, and the other person (of higher status) either bows or offers to shake hands. 178

**Exchange 3: How is your family?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>How is your family?</th>
<th>kaajuktul modu chal chineysaayo?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>They are doing fine, thank you.</td>
<td>ney modu chal chineyko isimneetaa kamsaa hamneedaa</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Handshakes differ according to gender and status. A man offers his right hand using his left hand to support or grip the wrist of his right hand as a gesture of respect. When women greet each other, they extend both of their hands so that they are holding both of each other’s hands. A bow of the head accompanies handshakes for both men and women. When a child greets an adult, the child always bows. 179 When a visitor initiates a greeting, it is customary to bow and offer to shake hands with the eldest person first. 180 If a man is shaking hands with a woman, the grip should be very light and short.

**Exchange 4: Good morning.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>Good morning.</th>
<th>chohun achimneedaa</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>Good morning.</td>
<td>chohun achimneedaa</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Koreans consider direct eye contact disrespectful, similar to an invasion of privacy. For this reason, they may look beyond the person or downward as they express their greetings, or they may hold minimal eye contact. 181

**Exchange 5: Good afternoon.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>Good afternoon.</th>
<th>chohun ohu imneedaa</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>Good afternoon.</td>
<td>chohun ohu imneedaa</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conversational exchanges should not be overly direct, as Koreans may perceive this as invasive. This is also true when asking questions of a Korean person. The questioner should be indirect.

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Exchange 6: Good night!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>Good night!</th>
<th>anyonghee chumusaayo</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>Good night!</td>
<td>anyonghee chumusaayo</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For instance, it can appear rude and abrupt to ask, “Do you understand me?” Instead, the questioner should say something like, “Does this seem reasonable?” or “Is this how you would see it?” \(^{182}\) When addressing a Korean person, use his or her honorific title and the family name (surname).

Exchange 7: Hello!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>Hi, Mr. Kim.</th>
<th>kim sansongnim, anyong aaseyo</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>Hello!</td>
<td>anyong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soldier:</td>
<td>Are you doing well?</td>
<td>chal chineysaayo?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>Yes.</td>
<td>ney</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Hospitality and Gift-Giving

Unannounced home visits for social purposes are rare in the DPRK, and even arranged social visits are infrequent. \(^{183}\) North Korean men enjoy drinking, with traditional rice wine (soju) being a particular favorite. However, the possibility of saying something that could be deemed critical of the government or Kim leadership in the relaxed confines of home looms large.

Exchange 8: I really appreciate your hospitality.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>I really appreciate your hospitality.</th>
<th>singangsaa jooshin gaat namoo kamsaa hamneedaa</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>It is nothing.</td>
<td>pyul mal sim-ulyo</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A British man who worked in Pyongyang for seven years (1986-93) enjoyed exactly one meal in a colleague’s home. It was a heavily orchestrated affair involving all international staff at the publishing house that employed him. He observed the host’s child did not know how to eat shellfish, indicating the food was not normal fare for the family. \(^{184}\)

Exchange 9: The food tastes so good.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>The food tastes so good.</th>
<th>omsigey maasee namoo chwaayo</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>Thank you.</td>
<td>kamsaa hamneedaa</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the event one has the opportunity to visit a North Korean home, it is cultural protocol to remove one’s shoes before

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\(^{182}\) Suk-hyon Kim, “Korean Cultural Codes and Communication,” *International Area Studies Review* 6, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 100, [http://ias.sagepub.com/content/6/1/93.full.pdf](http://ias.sagepub.com/content/6/1/93.full.pdf)


entering. The guest should bring a gift and offer it to the host with both hands. It can be a souvenir from one’s home country, so long as it lacks political overtones, or a locally purchased edible like fruit. The value of the gift is less important than the act of offering it. 185 The recipient may have to be pressed several times to accept it.

Exchange 10: This gift is for you.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>This gift is for you.</th>
<th>sanmul paatey saayo</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>I cannot accept this.</td>
<td>chan paatul so abseyo</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Eating Customs and Habits

Eating customs vary but generally, conversations during meals are limited. North Koreans avoid, wherever possible, using their fingers to touch the food as eating with hands or fingers is impolite. They typically slurp their soups and drinks. It is an acceptable way to cool hot dishes rather than blowing on them. They use chopsticks to eat all foods except rice, for which a spoon is used. North Koreans consider it poor manners to eat while walking on the street. 186

Severe food shortages in recent decades have seriously affected the daily diet. 187 Spring is the lean season for farmers. Little is left of the previous year’s harvest while the current year’s crops have not yet matured. 188 Households typically mix wild foods with grain to stretch out their resources. 189 Only the elite have assured access to staple foods. Most North Koreans consume less than half of the recommended daily caloric requirements, and in 2012, nearly one-third of all children suffered from malnutrition and protein deficiencies. 190

Traditional Dishes

Soy sauce, red pepper, ginger, and sesame are commonly used spices in Korean cuisine. Kimchi (fermented cabbage) is a staple along with rice, resources permitting. The rest of the meal,

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typically soups and vegetable side dishes, is referred to collectively as *panchan*.\(^{191}\)

**Exchange 11: This food is very good.**

| Soldier: | This food is very good. | omsigee naamoo maaseesaayo |
| Local:   | It’s Bulgogi.           | pulgogey eemneedaa          |

*Raengmyon* is a cold noodle soup, the signature dish of North Korea. Preparation varies family to family.\(^{192}\) Noodles and noodle dishes are now typical in cities along the northeast coast. In cities like Hamhung and Chongjin, noodles are likely to be made from potatoes as well as the traditional buckwheat varieties seen in the capital.

**Exchange 12: What is the name of this dish?**

| Soldier: | What is the name of this dish? | moosin umsig yeyo? |
| Local:   | This is Bibimbob.              | pipim paapimneedaa |

Due to the scarcity of meat, much of the diet is vegetarian. Tofu is a common meat-substitute. A popular traditional dish that few North Koreans are in a position to enjoy is *Bulgogi*, marinated beef strips broiled over charcoal. Official sources report ordinary citizens have been moved to tears when presented with *bulgogi* by Kim Jong II.\(^{193}\)

**Exchange 13: What ingredients are used?**

| Soldier: | What ingredients are used to make Bulgogi? | pulgogiye mosee turaagamneedaa |
| Local:   | Meat, soy sauce sugar, wine, garlic, mushrooms, green onions, syrup | kogee, kanjhang, sultang, changchoo, maanul, paasat, paa, buljachee turaa kamneedaa |

**Dress Code**

The DPRK dress code covers everything from proper attire to grooming schedules. Citizens are given Kim Il Sung badges that they wear on the left side of their upper garments, close to the heart. In addition to reflecting loyalty to the regime, badges are a form of social delineation.\(^{194}\) There are approximately 20 designs in circulation.\(^{195}\) According to an expert, “an experienced observer can guess the official association and approximate position of a North Korean simply

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by looking at his/her badge.”

Badges are reputedly a target of pickpockets in a country where people typically don’t wear jewelry or carry a lot of cash.

**Exchange 14: How should I dress?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>How should I dress?</th>
<th>myowaasur iboyaa hamneekaa?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>Wear loose fitting clothes, which cover your body.</td>
<td>hanaa naagey mahnin holing anosree eepooseyo</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Somewhat at odds with other state socialist revolutionary governments like China, where clothing was unisex prior to the economic reforms, the North Korean government has long promoted traditional female attire. Women are encouraged to wear the *choson-ot*, a long, full, wrap-around skirt and short jacket known as *hanbok* in the South. The dress, in short, is a tangible manifestation of a way of life that is uniquely Korean.

In any event, they were long expected to wear skirts or dresses; the prohibition against females wearing slacks has only recently been lifted. In the summer, women routinely carry umbrellas to protect themselves from the sun. Pale skin is considered a sign of feminine beauty.

**Exchange 15: Is this acceptable to wear?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>Is this acceptable to wear?</th>
<th>eeyosil eebado taayo?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>Yes.</td>
<td>ney</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Men need to take care their hair is not too long, an indication they are unduly influenced by Western youth culture. While it is now common to see casual clothing adorned with roman letters, jeans remain synonymous with capitalist decadence and citizens of the DPRK are not permitted to wear them. Visitors should dress conservatively to show respect for local norms.

**Non-Religious Holidays**

In 2012, there were 14 official holidays in North Korea. National public holidays are listed below in order of date:

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• New Year’s Day (01 January)
• Day of the Shining Star (Kim Jong Il’s birthday is 16 February but celebrated on 17 February)
• Day of the Sun (Kim Il Sung’s Birthday, 15 April)
• Army Day (25 April)
• Labor Day (01 May)
• Victory Day (27 July)
• Liberation Day (15 August)
• National Day (09 September)
• Korean Workers’ Party Founding Day (10 October)
• Constitution Day (27 December)

Other celebrations include a three-day holiday for the Lunar New Year or Seollal, (a variable date in January or February), Surlinal (a spring festival formerly called Dano, on a variable date in May or June), and Chuseok (the Harvest Moon Festival, on a variable date in September or October). While South Koreans spend time with family and visit their ancestral graves during three days of Harvest Moon festivities, North Koreans are expected to pay their respects to the Kim leadership and those buried in the national martyr’s cemetery. Chuseok was recognized as a one-day holiday in the DPRK in 1988. The Arirang Mass Game Festival commences around Kim Il-Sung’s birthday, and authorities stage events for two months.

Dos and Don’ts

Do be aware of all official regulations and follow them.
Do remove your shoes before you enter a temple or a private home.
Do use only your entire right hand to summon a person. Keep your palm down and wave downward.

Don’t show disrespect to images or statues that represent state leaders, state authority, or the juche ideology.
Don’t criticize or show any disrespect to North Korean officials or citizens.
Don’t criticize or show any disrespect, direct or implied, to members of the Kim family.
Don’t engage in open expressions of affection with the opposite sex.
Don’t touch a North Korean person casually; it is a violation of personal space.
Don’t deliberately point your foot at or show disrespect to statues or images of Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong Il, or any members of the Kim family.
Don’t deliberately point your foot at an image or statue of the Buddha.
Don’t discuss religion or try to promote any religious ideas to North Koreans.
Don’t point to anybody with a finger. Use the entire right hand instead.

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Don’t point upward with the middle finger. It is obscene in the U.S. and equally so in North Korea.
Don’t use obscene or indecent language within earshot of North Korean citizens. Some may be familiar with American slang.
Chapter 3 Assessment

   **False**
   All adult North Koreans wear Kim Il Sung badges, although the badges are different for party members.

2. North Koreans consider direct eye contact disrespectful.
   **True**
   Direct eye contact is disrespectful in North Korea, particularly toward a person of higher social status. Thus, North Koreans may look beyond the person or downward during exchanges with strangers or superiors.

3. North Korean women have been barred from wearing slacks in public
   **True**
   While the law is sporadically enforced, it remains on the books. The government promotes traditional feminine attire for women.

   **True**
   Kim Il Sung’s philosophy of Juche claims human civilization started on the Korean peninsula. This is why North Koreans have to work hard to achieve its greatness.

5. Songbun is the name of a North Korean dish eaten on political holidays.
   **False**
   *Songbun* is the name of North Korea’s social classification system.
CHAPTER 4: URBAN LIFE

Introduction

After the Korean War ended, thousands of people in the North Korean countryside migrated to urban areas. Approximately 17.7% of the country’s population resided in the nation’s cities in 1953 (the year the war ended), according to official statistics. Estimates from the Central Intelligence Agency place that statistic at 60% for the year 2010.\(^{205}\) South Korea, despite claiming better agricultural conditions for farming, was 88% urban in 2010. Demographers expect the differential to accelerate.\(^{206}\)

North Korea, like other state socialist countries, has incentives to limit rural to urban migration.\(^{207}\) The government must provide urbanites with jobs and housing. In addition, living in Pyongyang is a privilege reserved for the loyal. An analyst noted, “In simply no other country is there such a striking difference between living in one city and living any place else in the entire country.”\(^{208}\) Even those deemed worthy of residence permits can find themselves cast out for reasons that have nothing to do with personal conduct. In 2011, a neighboring province annexed the southern part of Pyongyang. This move reduced the capital city’s population by about 500,000.\(^{209}\) It occurred after the government had offered cash and rice incentives to motivate residents to relocate on a voluntary basis.\(^{210}\) It is unlikely they found sufficient volunteers given the difference in standard of living.

Daily Urban Life

Prior to the 1990s, there was very little need to pay for anything with money and very little to buy with it. Citizens of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) received essential goods through the Public Distribution System (PDS). Allocation varied according to their place of residence and social rank (songbun) within the government’s 51-grade classification system, which remains in place. High-ranking members of the Korean Workers’ Party (KWP) fill the top five strata.\(^{211}\) There are five categories of housing that range from one room with a shared


\(^{207}\) Migration Dialogue, Department of Agriculture and Resource Economics, University of California, Davis, “North and South Korea: Illegals, Visas,” Migration News 6, no. 5 (May 1999), [http://migration.ucdavis.edu/mn/more.php?id=1811_0_3_0](http://migration.ucdavis.edu/mn/more.php?id=1811_0_3_0)


kitchen to free standing homes with private gardens. While all newlyweds are entitled to apply for accommodation, the quality can vary. Some apartments lack running water on the upper floors due to insufficient water pressure. This forces residents to fill containers from street taps and carry them up on a daily basis. Defectors report that desirable units can be “bought” by bribing housing management officials.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exchange 16: Does your family live here?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Soldier:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In exchange for food and housing, DRPK citizens were expected to devote themselves to the revolutionary cause. Beyond meeting production quotas, workers were required to participate in collective social activities, such as studying the writings of the national leader or participating in mass events. Mothers would drop their pre-school age offspring at day care centers before 8:00 a.m., where children could also be boarded. After arriving at their own place of work, they could remain on the job until 8:00 p.m., which might be followed by an additional two hours of study and self-criticism sessions. Annual leave or vacations simply did not figure into the daily lives of urbanites. A middle-aged defector from the coastal city of Chongjin recalled the rare Sunday when neither she nor her late husband was required to report for work and their four children were not busy with school. They enjoyed only two family outings to the beach despite its extremely close proximity.

**Urban Workforce**

Most industry is located in or near urban areas, and approximately 64% of the population works in industrial or service jobs, according to 2007 estimates. Urban residents over the age of 16 are eligible for job assignment. Due to the insolvency of much of the industrial sector, many of these jobs are unpaid or offer only token compensation. Failure to report after being assigned a

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job, however, can result in being sent to a labor camp. Some employees pay a monthly fee to sign in but spend their days toiling off-site. One such employee noted, “How would the companies survive if they didn’t get money from the workers?”

Non-payment of salaries coupled with the withdrawal of state subsidies for essential goods like food makes life challenging for factory workers. According to former college professor who defected, the average monthly salary of a North Korean worker is approximately KPW 2,000 (USD 15) while 1 kg (2.2 lbs) of rice costs KPW 4,000 (USD 31). North Koreans increasingly rely on ingenuity to survive. At one Pyongyang shoe factory, only about 100 of the 750 workers still show up. While the others remain on the books as employees; they buy the materials from the factory, make the shoes at home and sell them privately. After paying management a fixed amount, they can keep the rest.

Marketplace

Under Kim Il Sung, markets where citizens sold goods for money were seen as a vestige of capitalism. They were never entirely eradicated from the landscape, however. Most of the goods sold were second-hand items no longer needed by the seller’s family. Nonetheless, those loyal to the regime often viewed them as sleazy places. One defector recalled her horror when a factory manager suggested to female employees that they find other ways to feed their families due to an impending slowdown that eventually shuttered the factory. She could not imagine becoming a peddler and joining the ranks of women she considered uncivilized.

Exchange 17: May I examine this close up?

| Soldier: | May I examine this close up? | eegowsil kachapkey salpey pul soo isumneekaa? |
| Local: | Sure. | mul-loneecheeyo |

In Confucian cultures, females are heavily overrepresented in the ranks of the peddler class. Confucius viewed traders as disreputable people who rely on tricking customers into paying

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more than an item is worth.\textsuperscript{226} Hence, it became an activity befitting women who traditionally held lower social status. In North Korea, female employees were the first to be furloughed from state-owned enterprises in the 1990s.\textsuperscript{227} In order to make ends meet, they began to trade privately. By contrast, men have been banned from such activities because they should be occupied with more ideologically appropriate work in the eyes of the KWP. They may be involved in transporting goods to the market, but women are responsible for sales.\textsuperscript{228}

**Exchange 18: Can you give me change for this?**

| Soldier: | Can you give me change for this? | kaasowlun tonul chul soo isumneeka? |
| Local: | No. | awbsumneetaa |

In 2003, the KWP recognized stall markets (jangmadang) as permanent shopping venues.\textsuperscript{229} The largest market in Pyongyang boasts 1,500 booths that span 6,000 sq m (64,583 sq ft), divided into food, apparel and electronic appliance sections.\textsuperscript{230} Using satellite imagery, scholars identified 200 such markets across the country in 2010.\textsuperscript{231} Some draw more than 100,000 shoppers a day.\textsuperscript{232} Nonetheless, they are generally not visible from artery roads or monuments. Merchants reportedly give discounts to those paying in Chinese RMB currency, known simply as “B” in North Korea.\textsuperscript{233} This is particularly true for street vendors, who ply their wares at what have become known as “frog markets,” since they run off at the first sign of law enforcement.\textsuperscript{234}

**Monitoring and Surveillance**

Every urban housing complex is organized into people’s groups (inminban) of between 25 to 50 families under the authority of a single individual, typically a middle-aged woman who has several assistants. As the head (inminbanjang), she is tasked with organizing all communal


\textsuperscript{230} “Pyongyang’s ‘Unification’ Market of Today,” Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainability, 5 April 2006, \url{http://nautilus.org/napsnet-special-reports/pyongyangs-unification-market-of-today/}


\textsuperscript{232} “Advancing Human Rights and the Prospect for Democracy in North Korea,” (Remarks by Carl Gershman, President of the National Endowment of Democracy, Seoul, South Korea, 16 February 2012), 5, \url{http://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/Carl-Gershman-Speech-February%2016.pdf}

\textsuperscript{233} “North Koreans Shun New Won,” Radio Free Asia, 23 June 2010, \url{http://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/won-06232010120048.html}

activities like maintenance and sanitation disposal.\textsuperscript{235} Her most important responsibility, however, is to ferret out any type of illicit economic activity being conducted on the premises.\textsuperscript{236} Though not part of the government herself, she meets on a regular basis with a representative from the state security ministry.\textsuperscript{237} In the past, she was rewarded with additional rations and other perks of officialdom. Now that money is needed to buy an array of essential goods, she may be willing to accept cash in exchange for turning a blind eye to routine infractions.\textsuperscript{238} In short, the state has become predatory as well as punitive.

\textbf{Exchange 19: Do you know this area very well?}

\begin{tabular}{|l|l|}
\hline
Soldier: & Do you know this area very well? \tabularnewline & ee chee-aagul chal amneekaa? \tabularnewline Local: & Yes, I know it well. \tabularnewline & n ey, chaal amneetaa \tabularnewline \hline
\end{tabular}

Before enforcement subsided over the last decade, mobile police units (\textit{kyuchaldae}) made unannounced home visits to ensure residents were not misusing electricity for cooking purposes.\textsuperscript{239} After circulation of smuggled foreign film cassettes became commonplace, the police would shut off the power to entire buildings to undertake a unit by unit search. They would ask to inspect video players to see if any foreign entertainment was lodged inside.\textsuperscript{240} Discovery of contraband could dispatch the entire household to a labor camp from which they would be unlikely to emerge alive. Despite their newfound access to both contraband goods as well as the possibility of buying one’s way out of trouble, most people continue to go to great lengths to keep contraband hidden. One defector in Seoul keeps in touch with family back in North Korea via a cell phone smuggled in from China that her relatives keep buried in a hill.\textsuperscript{241}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
Healthcare

Medical Care

North Korea has one of the world’s highest physician-to-patient ratios, with approximately one doctor for every 700 people.242 One doctor reported that when she began her career in the 1960s, she was required to treat at least 32 patients a day.243

Exchange 20: Is Dr. Kim in, sir?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>Is Dr. Kim in, sir?</th>
<th>kim baaksagaa aney kaashimneeka?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>aan key shimneetaa</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In theory, medical care is free for everyone; however, the level of care varies by a sick person’s songbun. Authorities reserve the highest quality care for military and government elites and officials of the KWP who live in or can travel to Pyongyang, where the best hospitals are located.244

Exchange 21: Is there a hospital nearby?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>Is there a hospital nearby?</th>
<th>kachaa-on gosey pyangwaanee isumneeka?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>Yes, in the center of town.</td>
<td>ney, shiney kaawundey isumneetaa</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Acute shortages of drugs, vaccines, sterilizers, and essential medical equipment, compromise delivery of medical services.245, 246 Nowadays, surgery is routinely performed without anesthesia. Shortly before she defected in 1998, a doctor reported that patients had to bring their own bottles if they required intravenous fluid. Most brought beer bottles. “If they would bring in one beer bottle, they’d get one IV. If they'd bring two bottles, they would get two,” she explained.247

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Health Issues

Malnutrition imposes long-term negative health effects on the entire population, including urbanites. Life expectancy in the country dropped from nearly 73 years in 1995 to about 66 years in 2010. Infant mortality and maternal death rates increased during the same period. Malnutrition has stunted nearly half of all children under the age of five; 9% suffer from wasting; and 25% are underweight. Regional variations are significant, however. In one province where the food distribution system failed back in the 1990s, a study found 82% of the children were malnourished. By contrast, in Pyongyang, the percentage was approximately half that number.

Education

Primary and Secondary Schooling

Primary and secondary enrollment is compulsory in North Korea, where all pupils complete a year of kindergarten, four years of primary school, and six years of middle school. The principal oversees day-to-day organizational matters for a school while the vice-principal, who also serves as the school’s KWP party secretary, is responsible for maintaining adherence to party-set ideological standards. Teachers are provided with detailed instructions on how to cover their assigned subject, even if it is math. The educational pedagogy relies heavily on students regurgitating what they have been taught. On his first visit to the DPRK, a well-seasoned reporter was taken aback when two young girls he was informally interviewing began to repeat their responses in perfect unison. “They could

References:

have been robots,” he explained. After completing middle school at age 15-16, students are either assigned a job, begin their military service if they are male, or continue their education.

Higher Education

North Korean universities and technical colleges offer a specialized curriculum such as engineering, agriculture, industry, medicine, foreign language study, music, fine arts, and so on. In addition to studying, students are required to participate in productive labor. For urbanites, this can include stints in the countryside. In 2011, university classes were cancelled for ten months, ostensibly to enable college students to help build “a great, prosperous and powerful nation.”

Admission is highly sought after and extremely competitive. Applicants must pass both a national college entrance exam as well as a department specific exam. Since it is the nation’s most prestigious school, Kim Il Sung University has a special entrance examination. While students from cadre families can offset low scores through informal “backdoor” admissions opportunities, the regime recognizes the necessity of placing more weight on merit for technical and engineering school applicants. For that reason, promising students from ordinary families are more likely to gain admittance to schools with science programs. One defector, who recalled how he became the pride of his family after he was accepted into Kim Chaek University of Technology, the North Korean equivalent of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), noted, “it was the only way for a boy without good songbun to get to Pyongyang.”

Restaurants

While dining options are limited in North Korea, restaurant fare includes local favorites, such as cold buckwheat noodles, along with more expensive dishes made from duck or ostrich.

Exchange 22: I would like coffee or tea.

| Soldier: | I would like coffee or tea. | kopinaa charal maasko shipsimneedaa |
| Local:   | Sure.                      | ney                                  |

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A restaurant outside Pyongyang, known as Pyongyang Ostrich Farm, supplies meat to high-end restaurants in Pyongyang and is a destination for visitors.259 Pyongyang now also boasts a pizzeria.260

**Exchange 23: Do you have a dessert?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>Do you have a dessert?</th>
<th>hoosuegee isaayo?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>Yes, we have Shikhey and fruit</td>
<td>ney, ooreenin shikyewa kwaayree isimneeda</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Credit cards denominated in USD cannot be used in North Korea due to sanctions. In 2011 the DPRK issued an electronic payment card, called the Narae, which stores balances in hard currency that international visitors can use to settle their accounts.261

**Exchange 24: Can I have my total bill, please?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>Can I have my total bill, please?</th>
<th>kasansorool taa kataa choosil shoo isaayo?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>Yes, of course.</td>
<td>ney bulbonee cheeyo</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Environmental Issues**

Pyongyang has significant amounts of air pollution due to reliance on coal. Primary contributors include coal-fired industrial boilers and kilns operating in factories in and around the city. Even residential households, which rely on coal to meet their needs, contribute significantly to the problem. Concerns about the nation’s water quality increase as water pollution from industrial waste and sewage plants flows into streams. The government uses most of the nation’s surface-water supply (80%) to produce hydroelectric power.262 Regardless of whether ordinary residents have to make do without, the authorities never cut power to monuments like the Juche Tower that are important to the regime’s legitimacy. Nonetheless, as a scholar observed, “Pyongyang residents can console themselves with the fact that the situation outside the capital is invariably much worse.”263 This is true for pollution as well. Most of the country’s natural

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resources are located in the northern two-fifths of the country, adjacent to China. Consequently, the North Korea’s industrial base is located there, too.\textsuperscript{264}

**Urban Transportation**

*Rail*

Most North Korean cities have tram and bus service and Pyongyang has a subway. Visitors are typically chauffeured around during their stay. A ride on the Pyongyang metro is popular with tour groups, however. Chandelier-lit stations have been built deep into the ground. One station is 150 m (492 ft) underground, versus 10-30 m (33 to 99 ft) for its counterpart in Seoul. Presumably it was constructed at such a depth to prepare for emergencies like war. The upshot is that it requires a great deal of electricity to operate.\textsuperscript{265} A foreign resident in the 1980s noted it took two to three minutes to go up or down and walking the escalator steps was absolutely prohibited.\textsuperscript{266} Much more recently, a diplomat routinely observed locals sitting on the escalators steps, though that too is prohibited.\textsuperscript{267} The stations are decorated as socialist-themed “underground palaces.” The names of the stops do not refer to geographical locations but rather to revolutionary goals like Triumph or Paradise. The two-line train, built in the 1970s, traverses approximately 30 km (18 mi) of track with cars bought second-hand from Germany where they formerly carried passengers in East Berlin.\textsuperscript{268}

*Road*

The capital city’s broad boulevards were long legendary for their emptiness. Many people appeared to walk to their destinations. Due to the chronic electricity shortage, the government relied on sharply dressed “traffic ladies” to direct the few vehicle drivers.\textsuperscript{269} A Beijing-based tour operator has observed the recent installation of traffic lights and the redeployment of traffic ladies as enforcers over successive recent visits to North Korea.\textsuperscript{270}

\textsuperscript{265} “Pyongyang,” Global Security.org, \url{http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/world/dprk/pyongyang.htm}
\textsuperscript{266} Andrew Holloway, “Chapter 8,” in *A Year in Pyongyang* (Enfield, England: The Nihilist Amateur Press, 2011), \url{http://www.aidanfc.net/a_year_in_pyongyang_8.html}
\textsuperscript{268} Robert Schwandl, “Pyongyang,” *Urbanrail.net*, 2007, \url{http://www.urbanrail.net/as/pyon/pyongyang.htm}
\textsuperscript{270} “Changes in Pyongyang,” *Young Pioneers Blog*, 11 May 2012, \url{http://blog.youngpioneertours.com/2012/05/11/changes-in-pyongyang/}
Exchange 25: Will the bus be here soon?

| Soldier: | Will the bus be here soon? | pawsugaa kumbang omneekaa |
| Local: | Yes. | ney |

There are now significantly more motor vehicles on the streets of Pyongyang than there were just a few years ago when cars, often with smoky windows, were exclusively associated with officialdom.²⁷¹ The one exception was Japanese cars imported as gifts to North Koreans with relatives in Japan.²⁷² Though Japanese models were reportedly banned in 2006, it took many years to implement due to the lack of alternative vehicles.²⁷³ Privately owned cars are typically registered through a state agency, which sell their license plate allotments to raise cash. This arrangement enables owners to maintain a lower profile and have greater leverage in dealing with law enforcement.²⁷⁴ While only men are allowed to drive cars, the 1996 prohibition against women riding bicycles was lifted in 2012.²⁷⁵ Bicycle transportation has become a lifeline for peddlers transporting their wares to market.

Street Crimes and Solicitation

Although no official statistics are available, crime against foreign nationals is presumed rare in North Korea where visitors are escorted everywhere.²⁷⁶ One seven-year British resident felt safe everywhere he went. Shortly prior to his departure, however, he took a swing at a local after the man, who appeared inebriated, began insulting him. Male drunkenness is so common in North Korea it figured into how the matter was judged.²⁷⁷ A member of a foreign journalists’ tour reported finding a man passed out in front of the restaurant where his group was scheduled to eat. Their guide immediately summoned passersby to surround the man to prevent anyone from taking pictures.²⁷⁸ After slipping away from his Chinese tour group, an Asian American college student walked the streets of Pyongyang without interference despite the fact he was 1.9 meters (6 ft 4

in) tall and therefore unlikely to be a native.\textsuperscript{279} When he pulled out a camera to photograph merchants in a \textit{jangmadang}, though, he quickly found himself surrounded by stocky matrons who alerted law enforcement to his unauthorized presence. He was released six hours later after producing a satisfactory self-criticism. Exercise caution in interacting with the local population. Informal efforts to engage North Koreans in any conversation, however innocuous, could land them in serious trouble.

Chapter 4 Assessment

1. During the three decades after Korean War combat ended, the urban population of North Korea tripled.
   **True**
   About 18% of the population lived in cities at the end of the Korean War. By 1987, that figure had risen to almost 60% where it remains today.

2. The quality of North Korean medical care suffers from a lack of trained doctors.
   **False**
   The country has adequate doctors but quality of care suffers from a lack of medicines and equipment.

3. Pyongyang’s subway stop names do not refer to geographical locations.
   **True**
   The city’s subway stop names are revolutionary goals like reunification or paradise.

4. The city limits of Pyongyang expanded in 2011 when the city annexed part of a neighboring province to ease a labor shortage in the capital.
   **False**
   In 2011, the southern part of Pyongyang was re-designated part of a neighboring province. This reduced the capital city’s population by half a million people.

5. Frog markets are where shoppers go to buy frogs, considered a North Korean delicacy, for special occasions.
   **False**
   “Frog markets” is the colloquial name for free markets where peddlers jump and flee like frogs when the police appear.
CHAPTER 5: RURAL LIFE

Introduction
Approximately 40% of the North Korean population lives in rural areas. They live in the inland areas of Chagang and Yanggang provinces because these areas are unsuitable for agriculture and the climate is brutally cold. Instead, most rural communities are found in the coastal lowlands and the Yalu and Tumen river-valleys, where towns and villages dot hill slope bases. Farmers live in small low-rise apartments or simple thatched-roofed houses often without running water, heating systems, bathrooms, or kitchens. They confront a short growing season, due to the country’s northern latitude, along with a high ratio of population to arable land, estimated to be 14% of total territory. For this reason, the government’s emphasis on agricultural self-sufficiency, part of Kim Il Sung’s juche ideology, is fundamentally misguided. When one factors in economic mismanagement, lack of inputs and machinery, weather alternating between heavy monsoonal rains and drought during critical points in the crop cycle, the results have proved tragic. While few expect a return to the conditions which prevailed in the 1990s that led to widespread famine, food shortages remain a recurring possibility for rural North Koreans who have virtually no other means to earn a living than farming.

Agriculture
Perhaps taking the Korean saying “10 years is enough to change the landscape” literally, Pyongyang sought ways to increase grain production after the establishment of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) in 1948. Toward this end, the amount of land under irrigation was expanded by building a system of pumps and reservoirs reliant on electricity to run. The government also adopted a Chinese model of dense seed

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planning to increase yields.286 It could claim some success; agricultural output doubled between 1961 and 1988.287 This was aided through intensive application of petroleum-based chemical fertilizers, which benefitted from Soviet energy subsidies, coupled with initiatives like terraced farming, where hillsides are stripped of natural vegetation and cut into horizontal steps that can be planted with crops. Terracing also created the conditions for catastrophic flooding since there were no trees to absorb water. A reporter described the 1995 floods as a “deluge of biblical proportions.” Some communities received as much as 46 cm (18 in) of rainfall in a single day.288

Cooperative Farms

Such sweeping reorganization would not have been possible if land ownership had remained in private hands. In 1943, approximately 75% of rural households were either landless or close to landless.289 After Japanese colonial rule ended, however, the traditional landlord class fled south.290 Their property was distributed to those who worked the land, a highly popular move.291 Collectivization of individual plots into cooperative farms did not commence until the mid-1950s, when several thousand cooperative farms, each encompassing multiple housing clusters, were created. Contact between residents of neighboring hamlets was traditionally minimal unless they relied on shared resources.292 Now some 300 families were jointly responsible for cultivating an area of approximately 500 hectares (1,236 ac).293 Cooperatives were provided with tractors, a symbol of socialist agriculture. In 1977, the regime boasted there were six tractors in use for every 100 hectares (247 ac).294

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Exchange 26: Where do you work, sir?

| Soldier: | Where do you work, sir? | awdeesaw eeraasimneekaa? |
| Local:   | I am a farmer, sir.    | chon dongbu-eemneetaa    |

All cooperatives operated on the same schedule regardless of local conditions. Farmers fulfilled targets set by state planners.²⁹⁵ After the harvest was completed, farm managers delivered it to a collection site, where it entered the Public Distribution System (PDS). In contrast to urban residents who received twice monthly grain rations, the PDS allocated an annual ration to farmers, who possessed the means to store grain.²⁹⁶ In the event they ran short, farmers foraged for food.

**Market Reforms**

In response to declining grain production, in 1991 the government unveiled a “Let’s Eat Two Meals a Day” campaign that legitimized reduced rations.²⁹⁷ As shortages grew more acute by the mid-1990s, the PDS proved unable to deliver. While 61% of the population received rations through the PDS in 1994, the number had plummeted to 6% three years later.²⁹⁸ The social contract in which the state provided for the basic dietary needs of the populace was in tatters.²⁹⁹

People with access to idle land began to cultivate crops illegally as a survival strategy. Others hiked into the mountains to clear land and grew food on what became known as private farms (sotochi). Self-reliance was psychologically reconfigured away from state ideology (juche) to individual initiative.³⁰⁰ Those unable to grow their own food sold their possessions, and even the accommodation rights to their housing, to buy grain. As famine spread, social order broke down in areas hardest hit.³⁰¹ Though reports of cannibalism were never confirmed, orphaned children, referred to as wandering swallows (kochebi), joined gangs to find food. Mainly it involved

stealing. Soldiers, referred to as corn guards, were sent to guard the fields. Farmers pilfered crops in order to feed their own families. According to one relief agency, half the corn crop disappeared in 1996.\textsuperscript{302}

In 2002, North Korea legalized the private sale of agricultural produce.\textsuperscript{303} Given the ideological sensitivity of sanctioning material incentives to meet the demand for food, the regime shied away from the word \textit{gaehyeok} (개혁, reform), instead using terms like \textit{jeonbyeon} (전변, change) or \textit{balhyeon} (발현, development).\textsuperscript{304} While there appears to be no formal commitment to marketization other than as a stopgap measure, Pyongyang has found it impossible to turn back the clock. After 2005 proved to be the best harvest in ten years, private sales of grain were again banned and the PDS was reinstated.\textsuperscript{305} In May 2010, all restrictions on private retail trade imposed between 2005 and 2009 were lifted.\textsuperscript{306} The PDS has been replaced by vouchers that are only distributed to select groups.\textsuperscript{307} Everyone else buys their food at market-determined prices.\textsuperscript{308}

**Rural Transportation**

Poor infrastructure limits travel in North Korea. National rail service, built during Japanese colonial rule, mainly serves the more populated western side of the country. Rural residents in the north, and particularly the east, have been described as an “internally isolated underclass” left to their own devices to survive.\textsuperscript{309}

**Exchange 27: Is there a train station nearby?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>Is there a train station nearby?</th>
<th>kichayawgee kachaa-un gosey isumneedaa?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>naneeyo</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

North Koreans need permission for in-country travel. During the period of severe famine, the government turned a blind eye to the movement of people in search of food. After the situation stabilized, authorization could be procured by paying a “commission” (bribe) to personnel in charge of issuing permits. This enables traders to move their wares, though they may have to pay off every person in a position of authority whom they encounter. Train conductors and other staff


\textsuperscript{305} Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, U.S. Department of State, “Background Note: Economy,” 4 April 2012, \texttt{http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bg/n/2792.htm}

\textsuperscript{306} Andrei Lankov, “It’s Not All Gloom and Doom in Pyongyang,” \textit{Asia Times}, 23 September 2011, \texttt{http://atimes.com/atimes/Korea/M123Dg02.html}


\textsuperscript{309} “Deprive and Rule,” \textit{The Economist}, 17 September 2011, \texttt{http://www.economist.com/node/21529063}
reportedly check documents multiple times. Anyone whose paperwork is questioned will likely have to pay a bribe to make the problem go away, according to defectors and Chinese traders.\textsuperscript{310}

River transportation is a less common mode of moving passengers and goods.\textsuperscript{311} Two of the main rivers used to transport freight are the Amnok (Yalu), running along part of the border with China, and the Taedong, flowing from central North Korea to the southwest.

**Rural Health**

The North Korean government takes great pride in providing universal healthcare for its citizens.\textsuperscript{312} At the same time, according to the World Health Organization, the DPRK spends less on healthcare than any other country in the world—under USD 1 per person per year.\textsuperscript{313}

**Exchange 28: Is there a medical clinic nearby?**

| Soldier: Is there a medical clinic nearby? | kachaa-on gosey pyongonee isumneekaa? |
| Local: Yes, over there. | ney, chowgee-ey isumneetaa |

The diagnosis may be free, but out-patient treatment is often contingent upon the patient purchasing medicine from a private source recommended by the doctor who presumably receives a kick-back. Such schemes enable medical professionals to earn enough money to survive themselves.\textsuperscript{314} They are no longer automatically entitled to receive subsidized rice rations.

**Exchange 29: My arm is broken doctor, can you help me?**

| Soldier: My arm is broken doctor, can you help me? | paaree burojanindey, tu-aa jul soo isumneekaa? |
| Local: Yes, I can help you. | ney, tu-aa tidee kaasumneetaa |

The cost of surgery must be negotiated beforehand and paid up front. Defectors in Seoul report receiving frantic calls from family members in North Korea asking for immediate transfer of funds to pay for essential treatment.\textsuperscript{315}


Exchange 30: May I use your phone?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>May I use your phone?</th>
<th>chanaarul sayongal soo isumneekaa?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>Sure.</td>
<td>murlonee cheeyo</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Tuberculosis is a threat to those suffering from malnutrition. According to an organization involved in relief work, “[b]etween 2006 and 2008, the number of reported cases doubled to 344 per 100,000 people.” However, treatment facilities are insufficient to accommodate the demand. In addition, drugs supplied by international humanitarian groups are at risk of ending up for sale on the open market.

Rural Education

Education in North Korea is free and the government claims that 99% of the nation is literate. Eleven years of education are compulsory and includes two years of kindergarten or daycare, four years of primary school, and six years of middle school.

Exchange 31: Do your children go to school?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>Do your children go to school?</th>
<th>aayeedree hagkyowey taaneemneekaa?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>Yes.</td>
<td>ney</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each cooperative has at least one primary school. There is one middle school for every two or three cooperative farms. Each rural middle school has approximately 500-600 students, with an average class size of around 30 students, typically operating in two shifts. Despite the impact of food shortages on children, the system excludes those who have developmental disorders from schooling; there are no known special education programs in North Korea where disabilities are viewed as a source of shame.

Who Is In Charge?

The administrative and economic affairs at the village level are the responsibility of the chairman of the cooperative farm management committee of each village (rī). The Korean Workers’ Party

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(KWP), local people’s assemblies, and local administrative committees elect officials at the local level. The committees are extensions of the national bodies of the KWP and the Supreme People’s Assembly (SPA) as well as the cabinet.\textsuperscript{319} There are no checks and balances on state power in North Korea.\textsuperscript{320} At the same time, the administrative hierarchy of authority is riddled with principal-agent problems that result in diversion of goods from their intended purpose.\textsuperscript{321} Fertilizer allocated by the central level, for example, ended up for sale on the open market in June 2012. Despite the prospect of punishment, farmers sold the fertilizer in order to recoup what they spent on gasoline and truck rental fees to transport it from the distribution center to their fields.\textsuperscript{322} Aware of the situation, a former ambassador, upon receiving a request for fuel aid, pointed out “others” (e.g. the military) would likely appropriate whatever assistance his government could provide the cooperative. He was informed that wouldn’t happen because the farm manager was the chair of the local KWP committee, a position that gave her the power to fend off any effort by the local military commander to appropriate the fuel.\textsuperscript{323} Still, farmers face the ever present threat that in the event of food shortages, the military will simply come in and seize whatever it needs to feed the troops.\textsuperscript{324}

\section*{Border Crossings and Checkpoints}

There is direct international train service from Pyongyang to Beijing and Moscow.\textsuperscript{325} There is also a heavily monitored crossing point at Panmunjom between North and South Korea, used primarily by South Koreans working at the Kaesong Industrial Complex in North Korea.

\textbf{Exchange 32: Where is the nearest checkpoint?}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>Where is the nearest checkpoint?</th>
<th>kajhaang kachaa-un chadansogaa odiimneekaa?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>It is two kilometers.</td>
<td>ee keeromeetaa jongdo tarojani koshimeetaa</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


\textsuperscript{321} The principal-agent problem addresses the difficulties in ensuring that lower levels of decision-makers follow the wishes of higher levels rather than acting out of self-interest. Sam Vaknin, “The Agent-Principal Problem in Politics,” \textit{Global Politician}, 30 August 2010, \url{http://www.globalpolitician.com/26567-politics-business-corruption-citizenry-state}


\textsuperscript{324} Carol J. Williams, “North Korea Farmers to Test Regime Appetite for Reform,” \textit{Los Angeles Times}, 26 September 2012, \url{http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/world_now/2012/09/north-korea-farmers-market-economy.html}

\textsuperscript{325} The Man in Seat Sixty-One, “Train Travel to North Korea …” \url{http://www.seat61.com/NorthKorea.htm#UK0X5oYbiK0}
Citizens of the DPRK do not have the right to move around freely outside their home county or municipality. Military and police checkpoints exist on artery roads throughout the country to check papers that were originally issued only after an individual’s place of work requested permission for a business trip. As it became more important to have cash in the wake of the famine, officials would issue anyone the required travel pass for a price. Those unable to pay can expect to be seriously roughed up and have their possessions confiscated.

**Exchange 33: Please get out of the car.**

| Soldier: | Please get out of the car. | chaayeso neyreepshipsheeyo |
| Local: | OK. | aras simneetaa |

Travel within restricted areas like the Chinese border region (or Pyongyang) requires an additional endorsement from the security office at the person’s place of residence. This enables border guards to demand larger bribes from those without documentation travelling to or from China, especially smugglers who are presumed to have deep pockets. Moreover, the North Korean government has fortified the border through electric fencing and deployment of 20,000 additional guards since Kim Jong Un came to power in late 2011.

**Exchange 34: Is this all the ID you have?**

| Soldier: | Is this all the ID you have? | ee kominsungee tangshinee kaajin chanbu imneekaa? |
| Local: | Yes. | Ney |

It is possible for citizens of the DPRK to get permits to cross the border legally, though the process can take six months. Approval may require generous payments to all those who are in a position to deny the application. Would-be North Korean defectors repatriated from China, where those without papers are viewed as economic migrants not political refugees and therefore subject to deportation, will likely be sent to a labor camp.

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Landmines

North Korea has neither agreed to nor signed the Mine Ban Treaty. In the past, the country has produced antipersonnel mines; however, its current production cannot be determined due to lack of information. Estimates indicate the country’s mine stockpile to be large, but again, this remains unverified. 332

Exchange 35: Is this area mined?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>Is this area mined?</th>
<th>eegosee tangang choneemeekaa?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>Yes.</td>
<td>ney</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The number of landmine casualties in North Korea is unknown. The country admits it has laid mines in the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) along its border with South Korea, and there are unconfirmed suspicions that areas along the east coast have also been mined. Following severe rains on the Korean Peninsula, boxes of mines believed to have washed down from North Korea were found near a South Korean island. 333 Several similar incidents have occurred in recent years. 334, 335

Chapter 5 Assessment

1. All North Korean farmers work on collective farms.
   **True**
   Agriculture was collectivized in North Korea between 1945 and 1958. No meaningful privatization reforms have altered this arrangement.

   **True**
   North Korea spends less than USD 1 per person per year on healthcare.

3. Private grain sales have been allowed in North Korea since the late 1990s to ease food shortages.
   **False**
   Private sales of grain were only allowed during the famine, but prohibited again by the mid-2000s when the government moved to reassert control over the distribution of essential foodstuffs.

4. Loyalty to the regime is the decisive factor in all college admission decisions.
   **False**
   Loyalty to the regime is the most important factor in acceptance at Kim Il Sung University. For engineering and technical schools, however, merit figures prominently to ensure the students can do the work.

5. Orphaned children were referred to as “wandering swallows” during the famine years.
   **True**
   The children typically banded together to find food, often by stealing whenever they had the opportunity.
CHAPTER 6: FAMILY LIFE

Introduction

Even by the standards of 20th century state socialist regimes, the transformation of North Korea into a totalitarian quasi-cult where citizens literally worship the Kim dynastic leadership is extraordinary. Nonetheless, traditional values underpin its society. The government took deeply ingrained Confucian cultural norms such as filial piety and deference to authority and used them to cast Kim Il Sung as the national father figure. When the regime announced his death in 1994, defectors recall old women wailing “Abogi, Abogi,” the honorific used to address either the family patriarch or deity. At the same time, the regime’s high level of surveillance reinforces the bonds of blood relations.

Exchange 36: Are these people part of your family?

| Soldier: | Are these people part of your family? |
| Local: | ee saramduree tangshin kajok imneekaa? |
| No. | aanyo |

A former Chongjin resident who reached Seoul with several relatives said her family started planning their escape after a friend revealed he had traveled back and forth to China numerous times and knew people who could help them get across the border. In recounting their decision to leave, she recalled not only her shock upon learning her friend’s secret but fear as well, because, “[y]ou could never trust anybody who wasn’t family. This was exactly the way the secret police trapped people.”

Traditional Family Lineage

Following World War II, the Soviet Red Army occupied North Korea. The Soviet government viewed the Korean family lineage, a patrilineal descent group, as an obstacle to socialism. It traditionally owned an extended family’s land in common and bound members together through the worship of male ancestors. It represented an alternative source of authority. To destroy its power, authorities burned lineage records.

Exchange 37: Do you have any brothers?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>Do you have any brothers?</th>
<th>hyongjeygaa isumneeka?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>Yes.</td>
<td>ney</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However, a defector recalled being surprised that his father had memorized the names of their ancestors recorded in the traditional family register (hoju). In his final days, the ailing father repeated them to his only male heir. It represented the boy’s filial obligation to commit them to memory.³⁴¹ For the son, the hoju was a relic of the past. He had grown up after the state assumed many functions of the lineage like education of children and provision of essential services.³⁴² What mattered to him was the songbun, the government’s social classification system, since it determined his opportunities in life as a citizen of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK).

Distribution of Roles and Responsibilities

While the state assigns both men and women jobs, men were traditionally considered the primary breadwinner. Surveys of defectors in South Korea reveal many North Korean women self-identify as housewives even though they were employed full-time outside the home.³⁴³

Exchange 38: Are you the only person in your family who has a job?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>Are you the only person in your family who has a job?</th>
<th>kaajok chungyey chigaabul kaajhin boonee tangshin hojaa eemneeka?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>aanyo</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In fact, women are disproportionately represented in the labor force between the ages of 16 and 30. According to visitors, there appear to be more female than male medical doctors as well.³⁴⁴ This likely owes to the 10-year military enlistment men must complete.

Status of Women and Children

Women

According to the constitution of the DPRK, “women hold equal social status and rights with men.”³⁴⁵ Kim Il Sung advocated the creation of a female working class that would revolutionize the traditional family system. In reality, this imposed a double burden on North Korean women.

who continued to shoulder almost all the responsibility for housework. Unsurprisingly, researchers ascertained a much higher proportion of men sat for workplace promotion exams. Moreover, women were overwhelmingly assigned jobs in light industry because heavy industry is considered a man’s profession and one that, incidentally, offered better compensation and greater social prestige. Female employees were simply taken less seriously. If a woman opted to become a full-time homemaker, she faced little official resistance.

During the mid-1990s when the economy went into a sharp downturn, entrepreneurship began to proliferate as a means of household survival. Light industries were the first to cease production and many North Korean women became active in trading and selling activities to put food on the table. Men remain employees of the state, even though most factories operate in name only. Resigning is not an option, since that would be considered an act of disloyalty. Instead they can pay, in most cases many times their monthly salary, not to show up but remain on the books. Interviews indicate it is often the wife who decides whether her husband’s skills on the open market are worth such a large payment.

Children

Children are accorded a special place in North Korea. Government and party leaders spend a great deal of time visiting collective venues dedicated the instilling the correct values in the next generation. This includes indoctrinating them to view the United States as an evil place and the American people as monsters. Nonetheless, according to a British journalist, “the littlest North Koreans show more fascination than fear when they encounter the rare American in Pyongyang, invariably waving and calling out ‘Hello’ in English.”

Exchange 39: How are you?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>How are you?</th>
<th>otokey chiney saayo?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>Fine, very well.</td>
<td>chal chinemeedaa</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

Children in Pyongyang, who come from families with good *songbun*, participate in numerous extracurricular activities like painting, gymnastics and accordion lessons. Nationally, Korean Worker’s Party (KWP) Sports Committee scouts identify children with special abilities. They are sent to train at special year-round boarding schools. Students with advanced computer skills are similarly singled out and sent to a special school in Pyongyang.\textsuperscript{351}

### Exchange 40: Did you grow up here?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>Did you grow up here?</th>
<th>yawgeesaa charas sumneekaa?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>Yes.</td>
<td>ney</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While education is nominally free in the DPRK, local authorities organize secondary school students in rural areas to collect wood to heat the classroom buildings. If they fail to meet their quota, families must make up the difference.\textsuperscript{352} Furthermore, officials may enlist students to help with farm or factory work.\textsuperscript{353}

### Family Life in a Typical Household

After the establishment of the DPRK, nuclear families became the norm, in part because the state regarded the extended family or lineage as a relic of the pre-socialist era.\textsuperscript{354} Family size shrank from 6.5 children per woman in 1966 to 2.5 children in 1988.\textsuperscript{355} To what extent this declining demographic trend reflects Kim Il Sung’s 1974 pronouncement that a woman should not bear more than three children is unknown.\textsuperscript{356} It remains slightly above 2 children per woman.\textsuperscript{357} Nonetheless, they may have to support their children well into adulthood. One woman noted proudly, “My [adult] son comes to me because I feed him, and he obeys me.”\textsuperscript{358}


Exchange 41: How many people live in this house?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>How many people live in this house?</th>
<th>ee jeebey modyoo myat myangee samneekaa?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>Ten.</td>
<td>yowl myangimneetaa</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The empowerment of women is the direct result of their economic importance to the family. It has become common for women to jokingly refer to their husbands as *meong-meong-i*, a term of endearment for a pet who, while cute and loveable, is a financial responsibility. One man explained what happens to widowers. “Men without wives become beggars. They become so hungry that they can’t go to work. Then they have to go to market to beg.” Though domestic violence is reportedly on the rise as well, for a woman to remain single is not socially acceptable in North Korea.

Marriage, Birth and Divorce

Finding a Partner

Since 1971, men can marry at age 20 while women must wait until 28. Although the rationale has not been made public, it is understood that the unusual age-gap policy was promulgated to sustain the morale of soldiers during their mandatory 10-year enlistment. They do not need to worry about their girlfriends marrying someone else in their absence.

Exchange 42: Are you married?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>Are you married?</th>
<th>kaaron hashas sumneekaa?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>aanyo</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While North Korea has regulations against pre- and extra-marital sex, such laws have long been at odds with elite behavior. It is common knowledge that Kim Jong II’s eldest son was born to his mistress, a married woman. Prostitution re-emerged during the famine and access to condoms, which had been restricted, has become increasingly widespread.

After the establishment of the DPRK, *songbun* status replaced the traditional concern over compatible ancestral names in finding an appropriate martial partner. However, economic factors

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are increasingly important. If the person has relatives in Japan (or even South Korea) who can send hard currency, it will improve his/her prospects. 365

Exchange 43: Is this your wife?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>Is this your wife?</th>
<th>eebunee aaney imneekaa?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>Yes.</td>
<td>ney</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A woman’s moneymaking ability has become a desirable attribute in a wife as well. North Koreans speak of “golden couples,” referring to a husband in government and a wife in private commerce. 366 Whereas in the past men would have been ridiculed for marrying a divorcee, this is no longer the case. If she is a successful entrepreneur, she may be viewed as preferable to a never wed woman with no work history. According to a news report, “The choice of a divorced partner is especially popular among discharged soldiers in rural locations. The men see it as a chance to marry a city woman and escape the poverty of the countryside.” 367 Marriages between urbanites and farmers enable the couple to live in either location.

Birth of Children

It is customary for newlyweds to begin planning a family immediately. For Koreans, parenthood confers passage to adulthood. 368 Visibly pregnant women generally remain out of public view and rely on their mothers or mothers-in-law to care for them. Most births take place in hospitals. By custom, fathers are not present in the delivery room. 369 After three or four days, mother and baby return home, where they remain in seclusion, visited only by family members. 370

Exchange 44: Is this your entire family?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>Is this your entire family?</th>
<th>bodoo tangshiney kaajog imneekaa?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>Yes.</td>
<td>ney</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---


370 ProQuest, “North Korea,” *CultureGrams World Edition*, 2012,
According to demographic researchers, the traditional Korean preference for sons seems to have waned in the DPRK and has even shifted toward daughters, perhaps as a consequence of female earning power in the private sector. 371, 372

**Divorce**

Divorce by mutual consent does not exist in North Korea. A decree is only granted through court trial. Unhappy couples must therefore make their case for marital dissolution in court, which requires costly filing fees. 373 Moreover, the DPRK only allows the courts to issue a fixed number of decrees each year, since the regime views divorce, a practice traditionally unheard of in Korea, as a selfish bourgeois lifestyle choice harmful to children. 374

**Exchange 45: Are these your children?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>Are these your children?</th>
<th>tangsheen eydeur imneekaa?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>ney</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Those trying to advance in the ranks of the KWP would be unlikely to seek a divorce for that reason. North Koreans who are determined to end their unions may have to pay “commissions” to court personnel to obtain a decree. 375 The courts routinely award the couple’s property and children to the husband, which forces the wife to forge a new life. 376

**Rites of Passage**

**Weddings**

In North Korea, spring weddings are favored. Brides wear a traditional choson-ot, purchased by their future in-laws, while grooms don Western-style suits, not the Mao-suit worn on other formal occasions, unless they are in the military, in which case they are married in uniform. The couple usually exchange their vows in the bride’s home. A designated master or ceremony (churye), often a party cadre or workplace administrator, officiates on behalf of Kim Il Sung. As he pronounces the couple man and wife, they bow deeply in front of portraits of the Kim family leadership. Guests sing a song of praise of to Kim Il Sung followed by a round

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372 Daniel Schwekendiek, “Why Has Son-Preference Disappeared in North Korea?” *North Korean Review* 6, no. 2 (Fall 2010): 65-73, [http://mcfarland.metapress.com/content/km116050059w2036/](http://mcfarland.metapress.com/content/km116050059w2036/)
of toasts. The newlyweds then emerge to place a floral tribute on the nearest Kim Il Sung statue before posing for a commemorative picture in front of it.

**Exchange 46: I wish you both happiness.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>Local:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| I wish you both happiness. | We are honored. | hangbug aasigil paaraa imneedaa  
yongang imneedaa |

Both sets of parents host separate receptions for between 30 to 50 guests. A defector recalled this created a friendly competition to show off. The bride’s family prepares a banquet including fruits of five different colors served in dishware she will use in her new home. While the state has assumed the traditional responsibility of the groom’s side for providing the couple with accommodation, the bride’s family remains responsible for their cooking utensils, a cupboard fill of quilts, which are laid out for guests to admire, and other daily use items. A refrigerator has become a “must have” item, even if there is no electricity to run it.

Later, or possibly even the next day, the party moves to the groom’s home where the revelry continues into the night. The *churye* may provide the couple with a car so the bride can arrive at her in-laws’ home in style. Most guests will travel by bus or farm cooperative truck. Lavish wedding celebrations are regarded as wasteful and ideologically subversive by the government. Festivities are confined to private settings to shield the couple and their respective families from criticism. Afterward, newlyweds are customarily excused from professional obligations for three or four days to allow them to settle into their new life.

**Funerals**

When the communists took power in North Korea, they abolished many traditional customs that were perceived to support the old social order. This included elaborate funerals and memorial services that could draw large numbers of extended family. Yet in reality, traditional practices

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381 “The Culture of Family and Marriage in North Korea [Inspector],” YouTube video, 10:52, *Arirang News*, 22 May 2012, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v='TFh_1ilduFg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v='TFh_1ilduFg)

have blended with ideology. For example, a standard burial chant was reworded to include the claim, “though this body is deceased, the spirit of the revolution still lives.”

Exchange 47: I would like to give my condolences.

| Soldier: | I would like to give my condolences to you and your family. | choo-eerul pyoo haamneedaa |
| Local: | Thank you. | kamsaa hamneedaa |

In order to preserve land for other uses, the government requires the dead be cremated, an alien practice to Koreans. However, burial in the ground is permitted upon approval by “appropriate authorities,” which likely requires a bribe. During the years of famine, defectors report bodies removed from public places were dumped in anonymous mass graves. This represented disgraceful treatment of the dead in a Confucian society, where it is believed that proper burial in a carefully chosen location is critical to the good-fortune of the deceased’s descendants.

Exchange 48: Please be strong.

| Soldier: | Please be strong. | kaangaagey puteysaayo |
| Local: | We will try. | koorotorok haages sumneetaa |

Authorities reserve those Confucian rituals for the leadership. When Kim Il Sung died in 1994, his funeral procession was an elaborately staged spectacle. Mourners filled Pyongyang’s broad boulevards and expressed their grief in frenzied fashion; crying, wailing, and fainting as the funeral cortege passed by them. A more subdued but nonetheless publicly choreographed funeral was similarly staged for Kim Jong Il when he died in 2011. Tens of thousands lined the streets, weeping and wailing. Wailing (kok) is a traditional Korean response that reflects not only the family’s sadness over the loss of the deceased, but guilt over the prospect their lack of attention might be responsible for the person’s demise.

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**Hwangap (60th Birthday)**

The 60th birthday is an important milestone for all Koreans, who base their traditional calendar on the 60-year Chinese zodiac cycle. Individuals who complete the entire cycle are set to begin a new one. (The person’s actual chronological age can vary according to Western reckoning, since Koreans are considered one during their first calendar year and advance in age on the first of the year rather than on their birth date.) Children generally prepare a celebration when a parent passes this milestone. If a North Korean citizen has served society exceptionally well, s/he may also receive a table filled with special foods from the Kim family leadership. In honor of Kim Jong Il’s *hwangap*, mass celebrations were organized across the country.²⁸⁹ Sixty signals the normal retirement age for urban North Koreans employed in the public sector.²⁹⁰

**Naming Conventions**

Parents name their children in North Korea. Generally, Korean names have three syllables. The first is the paternal family name. The second and third are given names by which others will call the child. Traditionally for males, one of the given names is unique but the second is common to all male children in the generation so that all male cousins in the same generation share a common name. For example, Kim Il Sung, the nation’s first leader, named his son Kim Jong Il. The three sons of Kim Jong Il are named Kim Jong Nam, Kim Jong Chul, and Kim Jong Un (the current leader).²⁹¹ Kim is the paternal family name, Jong is the generational name, while the third is unique to each son. The next generation of males will likely have the same third name but a different second name. Circulating name parts (*dollimja*) enable each generation to know how far removed they are from their original lineage founder.²⁹² Women keep their paternal family name when they marry, and so, their names are different from those of their husbands and children.²⁹³

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²⁹⁰ ProQuest, “North Korea,” *CultureGrams World Edition*, 2012,
Chapter 6 Assessment

1. Korean children are considered one-year old at birth. The Communist regime in North Korea profoundly altered traditional culture.
   **True**
   Koreans consider the nine-month gestation to be the first year of life. The Communists severed the traditional organization of lineages and reshaped family life.

2. The government encourages North Koreans to have large families to provide future laborers to build socialism.
   **False**
   The North Korean birth rate dropped by two-thirds between the 1960s and the 1980s. In 1974, Kim Il Sung decreed women should give birth to no more than three children.

3. North Koreans consider heavy industry to be a man’s profession.
   **True**
   Women are generally assigned to farm and light industrial work because heavy industry is considered a man’s profession.

4. Authorities have the right to remove children with their homes to enroll them in specialized schools.
   **True**
   Promising athletes are sent to state boarding schools to develop their talents. They only come home for several short vacations a year.

5. The deeply instilled revulsion for capitalism continues to handicap those with money-making skills in finding a spouse.
   **False**
   The ability to earn money has become an asset for those seeking a marriage partner. North Korean men may look for a woman with a proven history of entrepreneurship so they don’t have to face the prospect of shouldering the burden of supporting a family alone.
FINAL ASSESSMENT

1. The Amnok River is also known as the Yalu River.
   True / False

2. The North Korean city of Kaesong lies below the 38th parallel division of North and South Korea.
   True / False

3. Any North Korean citizen is entitled to live in the capital of Pyongyang.
   True / False

   True / False

5. North Korea has always been poorer than South Korea.
   True / False

6. North Korean people demonstrate their devotion to Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il by placing their portraits along family photos inside their home.
   True / False

7. Christianity never made deep inroads on the Korean peninsula.
   True / False

8. Chongdogyo is a religion native to Korea.
   True / False

9. Though Confucius was Chinese, Korea is routinely described as “the most Confucian land” in Asia.
   True / False

10. In recent years, North Korea restored a number of historic Buddhist temples so Buddhists have a place to worship.
    True / False

11. North Koreans never bow when exchanging greetings because this is a Japanese custom.
    True / False

12. North Koreans avoid using their fingers to pick up food when eating.
    True / False
13. North Koreans make social visits whenever their schedule allows.
   True / False

14. There are three major songbun categories broken down into 51 separation subcategories.
   True / False

15. There are three types of badges worn by North Korean citizens.
   True / False

16. Under socialism, the typical workday was shortened to fewer than eight hours to demonstrate that only capitalists forced employees to spend long hours on the job.
   True / False

17. Few urbanites heeded recent calls from the government to move to the countryside to help build a socialist society.
   True / False

18. South Korea, which has better conditions for farming, is less urbanized than North Korea which industrialized earlier.
   True / False

19. Most free market peddlers in North Korea are women.
   True / False

20. According to surveys, North Korea has only a modest level of corruption.
   True / False

21. Farmers set aside part of the harvest for personal consumption before turning the rest over to the government to distribute to city residents.
   True / False

22. Creating terraces on hills and mountains upon which to plant rice made a lasting difference in North Korea’s ability to expand grain harvests.
   True / False

23. Disabled students and others who have disabilities are banished routinely from Pyongyang and sent to live in rural areas.
   True / False

24. Most rural residents of North Korea live in the inland areas of Chagang and Yanggang provinces.
   True / False

25. Less than half of the current population of North Korea lives in rural areas.
   True / False
26. North Korean women are rising to the highest echelons of power reflecting government efforts to end traditional forms of gender discrimination.  
   True / False

27. Divorce is considered a private matter in North Korea where the government routinely grants decrees when both partners want to end the marriage.  
   True / False

28. All North Korean wedding festivities are held indoors.  
   True / False

29. Only members of the Kim dynastic leadership are accorded elaborate public funeral services.  
   True / False

30. North Korean men can legally marry at a younger age than women.  
   True / False
FURTHER READINGS AND RESOURCES


Red Tape and Comedy in North Korea. DVD. Neutral Bay, NSW, Australia: Enhance TV, 2011.


