

# IDEOLOGY AND ECONOMIC POLICY IN NORTH KOREA

YONHO KIM, EDITOR, *NKEF Policy and Research Paper Series / 2022*

# About the North Korea Economic Forum

The North Korea Economic Forum (NKEF) is part of the policy program at the George Washington University's Institute for Korean Studies (GWIKS). The Forum aims to promote the understanding of North Korean economic issues, distribute well-balanced, deeply researched, and multi-dimensional insights on the North Korean economy and to expand networks among various North Korea watchers, scholars, and policymakers. The Forum mostly involves closed and off-the-record meetings, where participants can freely and seriously discuss critical issues. Mr. William Brown is currently the chair of NKEF and is leading the meetings. NKEF also organizes special conferences made public throughout the academic year. The Forum is made possible by a generous grant provided by the KDI School of Public Policy and Management.

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# Preface

As an isolated socialist country, North Korea has had to face a constant challenge of justifying its own vision of economic self-reliance and the dynamics of marketization. The North Korean people's greater access to foreign media and domestic market information has required different versions of legitimization of mass mobilization. Drawing from a variety of academic disciplines and subject-matter specializations, the North Korea Economic Forum (NKEF) Annual Conference in October 2021 examined the role that ideology has played in shaping and constraining economic policy and economic life in North Korea, both in the Kim Jong Un era and historically. This collection of papers is a product of the conference sponsored by the KDI School of Public Policy and Management. I hope this set of papers offers a range of views that will contribute to the ongoing policy debates over how to address the challenges North Korea presents.

NKEF is part of the policy program at the George Washington University's Institute for Korean Studies (GWIKS). The Forum has been recognized by the North Korea watchers throughout the world as a center for knowledge-sharing and network-building, both private and public, on the North Korean economy which is relatively less discussed by the military and security-oriented Washington policy circle. Based on the successful second-year publication of the edited collection of Policy and Research Paper Series, NKEF will continue publishing creative, in-depth analyses on the North Korean economy relevant for both academic audiences and policy specialists.

**Yonho Kim**  
*Editor, NKEF Policy and Research Paper Series 2022*

WILLIAM BROWN

# Economic Ideology: A Refreshing Approach to Studying the North Korean Economy?

We live in the so-called information age. Even a country “shrouded in fog,” as Daniel Wertz described North Korea in his opening commentary in our first edition of this annual series of study papers on North Korea’s economy last year, is easily observable from space, even to our personal computers. And there is plenty of granular data available from excellent reporting sources coming from diligent reporters in South Korea and Japan on all kinds of issues, plus the forever blanket of pea-soup fog in the official media.

I often check North Korean exchange rate and price data and amuse myself over its inconsistencies and I download Chinese trade data— for the moment not so interesting since such trade

collapsed in 2020—amid UN Panel of Experts reports saying the data is misleading. And the US Geological Survey (USGS) “tsunami” warning beeps on my cell phone whenever there is a surface seismic event of a certain magnitude up high in the North Hamgyong Province in the northeast. It beeped for me in 2006, even before the official US word of a nuclear blast, giving me some kudos. And I can do all this from my study, not having to go into a Top Secret SCIF twenty miles away and contend with corruption laden security clearances. I like to check the weather in Pyongyang, using instant radar and temperature data just scrolling around the globe on my weather app. My observation this February day—it is very cold in the northern capital! I wonder what it feels like in

the mountains to the northeast where heat is not available and temperatures are below zero, Fahrenheit.

This latter difference between data and perception is the focus of our research effort on North Korea, taking the data a step forward from grains of sand to showing us something of what it is like to be living in North Korea today. It won’t tell us what Kim Jong Un is thinking, or what it would take for him to trade in his nuclear weapons and join the rest of the world, but it may help us understand the kinds of things he and his regime must deal with as they try to hold their critically endangered country together.

The four papers in this year’s volume do just that from four very different

perspectives. They focus on economic ideology issues but not in the way I am used to; few data points and not much talk about GDP or balance of payments, although Jonathon Corrado provides some such South Korean government estimates. GDP measures are always constructed estimates, not absolute fig-

industrial area between Pyongyang and its port city of Nampo. Kim and Cherry relate Cheollima to theories that it is a North Korean version of Mao's disastrous Great Leap Forward, at about the same time, but they appropriately note differences. It is interesting since Kim Jong Un keeps referring to a "Great

in which the heroine is a generation or two removed from the Gangseon steel workers, and I won't spoil it here. But moving from steel to textiles to information technology appears to be what Kim now wants people to see, all in a collectivist struggle against whatever it is he wants them to fight against. And

I must admit, there is sometimes great utility in a big common crash program to get something done. Sometimes infrastructure work here in Virginia is so slow I'd like to see a Cheollima speed battle finish our three decades in-the-building Silver Metro Line. Maybe President Biden should

***Shaw's assumptions are that the readership already must be fairly knowledgeable about capitalist institutions and theory, or they would not be able to make any sense of the stories, and that the books are thus aimed at the well-educated elites.***

ures, so these should be considered estimates of the estimates, or what I prefer to think of as proxies. But it is refreshing to go beyond these as these authors have with interesting new approaches. As with all such pieces, there is room for disagreement and debate but that just makes them more interesting.

For many Pyongyang watchers, if there is one icon that represents the country's propaganda it must be the flying horse statue in Pyongyang, symbolizing a lot that we tend to make fun of about North Korea. I immediately think of "speed battles" as I try to organize my kids to do their Saturday chores. The statue looks appropriately Stalinist, not Korean, and its name in English, confusing, "the ten thousand li horse" but not spelled that way. Pil Ho Kim and Makayla Cherry do a great job with their "Cheollima, Ten Times Faster? The Gangseon Steel Mill and the Cultural Turn in North Korea's Mass Mobilization Campaign" bringing some sense to this propaganda in art, literature, and film, showing the important impact such campaigns have had on the North Korean workforce and which Kim Jong Un may be trying to resurrect in a new way. The emphasis is on the old Gangseon electric arc steel mill where the movement was initiated by Kim Il Sung. It may be more familiar to American readers as Gangseon, an important

Leap" needed in North Korean industry today despite what he must know is Asia-wide ridicule at Mao's iron pot melting scheme of the early 1960s.

Kim and Cherry point out the propaganda themes are often blast furnace orange sunsets, visualizing what older North Koreans probably think of as the high point of their economic successes—the late 1950s—and the enormous speed battles that quickly rebuilt Pyongyang and other cities after the Korean War, what Eastern European diplomats referred to as "Pyongyang Speed." I have wondered why the Cheollima emphasis is on Gangseon steel and not the much more important Kimchaek integrated iron and steel mill in the big industrial city of Cheongjin in the northeast, perhaps because electric arc seems more modern, and the process does not need imported cooking coal—it simply melts recycled steel. Do those hundred thousand workers in Cheongjin feel left out, or even the Hwanghae iron and steel plant that supplies Gangseon? And one wonders how such scenes relate to the new generation discussed by Corrado or those reading the novels mentioned by Shaw (discussed below). "Cheollima, Ten Times Faster? The Gangseon Steel Mill and the Cultural Turn in North Korea's Mass Mobilization Campaign" points to that with a movie,

contract out to Kim for his Build Back Better program and get it done, fast.

In her paper "Global Finance through the Lens of North Korean State Literature," Meredith Shaw uses her expertise in language and literature to penetrate an unusual and little exploited source on North Korea's changing attitudes toward capitalism and finance. Her sources are fiction, novels produced by state-approved writers who create stories for the public to entertain themselves, but also, as she asserts, as a method of indoctrination and learning. They expose a central dilemma of the regime: how to portray the failures of American capitalism in a way that doesn't lead readers to appreciate the advantages of private ownership of capital, the "means of production" as Marx liked to say, which are increasingly apparent even in Pyongyang. Like people everywhere, the authors and their audiences love to focus on human interest stories, so a discussion among two Americans about how one of them over invested in the stock market and lost his savings, and of another whose start-up company went bust, must be fascinating for people living in , for example, Hamheung, looking at the small entrepreneurs seeking working capital to supply their shops, or even to expand their locations and needing permanent capital.

1. Daniel Wertz, "Cutting Through the Fog: The Methodology of Researching North Korea," in GW Institute for Korean Studies, *Researching North Korea: Sources, Methods, and Pitfalls*, NKEF Policy and Research Paper Series, 2021. [https://cpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com/blogs.gwu.edu/dist/8/416/files/2017/09/GW\\_KoreanStudies\\_Papers\\_03.pdf](https://cpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com/blogs.gwu.edu/dist/8/416/files/2017/09/GW_KoreanStudies_Papers_03.pdf)

Shaw's assumptions are that the readership already must be fairly knowledgeable about capitalist institutions and theory, or they would not be able to make any sense of the stories, and that the books are thus aimed at the well-educated elites. A one sentence critique of Adam Smith and Milton Friedman comes to mind, planting the idea that a planned economy is much more logical than a chaotic decentralized one. But one can easily imagine the North Korean readers thinking they should know something more of Smith and Friedman. With a small amount of research, probably available even in North Korea, they might find they agree with Smith's idea that shop keepers' desire to make a profit is not so bad, and find the quantity theory of money, the simple idea that a government that prints ever more paper money invites inflation, rather appealing, their experience with Kim Jong Il being such a reminder. They would not have to go to western theorists for these ideas; there are ancient Chinese and Korean writings on these same subjects, but by focusing on the Americans they may provide some kind of unintended respect. But then one can argue the propagandists know this better than we, so perhaps there is some kind of ulterior madness in their approach; maybe they are preparing the audience, at least the elites, for reforms of the underlying ownership system, or for appreciation of Kim's

apparent tight money policy that would make Friedman proud. That, for me, is far more interesting than Kim's view of nuclear weapons, for such a change could remove some of their sense of vulnerability to the capitalist world around them. We don't really know the intent or the result of these kinds of writings, but it is interesting to think and debate them and wonder, even expect, North Korean readers to do the same.

Shaw shows a strong understanding of capitalist finance, and my only critique is that there is not more of it. In other words, she should keep up with the good work. There must be many more such books coming out and we can learn from how these economic concepts are presented, especially the

ideas of private ownership and use of all kinds of money in lieu of communist style rations. And I would like more understanding of the degree to which rank-and-file North Koreans, not just elite scholars, read such books. They may be much more widespread in this highly literate and study-oriented society than we think.

Tycho van der Hoog's paper, "On the Success and Failure of North Korean Development Aid in Africa," takes a new disciplined look at the old story of North Korea's ironic aid programs in Africa, focusing on Ghana and Tanzania and especially on *juche* or self-reliant agriculture. He shows how the programs were public relations successes, especially with leftist western economists and social scientists such as Cambridge economist Joan Robinson, but which were developmental failures at the farm levels. "Aid" doesn't even seem to be the right word given that corrupt national leaders paid the North Koreans for their work trying to create socialist style farms. One might imagine, without

that being proposed by the much larger western aid programs.

The aid program did have value in showing North Korea to be much less the "hermit kingdom" that it becomes later after the collapse of Soviet socialism and the sharp cutbacks in its own foreign trade and investment relationships with the rest of the world. North Korean leaders were adept at using their self-reliant ideology to a profitable extent in African countries that were seeking to become independent of both the west and the east.

Jonathan Corrado, in his paper "Rose-Colored Glasses: The Information Ecosystem's Influence on Generational Variation in Attitudes on North Korea's Economic Management" takes an ambitious approach to studying generational change in North Korean attitudes toward Kim Jong Un's economic policies, using detailed surveys of defectors organized and published by Seoul National University and by the Unification Media Group. The SNU

*We don't really know the intent or the result of these kinds of writings, but it is interesting to think and debate them and wonder, even expect, North Korean readers to do the same.*

proof, they used real western aid dollars to pay the North Koreans. The essential problem, as is usually the case with centrally planned and dictated projects, is too little attention to local conditions. In effect, according to Van der Hoog, North Korean experts were not paying attention to the particular comparative advantages of the villages they were supposed to be helping, instead using cookie cutter approaches to crop decisions, mechanization, and fertilization. It reminds me of today in North Korea where the bureaucrats in Pyongyang have suddenly decided wheat is better than corn, after pushing corn for 70 years. But despite the failures, it all paid off for Pyongyang for a while as North Korea was able to convince many that its version of economics was better than

surveys, done over about a decade ask the same questions every few years of defectors based upon the time they left North Korea with the latest batch covering 2019, capturing insight now from after recent Kim's policies that seemed to have changed toward more centralization of activity and away from earlier experiments with a more market focus. Corrado's somewhat surprising findings is that he finds younger cohorts in the survey to be more pleased with the policies than are older cohorts which are highly critical of Kim and the socialist system. He theorizes that this is due to recently stronger government propaganda and less information entering the country from abroad in these later years. Along the way, Corrado reports excellent analysis of the changes in the



*A Foggy Day in Geumgangsan Port*

economy itself provided by SNU, the Bank of Korea, OECD, and others, in particular to show a large increase in private supported employment and a rapid decline in dependence on state activity during Kim's ten-year tenure.

These moving targets—radical changes in the economy including a drop in GDP per capita as estimated by the South Korean central bank since 2017, the shrinking state versus private sector share of income, and the well-known vagaries of dealing with defector reporting (I would call them refugees)—make it difficult to prove such a theory, as Corrado clearly acknowledges, but as he says it does offer the possibility that the younger generation in North Korea is more happy with Kim than the decline in income and foreign troubles

would suggest. Whether this is because of stronger propaganda and less information or a different understanding of the benefits of marketization that has slowed but not stopped, are ripe for new analysis as this kind of data continues to pour in.

It is all fun and challenging reading, well edited by a sharp-minded Yonho Kim and a slew of others at GW Institute for Korean Studies. I am remembering that Korea is often covered in fog in the early morning. Maybe studies like these are helping the sun to break through, just a little. There is no doubt you will all learn something that you can use in our endless debates on North Korean policy and economics. And don't forget to peruse the bibliographies for many more excellent papers. ■

PIL HO KIM AND MAKAYLA CHERRY

# Cheollima, Ten Times Faster?

## *The Gangseon Steel Mill and the Cultural Turn in North Korea's Mass Mobilization Campaign*

### ABSTRACT

The Cheollima movement, a mass mobilization campaign that began under Kim Il Sung's leadership in the late 1950s, has been memorialized as a great achievement in North Korean history. Although its economic impact is still a matter of debate in Western scholarship, only scant attention has been paid to its cultural legacy. Focusing on Cheollima's birthplace, the Gangseon Steel Mill, we find this legacy

reverberating through the Kim Jong Il and Kim Jong Un eras. For example, Gangseon appears in the two internationally circulated North Korean films, *Comrade Kim Goes Flying* (2012) and *The Story of Our Home* (2016), foreshadowing the Mallima (ten times faster than Cheollima) movement under Kim Jong Un. These two films and other Mallima iconography allude to a cultural turn of North Korea's mass mobilization campaign, which places the youth at the center of scientific and technological advancement.

### INTRODUCTION

The bulk of English-language scholarship on the mass mobilization campaigns of North Korea (the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, or DPRK) tends to focus on their immediate economic impact without paying much attention to their long-term cultural legacy. This tendency underestimates the subsequent mass mobilization campaigns as pointless regurgitation of the initially successful Cheollima movement

1. Samuel Kim, "North Korea in 1999: Bringing the Grand Chollima March Back In," *Asian Survey* 40, no. 1 (2000): 152; Andrei Lankov, *Crisis in North Korea* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), 184; Paul French, *North Korea* (London: Zed Books, 2007), 75; Patrick McEachern, *Inside the Red Box* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 118. A few notable exceptions in English-language literature pay Cheollima its due attention. See Peter Moody, "Chollima," *The Thousand Li Flying Horse: Neotraditionalism at Work in North Korea* *Sungkyun Journal of East Asian Studies* 13, no. 2 (2013): 211-33; Cheehyung Harrison Kim, *Heroes and Toilers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 104-17.

under Kim Il Sung. Worse still, some regard Cheollima as little more than a pale imitation of the Soviet Union's Stakhanovite movement and China's Great Leap Forward.<sup>1</sup> The simplistic, dismissive view of Cheollima typically comes with the benefit of hindsight on the DPRK's eventual economic failure. In contrast, South Korean scholarship has been engaged in comprehensive, historically nuanced research since the 1970s, elucidating Cheollima's persistence despite its diminishing returns.<sup>2</sup>

Our paper critically reexamines the ongoing legacy of the Cheollima movement in connection with the Gangseon Steel Mill (later renamed the Cheollima Steelworks). The mill and the people who inhabit the Gangseon area became a genuine symbol and inspiration for the DPRK's economic success in the Great Cheollima Surge Period (1957-67). Although the mill's economic pull dwindled throughout the Kim Jong Il era and into the current Kim Jong Un era, its cultural significance has not. The mill became a memorial site celebrating the Cheollima movement as Kim Il Sung's enduring legacy. It provided a backdrop for countless literary tributes to the model workers ("Cheollima Riders") and itself became a prime object for artistic renditions. As the birthplace of Cheollima, it was summoned up once again in the second—or third, depending on who is counting—surge of the mass mobilization campaign led by Kim Jong Il (2008-11). The short-lived surge still produced a volume of propaganda literature from the steel mill titled *We Are Gangseon People* (2010).

Since the ascension of Kim Jong Un, the mill has turned into a premier filming location for two recent movies supposedly geared toward international viewership, *Comrade Kim Goes Flying* (*Gimdong-muneun hanereul nanda*, 2012) and *The*

*Story of Our Home* (*Uri jip iyagi*, 2016). In analyzing these two films, we attempt to show that the regime is projecting its new, modern image to the outside world while instilling the myth of the continued success of mass mobilization campaigns. In this context, Kim Jong Un's 2017 declaration of Mallima (ten times faster than Cheollima) not only points to the redoubled intensity of mass mobilization but also alludes to a subtle shift of emphasis from traditional heavy industries such as steel to science and high technology and perhaps even to culture and entertainment.

### THE GREAT CHEOLLIMA SURGE AND DIP: PRODUCTION AND PROPAGANDA UNDER KIM IL SUNG

The origin of the Cheollima movement remains a controversial topic among North Korea watchers, not because it makes any substantial difference whether the movement was officially launched in 1956, 1957, or 1959, but because some believe that it was imitating the Great Leap Forward and therefore could not have started earlier than 1958. Mass mobilization campaigns had been staged before Cheollima, taking the form of a moral-ideological reform movement (*Geonguk sasang chong-dongwon undong*, 1946-50) and Stakhanov-style labor competitions (*Jeungsan gyeongjaeng undong*, 1946-50; *Noryeok yeongung undong*, 1951-59).<sup>3</sup> These campaigns were later integrated into Cheollima, which is still considered a great success—at least internally—unlike the disastrous Great Leap Forward.<sup>4</sup> Even those who belittle Cheollima as a knockoff with a "distinctly Maoist flavor" acknowledge DPRK's impressive economic record during the Great Surge.<sup>5</sup>

Those familiar with mass mobilization campaigns in modern East Asia would not necessarily deny China's apparent influence on Cheollima. Still, they are also aware of other comparable mass mobilizations across the ideological divide, such as Imperial Japan's "moral suasion" campaigns that preceded both the Great Leap Forward and Cheollima and South Korea's New Village Movement (*Saemaedul undong*) that came afterward. In other words, Cheollima has shared cultural roots with neighboring states, both friends and foes.<sup>6</sup>

The official narrative on the origin of Cheollima is that shortly after a general meeting of the Korean Workers' Party Central Committee, Kim Il Sung visited Gangseon Steel Mill for his patented on-the-spot guidance (*hyeonji jido*) in December 1956, informing the workers of the party's decision to launch the First Five-Year Plan in the new year. Kim's speech, titled "Let's mobilize to the maximum extent to produce steel," is credited as the catalyst of the movement.<sup>7</sup> The story has been retold multiple times, lately through the Korea Central News Agency (KCNA) on February 22, 2021:

At dawn of December 28, Juche 45 (1956), the President visited the then Gangseon Steel Plant to talk frankly with its workers about the difficult conditions of the country. He said it would be good for the country if it has 10,000 tons of rolled steel in addition, stressing that when other people take one step, we must take ten, and when other people take ten steps, we must take one hundred.<sup>8</sup>

Initially, the new movement did not distinguish itself from previous campaigns in substance. A stylistic difference is significant, however: Kim Il Sung's direct personal appeal to the workers.

2. Bok Su Lee, "Bukhan 'Cheollimaundong'ui Sahoehakjeok Hamui," *Journal of Asiatic Studies* 20, no. 2 (1977): 171-200. The comparison between the Great Leap Forward and Cheollima alone generated several studies that refute the simplistic view of the two movements. See Gil Jae Ryu, "Cheollimaundong'gwa Sahoejuuigyeongjeonseol," in *Bukhan Sahoeju*, 43-79 (Seoul: Institute for Far Eastern Studies, 1993); Mun Cheong Lee and Jeong Min Seo, "Bukhangwa Junggukui Sahoeju Daejungdongwon Bigyoyeongu," *Korean Political Science Review* 47, no. 4 (2013): 157-83; Sang Ryeol Woo, "Joseonui Cheollimaundonggwa Hangukui Saemaedulundong Bigyoyeongusiron," *Humanities for Unification* 55 (2013): 247-88.

3. See also Cheehyung Kim, *Heroes and Tailors*, 105-108.

4. Overall positive assessments of Cheollima were made contemporaneously by the Soviet Union and other Eastern European allies, as shown in their internal documents. James Person, "New Evidence on North Korea's Chollima Movement and First Five-Year Plan" (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center, 2009): 63, 68.

5. Lankov, *Crisis in North Korea*, 184-86; French, *North Korea*, 77.

6. Sheldon Garon, *Molding Japanese Minds* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997); Woo, "Joseonui," 247-88; Kristen Looney, "Mobilization Campaigns and Rural Development," *World Politics* 73, no. 2 (2021): 205-42. Balázs Szalontai points out that Kim Il Sung "did not merely copy Chinese policies" but instead followed the Soviet leadership, "unlike Stalin but similarly to Khrushchev," in conducting on-the-spot guidance (*Kim Il Sung in the Khrushchev Era* [Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center, 2005], 114).

7. Moody, "Chollima," 215; Yeong Ji Lee, "Hyeonji geurigo cheollima," *Journal of Korean Modern & Contemporary Art History* 40 (2020): 488.

8. "Chollima Statue Showing Heroic Spirit of DPRK People," *DPRK Today*, February 22, <https://dprktoday.com/abroad/news/27044> (accessed September 28, 2021).

The success of this approach brought a new round of movement with a substantive change two years later. Again, it immediately followed the Great Leader's on-the-spot guidance at Gangseon in February 1959. On March 9, a smelting team leader named Jin Eungwon decided to complete the "First Five-Year Plan within the year."<sup>9</sup> Jin would later become a labor hero because his work team began the nationwide campaign called the Cheollima Work Team Movement.<sup>10</sup> Many scholars see the movement as the real beginning of Cheollima because it achieved increased production goals through collective technological innovation, new skills acquisition, and communist moral education rather than by relying on individual labor competitions.<sup>11</sup>

In combination with such organizational innovations as the Daeam Managerial System for industry and the Cheongsan-ri method for agriculture, the Cheollima movement established North Korea's own "mass line" (*gunjung noseon*).<sup>12</sup> This led to the Great Revolutionary Surge, widely considered the best of the times in North Korean history. Even Hwang Jangyeop, the highest-ranked former official among North Korean defectors, fondly remembers the Great Cheollima Surge as the country's golden age in his memoir.<sup>13</sup> An economic analysis deeply skeptical of DPRK's official data nonetheless estimates a 147.5 percent increase in labor productivity and a 330 percent growth in industrial productivity by 1967.<sup>14</sup> Balázs Szalontai argues that despite the "enormous effort by all strata of the hard pressed society," Cheollima "barely raised the living standards of the population" as evidenced by meager increases in the amount of food rationing, among other things.<sup>15</sup> Undoubtedly, the feat of socialist industrialization

was accomplished at the expense of agriculture in North Korea, and the rural population, in particular, may well have resented the burden they had to shoulder. Still, the DPRK not only avoided the devastating famine the Great Leap Forward brought to China but also managed to grow the agricultural sector output at an annual rate of 8 percent between 1956 and 1960.<sup>16</sup>

Cheollima was never to reach such a height again, but it created an enduring template for the North Korean mass line: team-based labor competition, direct leader-masses communication through on-the-spot guidance, and ideological edification campaign. Not to rest on its laurels of the cradle of Cheollima, Gangseon laid claim to the consolidation of the mass line in 1965 with the blessing of the Great Leader, who once again visited the steel mill to proclaim that "the issue is whether or not the workers can continue on with the work method based on the mass line."<sup>17</sup>

As the initial charge of Cheollima slowed in the 1960s, the movement's emphasis began shifting from material incentives to ideological edification (*sasang gyoyang*)—moral education combined with self-cultivation through history, literature, arts, and other activities that further the notion of an "archetypal communist" (*gongsanjuui-jeok ingan*).<sup>18</sup> In literature, the first reference to Cheollima appeared in 1959. The literary archetype (*jeonhyeong*) of the Cheollima Rider, however, was not discussed until after Kim Il Sung's November 1960 address, "Let's create literature and arts befitting the Cheollima Era." The archetype was formulated over the next several years, producing the bulk of poetry, fiction, and non-

fiction works during the mid- to late years of the Great Surge.<sup>19</sup> The monthly *Cheollima* was launched in 1959 expressly to promote the movement. It remains the only general-interest magazine in North Korea today. A series of tributes and testimonials to Cheollima Riders was published in fourteen volumes between 1961 and 1966; labor heroes themselves wrote memoirs.<sup>20</sup> The Workers' Party continued to churn out Cheollima handbooks and manuals from 1960 until 1975, of which the most important was the collection of Kim Il Sung's words, *On the Cheollima Movement and the Great Surge of Socialist Construction*, published in 1970.<sup>21</sup>

The iconography of Cheollima was taking a step ahead of literary representations. The 1958 poster (figure 1) had established a visual archetype that would recur in numerous propaganda artworks. The rider, holding a banner, exhorts the viewer to enlist in the battle "for socialist construction," staring straight in the viewer's eyes and pointing directly at them. It bears an interesting resemblance to the Uncle Sam "I Want You" poster by American artist James Montgomery Flagg (1916) for the U.S. Army enlistment campaign during World War I. More interestingly, the red horse in the poster does not have the wings that would appear in most later Cheollima renderings. As such, one of the early Cheollima images belies the popular English translation of its name into a "flying horse." Peter Moody tries to connect the horse image with references in Chinese classics, such as the fictional Red Hare Horse (Jeoktoma) in *Romance of Three Kingdoms* and Bo Le's horse named Ji in *Garden of Stories*, only to admit that Cheollima "could refer to any horse designated as superior."<sup>22</sup> Indeed, Cheollima

9. Jin later told a Japanese leftist intellectual Fujishima Unai that he was one of the steelworkers who had received Kim Il Sung's first on-the-spot guidance at Gangseon in December 1956. Bok Su Lee, "Bukhan," 8. The work team movement had thus been more than two years in the making.

10. Cheehyung Kim, *Heroes and Toilers*, 109.

11. Ryu, "Cheollimaundong'gwa," 68; Seong Hwan Ju and Yeong Gi Jo, "Bukhanui 'Jeiui Cheollimadaejingun'undonge Gwanhan Yeongu," *North Korean Studies Review* 4, no. 2 (2000): 121-22; Se Yeong Yi, "Cheollima Undonggwa Sahoejuui," in *Cultural History of Modern Korea, the 1960s* (Paju: Changbi Publishers, 2016), 224-25; Cheehyung Kim, *Heroes and Toilers*, 107-108.

12. Jang Soon Moon, "Gimjeongeun Sidaewi Gunjungnoseon," *Korean Journal of Political Science* 26, no. 4 (2018): 1-19.

13. Jangyeop Hwang, *Naneun Yeoksau Jillireul Boatta* (Seoul: Hanwool, 1999), 135; Woo, "Joseonui," 276-77; Se Yeong Yi, "Cheollima Undonggwa," 225-30.

14. Mikyung Kim, "Historical Survey of North Korea's Economic Development," *International Journal of Korean Unification Studies* 11, no. 2 (2002), 265.

15. Szalontai, *Kim Il Sung*, 123-24.

16. Tae Hyeong Jo and Min Jeong Kim, "Bukanui Janggi Gyeongje" (Seoul: Bank of Korea, 2020), 32.

17. Kim Il Sung's address to the expanded party committee meeting at the Gangseon Steel Mill. Moon, "Gimjeongeun Sidaewi," 5.

18. See Chang Ho Kim, *Joseon Gyoyuksa 4* (Pyongyang: Sahoegwahak Chulpansa, 1991), 193, 218-41.

19. Jisun Yee, "Cheollimasidae Nodongyeongung," *Journal of Modern Korean Literature* 17, no. 1 (2016): 298-99, 305.

20. Cheehyung Kim, *Heroes and Toilers*, 161-65.

21. Jin Hwan Kim, "Cheollimaundong," *North Korean Studies Review* 20, no. 2 (2016): 42.

22. Moody, "Chollima," 222.

**Figure 1. Heungmo Gwak, "Comrade, Are You Riding Cheollima? Burn Away Conservatism and Passivity!" Poster Art, 1958.**



theorists argued that Cheollima Riders should possess the "characteristics of communist social aesthetics" without being "portrayed as superhuman or idealized."<sup>24</sup> Riding a flying horse would have been considered supernatural, if not superhuman, and therefore too outlandish for socialist realism.<sup>25</sup> The thoughtful moderation did not last long, however, and the iconography quickly scaled up to the gigantic Cheollima Statue, erected in Pyongyang's Moranbong Park to celebrate Kim Il Sung's birthday on April 15, 1961. The fourteen-meter bronze statue (forty-six meters including the stone pedestal) has two wings fully spread to the sky. DPRK's Korean Film Studio has used this iconic statue in the opening and closing logo of many films since (figure 2).

The winged-horse portrayal of Cheollima signifies Kim Il Sung's consolidation of power. Its symbolic value should not be underestimated.

**Figure 2. The Cheollima Statue (left) and Korean Film (Joseon yeonghwa) closing logo (right)**



The success in securing and maintaining the hegemony of Kim Il Sung was in no small part due to the way the North Korean regime *remythologized* a demythologized horse of the past to suit the goals of the present... At the same time state centralization projects such as mass mobilization campaigns and the cult of personality were declining in the Soviet Union and proving disastrous in China, they were enhancing the legitimacy of the North Korean regime during the late 1950s and early 1960s.<sup>27</sup>

Cheollima's elevated status and the growing cult of personality in propaganda art also spotlighted the Gangseon Steel Mill. The oil painting "In Gangseon After the War" (1961) depicts a young Kim Il Sung consulting with steelworkers at the mill (figure 3). Although the artists collectively created the painting at the height of the Cheollima campaign, it does not refer to the 1956 origin story. Instead, it extends further, to the immediate aftermath of the Korean War in 1953, when Kim Il Sung visited the destroyed steel mill to urge speedy postwar recovery. Thus,

literally means a horse that can run a thousand *ri* (approximately 250 miles) a day—an impossible yet imaginable creature. The Ferghana horse, referred to as the "heavenly horse" (pronounced *cheonma* in Korean) in ancient China, is believed to have been the model for various versions of Cheollima in traditional

Asian lore because of its legendary endurance and speed.<sup>23</sup>

The nonflying Cheollima in the 1958 poster echoes the concurrent discussion among literary theorists about creating the archetype of the Cheollima Rider. Interpreting Kim Il Sung's directive, these

23. Craig Benjamin, *Empires of Ancient Eurasia* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 72-73.  
 24. Yee, "Cheollimasidae Nodongyeongung," 311.  
 25. See Cheehyung Kim, *Heroes and Toilers*, 127-43.  
 26. Nicor at Creative Commons, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Chollima\\_statue\\_06.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Chollima_statue_06.JPG).  
 27. Moody, "Chollima," 230.  
 28. Yeong Ji Lee, "Hyeonji," 492.

the painting visualizes a historical and deeply personal relationship between the Great Leader and the steelworkers, further mythologizing Gangseon as the birthplace of Cheollima. As art historian Yeong Ji Lee points out, it foreshadows Juche art focusing on the representation of the supreme leader (*suryeong*) figure.<sup>28</sup> It also alludes to the “socialist extended family” (*sahoejuui daegajeong*) discourse the DPRK would formulate later.

In 1964, Kim Jong Il was given control of the arts and culture sector and took up the task of historicizing Kim Il Sung’s legacy to multiple media forms.<sup>29</sup> Thus began the construction of Juche art through cinema, paintings, architecture, and operas. During this period, a cluster of new works on the Cheollima movement was released. One highlight was the film *The Spinner* (*Jeong-bang-gong*, 1965), which may be the “only socialist realist film considered still relevant in North Korea.”<sup>30</sup> It features what would become the anthem of the movement, “Song of the Cheollima Forerunners” (*Cheollima seongujai norae*), which is still played regularly and mentioned on North Korean media. Cheollima’s cultural edification campaign grew more and more sophisticated as the 1960s wore on, but its material goals in building a strong socialist economy were already showing signs of distress. The Seven-Year Plan (1961–67) fell short of achieving its ambitious goals of “increasing industrial output by 220 percent and national income by 170 percent.” The DPRK was forced to declare “a buffer period for catching up” in the next three years, making it “a de facto 10-year plan.”<sup>31</sup> The Great Surge was dipping even as Cheollima was soaring on newfound wings, if only symbolically.

### CHEOLLIMA IN TWILIGHT: THE JUCHE ERA MOBILIZATION AND PROPAGANDA CAMPAIGNS

The 1970s was a period of economic stagnation for the DPRK. The Six-Year

**Figure 3. Jinseop Gil, Hyeoktae Jang, Chanhyeong Song, Changsik Choe, “In Gangseon After the War” (*Jeonjaenggi kkeunnan gangseon ttangeseo*), oil on canvas, 1961.**



Plan of 1971–76 ended a little over a year early on the basis of its “success”—a face-saving exaggeration by the regime to set the remaining year as a buffer for the next plan. International trade looked better for the regime; however, as fighting between China and the Soviet Union intensified, North Korea was encountering difficulties in entering the trade market with other partners.<sup>32</sup> The lack of reliable economic statistics makes an accurate assessment difficult, but the available United Nations (UN) data provides a rough sketch of the situation.<sup>33</sup> More ominous than simple stagnation was that South Korea’s economy had caught up and, since the mid-1970s, left North Korea farther and farther behind. The DPRK’s response was to dig its heels deeper in promoting the Cheollima movement, integrating it into Juche ideology. In the 1972 Socialist Constitution, Juche makes its first appearance as the guiding principle of the republic, a “creative application of Marxism-Leninism to the realities” of North Korea (Article 4). Article 13 stipulates the Cheollima movement

as “the general line (*chongnoseon*) of socialist construction,” and vows to “push for socialist construction at the maximum by unceasingly deepening and intensifying” the movement.<sup>34</sup>

As noted in regard to the 1961 painting of Kim Il Sung at Gangseon, the increasingly visible cult of personality in Cheollima symbolism had been foreshadowing the formation of Juche ideology well before both were codified. Seventeen years later, another painting of Kim Il Sung surrounded by his steelworkers portrayed one of the defining features of the Cheollima origin story, namely, the direct, personal communication between the Supreme Leader and the working class (figure 4). It also became an archetype of Juche art, illustrating how the state’s guiding principle works: the meaning of the word *suryeong* (supreme leader) should be taken literally to refer to the “head” of the national polity, of which the body represents the masses. This Juche version of the social organism theory legitimizes the ultimate authority and power of the supreme leader over the populace. The layout of

29. Hazel Smith, *North Korea: Markets and Military Rule* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 124.

30. Johannes Schönherr, *North Korean Cinema: A History* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012), 3.

31. Mikyoung Kim, “Historical Survey,” 265.

32. Mikyoung Kim, “Historical Survey,” 268–72.

33. Yangmo Ku, “North Korean Economy,” in *Politics in North and South Korea* (London: Routledge, 2017), 132.

34. For an unofficial English translation of the 1972 Socialist Constitution, see Wikisource ([https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Socialist\\_Constitution\\_of\\_the\\_Democratic\\_People%27s\\_Republic\\_of\\_Korea\\_\(1972\)](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Socialist_Constitution_of_the_Democratic_People%27s_Republic_of_Korea_(1972))).

**Figure 4. Yeongman Jeong, "The Supreme Leader Comrade Kim Il Sung Talks with the Smelters" (*Yonghaegongdeulgwa damhwahasineun widaehan suryeong gimilseong dongji*), ink and color on paper, 1978.**



**Figure 5. Yeongman Jeong, "Evening Glow over Gangseon" (*Gangseonui jeonyeongnoeul*), ink and color on paper, 1973.**



the 1978 painting by Yeongman Jeong is nearly identical to the 1961 painting, "In Gangseon After the War" (figure 3): as the Great Leader in the center of the frame advises the steelworkers surrounding him, they listen keenly to his words. One even takes notes. The 1961 painting found inspiration for Cheollima from the

postwar recovery of the steel mill; the 1978 painting finds an exemplary case of Juche idea in practice from the Cheollima origin story, in which the Supreme Leader (the head) gives the workers (the body) guidance in the flesh. Both images present the Supreme Leader's on-the-spot guidance as the essence of

the socialist general line and guiding principle. Yeong Ji Lee points out how the 1978 painting not only represents the guidance the Supreme Leader gave to the workers but sets the Gangseon steelworkers as an example for others to follow.<sup>35</sup>

One conspicuous element that separates the two paintings is the overall color tone. The 1961 painting is dominated by a somber white color, except for Kim Il Sung wearing radiant pure white clothes that highlight his presence. This color schematic conveys the sorrowful mood of the workers gathered in front of the steel mill destroyed by the war. White, after all, is the color of the traditional mourning dress in Korea. On the other hand, the 1978 painting is glowing scarlet and orange, the color of molten iron. The Great Leader is distinguished by his black suit, even his face is glowing red because of the intense light and heat inside the steel mill. The color of molten iron exudes the energy and liveliness of the republic during the Great Cheollima Surge.

In fact, the scarlet and orange color came to represent Gangseon well before 1978 by the same painter, Yeongman Jeong. His internationally renowned masterpiece "Evening Glow over Gangseon" (1973), is said to have brought a "revolution to Oriental painting" for its bold use of color.<sup>36</sup> The iconic landscape painting fuses the Cheollima legacy and the tenets of Juche art without displaying the worker, soldier, or Great Leader as is typical of socialist propaganda art (figure 5). The picture is the featured backdrop for many North Korean products, including posters and the North Korean ten won bill.<sup>37</sup> It shows the steel mill on the edge of the Dae-dong River; as smoke comes out of the top of the factory's funnels, the sunset casts the sky in hues of scarlet, orange, and dark reds.

In hindsight, though, the beautiful sunset of Gangseon might be better interpreted as a sign of declining vigor of the mass mobilization campaign on the ground—Cheollima flying into the

35. Young Ji Lee, "Hyeonji Geurigo Cheollima," 499-500.

36. B. G. Muhn, *Pyeongyangmisul* (Seoul: Seoul Selection, 2018), 113.

37. Craig Smith, "Industrial Landscapes," in *Made in China Yearbook* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2017), 221-22.

twilight, so to speak. The unmet goals of economic plans and general stagnation forced the regime's hands to seek new ways to motivate workers and increase industrial outputs. In December 1967, the Supreme People's Assembly adopted the Three Revolutions movement (*Samdae hyeongmyeong undong*), taking the first step of replacing the Cheollima movement. The Three Revolutions of idea (*sasang*), technology (*gisul*), and culture (*munhwa*) would take a more tangible form of the Three Revolutions Team movement in 1973 and then expand to the Three Revolutions Red Flag movement two years later. The Three Revolutions campaign was focused on generational change, dispatching young college students to farms and factories to introduce new ideas and technology unencumbered by the old hierarchical order. Kim Jong Il oversaw the new campaign, using it as a stepping stone for his succession of power from Kim Il Sung. The final step of the replacement was taken in 1992, two years before Kim Il Sung's death, as the constitutional revision removed the Cheollima movement and inserted the Three Revolutions Red Flag movement in its stead. Cheollima took an exit as a mass movement but it remained as a cultural symbol firmly rooted in North Korean society.

## THE RETURN OF CHEOLLIMA IN TWO ACTS: 1998 AND 2008

The devastating famine and the collapse of the economy put the DPRK in crisis mode, which they referred to as the Arduous March (1996–99). The North Korean citizens were left to fend for themselves as aid from above disappeared. To compensate, the people created a primitive market economy.<sup>39</sup> In 1998, Kim Jong Il put into full effect Seongun (military-first) policy, a move that elevated the military above the party. Seongun policy was ostensibly to protect the country against imperialism and be a

practical method to realize a self-efficient economy, leading to the state's goal of *Gangseong daeguk* (a strong and prosperous nation). The military-first economic plan focused on revitalizing the heavy industry sector to support the military. At the same time, the market economy initiated by the citizens was meant to assist other necessities, such as the food supply.<sup>40</sup> As heavy industry and the old economic system came back into focus, the regime also revived the Cheollima movement. The New Year Joint Editorial of 1999 announced the Second Great Cheollima March, which appears to have yielded some success. North Korea saw a slight rise in its overall GDP, heavy industry output, and steel production over the beginning of the Arduous March. However, relative to the beginning of the 1990s, steel production was still down by more than two million tons from 2000 to 2018.<sup>41</sup> The disappointing results prompted the DPRK to quietly drop the second march, leaving little to no reference in official documents or media coverage afterward.<sup>42</sup>

Undaunted, Cheollima came roaring back a decade later as North Korea's civilian-led market economy had made significant progress. The regime attempted to control its growth and bring back the centrally planned economy.<sup>43</sup> Even though Kim Jong Il inherited the Cheollima legacy from his father, in 1998 he tried to break out and be his own man by choosing the Seongjin Steel Mill for the on-the-spot guidance that kicked off the Second Cheollima March. That pretense was dropped in the third round in 2008 as the Dear Leader visited the old Gangseon mill—now the Cheollima Steelworks—quite literally following in his father's footsteps. The Gangseon steelworkers responded enthusiastically with a mass rally, according to the KCNA's awestruck coverage of the occasion:

The workers of the Chollima Steel Complex held a rally of the employees on Dec. 28 to vow to bring about

a new great revolutionary surge in hearty response to the instructions given by General Secretary Kim Jong Il during his on-site guidance to the complex and adopted a letter to the working people across the country.... They in the letter renewed their firm determination to take the lead in the on-going all-out charge and demonstrate the spirit of Cheollima, the mettle of the workers in Gangseon once again.... To create something new and advanced our own way is the mode of advance to be adhered to in the present movement for effecting a new great upswing and a key to victory, the letter noted, adding: "Let us demonstrate the mettle of Koreans in the building of a great prosperous powerful nation!"<sup>44</sup>

Just like the Great Cheollima Surge of the 1950 and 1960s, various media sectors promoted the new march with, among other items, *We Are Gangseon People: A Collection of Works from the Cheollima Steelworks Workers (Urineun Gangseon saramida: Cheollima chegan-gnyeonhapkieopso gunjung munhak chakpumjip*, 2010), a collection of literary works purportedly written by the workers themselves. Through various poems, short stories, and personal recollections, the text describes the brilliance of Gangseon as a revolutionary landmark and a historical site.

The recurring theme of the book is modernization. In the first essay, author Hyeongnam Kim details Kim Jong Il's guidance trip to the steel mill. Once there, the Dear Leader witnesses the new and improved electric arc furnace in action. The workers at the steel mill upgrade the machine so successfully that it will not require as much power to operate, allowing for faster and more efficient production. Kim Jong Il complements the workers, telling them how important modernizing the steel industry is for the country. Since arguably the beginning of the DPRK, Kim Il Sung and the Workers

38. Ryu, "Cheollimaundong'gwa," 75; Ju and Jo, "Bukhanui," 129–30; Jin Hwan Kim, "Cheollimaundong," 44.

39. Hazel Smith, *North Korea*, 206.

40. Hazel Smith, *North Korea*, 249.

41. Vincent Koen and Jinwoan Boem, "North Korea: The Last Transition Economy?" (Paris: OECD, 2020), 8–10.

42. Bo Geun Kim, "Bukhanui 2009 Cheollimaundonggwa Gangseongdaeguk Jeollyak," *Unification Policy Studies* 18, no. 1 (2009): 96.

43. Hazel Smith, *North Korea*, 249; Ku, "North Korean Economy," 139.

44. KCNA, "Working People of DPRK Called upon to Bring about New Great Surge," December 29, 2008, <http://www.kcna.co.jp/item/2008/200812/news30/20081229-08ee.html>.

**Figure 6. “Girl Power”: Yeongmi in an arm-wrestling match with the Cheollima Steelworks foreman in *Comrade Kim Goes Flying***



Party’s leadership have emphasized that science and technological innovation would lead to economic development and successful defense for the country.<sup>45</sup> Science and technology development refers not only to high-tech innovations but also to various methods to solve the numerous problems North Korea’s economy and people are facing.<sup>46</sup> Still, Kim Jong Il was keenly aware that the DPRK needed new, more advanced symbols of twenty-first century science and technology even as it was still relying on the past glory of the Great Cheollima Surge to mobilize the masses. The Three Revolutions movement he led from the 1970s until the famine was an effort to modernize the mass mobilization campaign. Nearing the end of his life, Kim Jong Il made yet another attempt to do so by not replacing the symbolism of Cheollima but instead enhancing it.

A trial balloon of sorts was floated a few months before the December 2008 launch of the Cheollima march. On September 1, *Rodong sinmun* ran an editorial commemorating the sixtieth anniversary of the DPRK’s founding, saying, “If the Supreme Leader [Kim Il Sung] opened up the Cheollima Era by putting our people on the thousand-*ri* horse,

the General [Kim Jong Il] has opened up the Speed Battle [*Sokdojeon*] Era by putting the people on the ten-thousand-*ri* horse [*mallima*].”<sup>47</sup> Thus, the neologism of *Mallima* first appeared during Kim Jong Il’s reign not quite yet as a new symbol but as hyperbole, a ten times faster Cheollima. Had Kim Jong Il lived longer, he might have been the one to embrace *Mallima* as a new symbol for the modernizing campaign. But with his demise in 2011, the third round came to a premature end. It was time for the young, untested leader to ride the old horse and let it fly.

### COMRADE KIM GOES FLYING: GANGSEON’S TRANSITION FROM MOLTEN IRON TO SILVER SCREEN

A coproduction between Belgium (Anja Daelemans), the United Kingdom (Nicholas Bonner), and North Korea (Mihwa Ryeom), *Comrade Kim Goes Flying* (2012) was an unusual movie project from the start. It became all the more intriguing given the political transition from Kim Jong Il to Kim Jong Un during the film’s shooting. The movie thus rep-

resents the beginnings of an ideological and economic shift into the younger Kim’s era.

The story follows Yeongmi, a woman in her late twenties who excels in surpassing production quotas as a coal miner in her countryside hometown. However, after going to Pyongyang to participate in a construction project, Yeongmi’s dream of doing acrobatics is reinvigorated. After a few trials, Yeongmi, with the help of several working-class comrades, succeeds in joining the acrobatics team and wins multiple competitions overseas. On the surface, this film has little to do with Cheollima except for one prominent location—the Gangseon Steel Mill with its scarlet glow from molten iron. Yeongmi visits the steel mill to have acrobatic equipment made for practice (figure 6); as she makes her way through the factory, the viewer witnesses multiple areas, including the smeltery, an operation room, and an outside rest area surrounded by nature. Although the film is about Yeongmi experiencing the “outside world” with respect to her countryside hometown, some significance seems attached to her going to Gangseon when the other landmarks, statues, and attractions are located in Pyongyang, the showcase capital of the DPRK. Part of the reason may be in Gangseon’s heightened symbolic value since 2008. Well before the official launch of the third round of Cheollima, the New Year Joint Editorial in 2008 invoked one of the most iconic images from the original Cheollima Movement, *Evening Glow over Gangseon*, in promoting the goal of *Gangseong daeguk*. A propaganda song with the same title as the 1978 painting was also released.<sup>48</sup> The alliterative quality of Gangseon and *Gangseong daeguk* almost certainly helped raise the propagandistic value even higher.

Still, the film does not fall easily into a propaganda trope, as did *We Are Gangseon People*, never mind the Cheollima Rider archetype of the past. Instead, this avoidance was a major result of the unprecedented collaboration

45. Young-Ja Park et al., *Eight Changes in North Korean Economy* (Seoul: Korea Institute for National Unification, 2018), 45.

46. Yungwon Yoon and Han Park, “Pattern and trend of scientific knowledge production,” *Scientometrics* 124 (2020): 1436.

47. Mi Yeong Jeon, “Gimilseong Cheollima,” *Unified Korea* no. 10 (2008): 85.

48. Jin Hwan Kim, “Cheollimaundong,” 48.

between North Korea and the West. On the film's website, the Western directors discuss their initial vision for the work and how they were able to reach a consensus with their North Korean partners:

We fed the director the "girl power" theme and feeling and guided the film towards comedy and romance in order to bring it as close as possible to the magical fairytale we had originally had in mind. Overcoming cultural differences, the three of us eventually found common ground in this universally recognisable story of individual perseverance.<sup>49</sup>

Individual perseverance is nothing new to North Korean literary and cinematic narratives, though it is typically resolved in a collective effort to overcome obstacles. Thus Yeongmi perseveres through hardships with the help of her comrades, transforming herself from a coal miner to an internationally acclaimed acrobat. The film's global circulation matched international aspirations embedded in the narrative as it was screened at film festivals in Toronto, Pyongyang, Busan, Taipei, Rotterdam, Edinburgh, and many more worldwide.

Anthropologist Bonnie Tilland explains the global appeal by pointing out "the energy of the film, the chemistry between the characters, and the pleasure of seeing various sites in Pyongyang" and the amplification of North Korean "ideals, making not only the lives of the characters legible to a foreign audience through cultural translation but translating the classic worker story of sacrifice and growth into the genre of rom-com."<sup>50</sup> More significantly, the romantic comedy genre inspired an innovative approach to North Korean cinema. Immanuel Kim, an expert in North Korean literature, offers a critical insight into this genre:

Much like Hollywood, North Korean romantic comedy casts iconic actors in fashionable clothes and urban lifestyles. The actors recite revolutionary

ideas – sure. But in romantic comedies, they are part of a larger apparatus that connects their popularity to the greater-than-life events in a romantic setting, creating a spectacle for viewers.<sup>51</sup>

By providing an important *mise en scène* in the film, the Gangseon Steel Mill allows for Cheollima to insinuate itself into the rom-com narrative. Far from being satisfied with the tired old labor hero status she has already accomplished as a miner, the heroine of the younger generation—a peer of the newly emerging leader Kim Jong Un—aims for a bigger role for herself. Thanks to the help of the Cheollima steelworkers, she finally reaches her goal, which, in a subtle yet significant way, indicates Cheollima's cultural turn from work horse to show horse.

### MALLIMA'S STABLE: THE STORY OF OUR HOME

The Mallima movement came into prominence during Kim Jong Un's new Five-Year Economic Strategy period

(2016–2020). Although echoing the three previous rounds of Cheollima, Mallima made two notable adjustments. First, since Kim Jong Un's *Byeongjin* (parallel development) line signaled more attention to be paid to civilian economy than the previous *Seongun* line, the focus of the economic policy has been shifting from heavy industry and mining to the service, agriculture, and light industry sectors.<sup>52</sup> As if to confirm this shift, Kim Jong Un kicked off the Mallima movement by visiting a textile factory—not a steel mill—for his on-the-spot guidance visit in January 2016. For the first time since the Great Cheollima Surge, light industry has been the point of origin for a mass mobilization campaign.<sup>53</sup>

Second, Mallima has elevated science and technology as the rallying point for the economy. Granted, the Kim Jong Il-led campaigns already emphasized science and technology. Mallima, however, has turned a policy priority into visual propaganda art. The Mallima poster, for example, upgraded the original "Comrade, Are You Riding Cheollima?" image by adding an image of a rocket next to the soaring winged horse now called

Figure 7. Mallima poster (left) and commemorative postage stamp (right)



49. Anja Daelemans and Nicholas Bonner, "Directors' Statement," [https://comradekimgoesflying.com/statement\\_dir.php](https://comradekimgoesflying.com/statement_dir.php) (accessed October 1, 2021).

50. Bonnie Tilland, "Towards a Visual Sociology and Anthropology," *Journal of Asian Sociology* 50, no. 2 (2021): 307.

51. Immanuel Kim, *Laughing North Koreans: The Culture of Comedy Films* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books), 95.

52. Koen and Beom, "North Korea," 9.

53. Jin Hwan Kim, "Cheollimaundong," 54.

**Figure 8. Sunset over Gangseon: Jong A speaking to the children about the path the Great Leader once took in *The Story of Our Home*.**



Mallima. The 2020 new year postage stamp shows another winged horse flying over a futuristic, spaceship-shaped building, which turns out to be the Science and Technology Park in Pyongyang (figure 7). Starting under Kim Jong Il, construction projects for scientists and high-tech industry workers flourished in twenty-first century North Korea. Mallima sped up such spectacular high-rise buildings and futuristic urban megaprojects in Ryeomyeong Street, a newly developed area of Pyongyang.

Despite its glossy façade, Mallima is widely considered a bust as a mass mobilization campaign. After all, the DPRK quietly canceled the Grand Convention of the Mallima Forerunners, which had been scheduled at the end of 2017 to celebrate the grand achievements of the newly minted Mallima Riders. The estimated real GDP growth rate briefly went up to 4 percent in 2016 only to plunge to negative 4 percent over the next two years. Most ominously, steel production dropped to an all-time low—even lower than the previous lows during the Arduous March—to well below one million tons in 2018. The industry, in fact, has never fully recovered from the collapse of the

mid-1990s.<sup>54</sup> On the propaganda front as well, Mallima seems to have been beset by a lack of passion and creativity. During the Seventh Congress of the Workers' Party, Kim Jong Un singled out the art and literature sector for critique:

Although all sectors are darting with Mallima Speed, the literature and arts sector has yet to produce many excellent works that is brimming with revolutionary fever and fighting spirit of our society and ignite millions of hearts.<sup>55</sup>

This failure was not for the lack of trying, however. Quite a number of literary works, theater performances, and propaganda essays were produced to shore up the morale for Mallima. The problem was, as literary scholar Jisun Yee puts it, they have failed to create a new “archetype for the Mallima Rider.” The archetypal Cheollima Rider was an industrial worker, like the smelter at the Gangseon Mill who urged his team members to devise solutions to make the work process more efficient so that they could exceed their production goals. Writers of Mallima tried to make a “national hero” out of a rocket scientist or a computer programmer,

but the idea failed to resonate with the masses, given the distant nature of such work from the people’s daily lives.<sup>56</sup>

One exception to the general stagnation of Mallima’s edification campaign is the 2016 film *The Story of Our Home*. Based on a true story covered by American news media such as CNN as well as multiple South Korean news agencies, the movie follows Jong A Ri (Jeong-a Ri), an eighteen-year-old woman who decides to care for three blood-related orphans.<sup>57</sup> With the help of everyone in their hometown, Jong A learns how to become a caring mother to the three and lives happily with four more children she adopts. Her real-life counterpart, Jeonghwa Jang, was selected by the North Korean authorities to join the Second National Conference of Exemplary Young People of Virtue and was awarded the Kim Jong Il Youth Honor Award. *Rodong Sinmun* ran an article on Jang, referring to her as the “daughter of the working class and Gangseon.”<sup>58</sup> Indeed, the film takes the viewer to the hometown of Cheollima, renowned to most North Koreans for its steel mill. However, the film does not especially feature the mill. Instead, Jong

54. Koen and Beom, “North Korea,” 8, 10.

55. Cited from Jisun Yee, “Chilcha Dang Daehoe,” *Journal of Korean Language and Culture* 67 (2018): 51.

56. Yee, “Chilcha,” 65–67.

57. Tim Schwarz, “Orphaned by famine,” CNN, September 21, 2015.

58. Ji Yeon Cha, “Bukhan, Goa Kiuneun,” *Yonhap News*, July 2, 2015.

A works at the public catering department that often helps the mill.

Of course, obligatory scenes pay tribute to the late supreme leaders. Jong A tells the orphans the story of the two Cheollima campaigns as they walk down the path the leaders once took: "Our President [Kim Il Sung] visited the Gangseon Steel Mill on this road, and our General [Kim Jong Il] passed this way on the snowy day of December. We should never forget them when we go this way" (figure 8). After Jong A gives this lesson, she and the children go to the steel mill again to view the memorials or paintings of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il giving guidance meetings at the factory. Other than that, the film speaks little of the steelmaking process. This is surprising given the scarlet glow inside the steel mill figuring so prominently in *Comrade Kim Goes Flying* just four years prior. It makes sense, though, if the goal of *The Story of Our Home* is to create a new archetype different from the old Cheollima Rider.

As the main character, Jong A provides a role model and moral compass for the film, and by extension, for the Mallima campaign. However, little in what she does for work inspires the new, lofty goals of Mallima. Herein comes another character, Un Jong, the eldest of the children Jong A watches over and a budding math genius. At first, Un Jong's headstrong independence makes it difficult for her to accept Jong A as her and her sibling's motherly caretaker. Eventually, Jong A wins Un Jong over and lets her talent flourish. In reviewing the Kim Jong Un-era mass culture, Tatiana Gabrussenko comments on the advancement of the youth: "Mallima culture has changed the generational perspective into a more youth-centered one, with young people portrayed as decision-makers and the focus of narratives, and with *Gangseong daeguk* giving rise to the slogan 'strong youth country' (*cheongnyeon gang-guk*)."<sup>59</sup> Both Jong A and Un Jong belong

to the strong youth category, and Un Jong in particular represents the promise of advanced science and technology the DPRK is eager to harness through Mallima. Gangseon, the steel mill, and the old generation of steelworkers and their comrades are assisting and nurturing this young generation in the background. As the Cheollima generation fades into sunset, the new Mallima generation rises. This change may be able to complete another cultural turn of North Korea's mass mobilization campaign.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Since Kim Il Sung created a formula for North Korea's mass line in the late 1950s, the Gangseon Steel Mill has always been a staple of the mobilization campaign. As we have seen, the impact and legacy of Cheollima goes deep and wide, from economy to politics to culture and art. Much of it is certainly propaganda, but

the movement. The economic surge barely lasted beyond the first Five-Year Plan, but the movement remained prominent well after, into the next decade, generating an abundance of cultural expressions in literature, art, music, and film. Subsequent iterations of Cheollima, including the latest Mallima, pale in comparison primarily because of the dire political-economic situation today. However, the two Mallima-era films discussed in this paper demonstrate notable signs of change, especially in terms of advancing the younger generation. The legacy of Cheollima looms large in both films as the old steel mill of Gangseon stands behind the youthful characters. The mill may have diminished in industrial capacity yet still is potent culturally.

Under Kim Jong Un's leadership, the DPRK has tapped the culture and entertainment industry to propagate the desire for innovation and modernization. The film industry may not be producing as much as in the previous eras, but the

***Under Kim Jong Un's leadership, the DPRK has tapped the culture and entertainment industry to propagate the desire for innovation and modernization. The film industry may not be producing as much as in the previous eras, but the two films analyzed show technological advancement in terms of improved production value, thanks in part to international coproduction and circulation.***

propaganda is woven into the fabric of North Korean daily life. A cultural analysis of Cheollima and Mallima is therefore a necessary step to see through the fog of hyperbole and reach a better understanding of those lives.

The Great Cheollima Surge provided a genuine inspiration for the people of North Korea to achieve an impressive feat in economic development. Even acknowledging the critique that the mobilization campaign did not improve the people's livelihood as much as it should have, it is difficult to deny the spontaneous energy and passion that fueled

two films analyzed show technological advancement in terms of improved production value, thanks in part to international coproduction and circulation. Further, they adopt innovative narrative technics, such as romantic comedy and the youth power theme, from Western and South Korean entertainment industries. How effectively this Mallima-era cultural turn is mobilizing the youth toward the scientific and technological progress remains to be seen, but it would not be surprising if the next international film release from Pyongyang features another young, strong-willed character with scientific prowess. ■

59. Tatiana Gabrussenko, "Mass Culture in the Kim Jong Un Era," in *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary North Korea* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2020), 286.

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MEREDITH SHAW

# Global Finance Through the Lens of North Korean State Literature

## ABSTRACT

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This article analyzes select works of North Korean state-produced fiction, poetry, and editorials dealing with financial crises and other aspects of free market economies. Given that North Korea's state-produced literary products are generally directed toward educated elites and members of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK), they can provide insights into how the WPK instructs its rank-and-file to understand global and local developments. When the subject turns to global finance, which necessarily requires some awareness of complex external developments, this literature seems to serve a dual role of indoctrination and (limited) education. The resulting propaganda products

reveal much about how the North Korean regime updates its foreign-exposed elites on concepts such as planned versus free-market economies, the intersection of global politics and economics, and their country's purported vanguard role as heroic holdout against a corrupt and failing global capitalist system. Although the depictions are naturally exaggerated and distorted in accordance with the WPK's priorities, the stories still contain a surprising amount of accurate detail about the complexities of global finance.

## INTRODUCTION

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North Korean state-produced literature has been extensively analyzed from the

perspective of political communication as a tool of social control and ideological indoctrination. This article takes a different tack, examining its potential pedagogical role as a tool for supplementing elite cadres' increasing knowledge of topic areas that are somewhat taboo for the general public—specifically, in this case, the workings of the global financial system and free-market capitalism. This analysis focuses on literary products whose distribution is limited to relatively elite workers and students.

This research began with a puzzling observation gleaned from readings of North Korean historical novels published and distributed by the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK). That is, certain high-profile novels published in recent decades have devoted

increasing space and detail to narrative accounts of foreign developments, particularly on US politics and global finance.

This observation becomes more surprising when we understand two important aspects of North Korean literature. First, publications are expensive in resource-scarce North Korea, and thus novels are extensively vetted, evaluated, and revised in conformance with strict ideological criteria prior to publication. Among these, the most prestigious are the novels of the Imperishable History and Imperishable Leadership Series, chronicling the lives and achievements of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il respectively.<sup>1</sup> With an average production rate of about one new novel per year, and comparatively wide distribution to regional libraries and party offices (and, increasingly, in e-book format), these series are the most rigorously vetted, established historical narratives, and the party devotes considerable resources to their distribution.

Second, foreign settings and well-developed foreign characters are rare in North Korean literature in general. The Korean Writers' Union (KWU), which cultivates and supervises all literary writers, has a clearly defined status hierarchy of topics that its writers may cover—stories about the leaders, the anti-Japanese guerrilla struggle, and the Korean War are at the top; stories about the world outside North Korea are at the very bottom.<sup>2</sup> Only top-ranked authors can write stories about the leaders, but the lower ranks can advance by producing stories about wartime traumas or present-day domestic achievements; novels set outside Korea consistently get the poorest evaluation from KWU editors. Given this incentive structure, KWU literary products seldom show external settings or characters.

In this context, it is puzzling that some of the more recent novels in the Imperishable Series—the most highly regarded and widely distributed novels the KWU produces—have subplots featuring American characters, generally working within the US government or military. Although still not common, such characters have appeared more frequently in novels published since 1995, sometimes with entire chapters told from their perspective, and a few have received detailed character devel-

need to understand market economics well enough to generate wealth for themselves and their state. As this class expands, a parallel informational world seems to be emerging alongside the one the common citizen experiences.

For example, in the novel *Shine the Dawn* from the Imperishable Leadership Series,<sup>5</sup> a North Korean technician presents his factory's new CNC machines at a trade show in Singapore. One foreign broker expresses skepticism about his capacity

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opment with backstories fleshing out their family relationships and personal motivations. This prompts the question of why the KWU would devote a portion of its most elite, expensive products to foreign characters and settings when it has historically shown a clear preference for avoiding all things foreign whenever possible.

To solve this puzzle, we must consider the unique conundrum of how the North Korean regime handles information. The efficiency of its information blockade has been well documented,<sup>3</sup> and that tight information control continues to be essential to regime survival, even as some cracks have appeared.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, given the nature of the globalized world and its own economic needs, a sizable subset of North Korean elites have come to acquire some practical knowledge of external realities, such as the workings of global finance. The regime needs capable economic cadres and entrepreneurial traders to sustain itself. Its elites

to negotiate deals as a mere technician, given that “in your country, all companies are owned only by the state, and the rights of researchers, producers, and sellers are all separate.” The technician replies,

I'm sorry, but your textbooks must be outdated. The Ryeonha Machine Tool Company exercises all of these rights in a unified manner. I think it is rather your side where things get separated. Let's think about it like this... There is production and consumption. Where you have the 'market,' we have a 'plan.' Consider this. Compared to the market economy ruled by the 'Invisible Hand' from Adam Smith and Milton Friedman, see how unified, flexible, and scientific things are in a planned economy, where the elements of accumulation, consumption, production, and sales are managed with the most reasonable, accurate calculation and control. It's like the difference between a military without any Chiefs of Staff, and one with it...

1. For more background on the “Imperishable” Series, see Jin-Ho Kang, *Bukanui munhwajongjeon* (Seoul: Somyong Chulpan, 2009). For more on the uses of literature in North Korean citizen education and ideological training, see Yeong-Mi Lee, *Bukan munhakgyoyugui irongwa silje* (Seoul: Hanguk Munhwasa, 2012).  
2. Ju-Seong Kim, *Tobenai kaeru* (Tokyo: Futabasha, 2018), 202-203.  
3. Jonathan Corrado, “Rose-Colored Glasses: The Information Ecosystem’s Influence on Generational Variation in Attitudes on North Korea’s Economic Management,” in *Ideology and Economic Policy in North Korea*, edited by Yonho Kim, *NKEF Policy and Research Paper Series 2022* (Washington, DC: The George Washington Institute for Korean Studies, 2022).  
4. Ralph Hassig and Kongdan Oh, *The Hidden People of North Korea* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).  
5. Bong Cheol Rim, *Achimeun binnara* (Pyongyang: Munhak Yesul Chonghab Chulpansa, 2015).

As for [legal rights], look at this KCNA report from December 11, 1992. The Foreign Investment Act and the Joint Venture Act were adopted at the Fourth Meeting of the 9th Supreme People's Assembly. If you wish, I can send you a copy. Are you satisfied?<sup>6</sup>

In this excerpt, we can identify not only textbook socialist theory, but also legal information in a practical context and a helpful model for how North Korean traders might respond to skeptical queries from potential foreign investors and partners. The passage clearly assumes some knowledge of classical and neoliberal economic theory and seems aimed at informing a particular class of reader.

*The regime has shown increasing interest in providing more advanced training for elites in economic fields while keeping them within a controlled information environment.*

The same chapter also offers a favorable description of Singapore, without mentioning it by name, noting that "Its territory was not very large, but 80% of national income was obtained from intermediary trade [중계무역], and the country had run a lively intermediary trade from early on as a maritime and public transportation hub linking Europe, Asia and Australia."

This leads to a hypothesis: that certain North Korean literary products may serve a practical pedagogical function, separate from their primary function of indoctrination, by providing a narrative context for the external economic principles and realities that its economic elites encounter, while reshaping their externally acquired knowledge to conform to approved ideological tenets. Given the focus on portrayals of major recent developments in global finance and currency exchange, this analysis targets literature dealing with the Asian financial

crisis of 1997, the global financial crisis of 2008, and the North Korean currency reform of 2009 (for which the 1947 currency reform is used as an allegory).

## ECONOMIC "IN-THE-KNOW" ELITES

The transformation of the North Korean economic order since its collapse in the 1990s has produced several significant subclasses that can be considered economic elites in the sense that they have had some degree of interaction with foreign markets, trade, or finance, or have been given advanced training in these

areas.<sup>7</sup> Some have acquired this knowledge illicitly through their own enterprise; others have done so with the tacit or direct endorsement of the state. Benjamin Habib outlines how the postcollapse North Korean economy has splintered into five identifiable, sometimes overlapping layers:

the remains of the official economy... the enormous military economy, which incorporates entire production and supply chains to provision the military and generate income through weapons exports and rent-seeking activities... the illicit economy, featuring a basket of criminal activities through which the regime generates a large portion of its foreign currency earnings... the court economy, which the leadership uses to provision the wider regime elite with luxury items not available to the wider public... [and] the entrepreneurial black market in which budding cohorts of people

from the lower levels of North Korean society do business outside of official channels.<sup>8</sup>

This article focuses on the information world of North Korean economic elites, broadly incorporating all whose work in the latter four sub-economies has given them higher exposure to foreign economies. Justin Hastings details how North Korea has developed extensive international networks, belying its "hermit" image, and emphasizes how North Koreans abroad have demonstrated a high level of entrepreneurial skill and adaptability in operating between these worlds.<sup>9</sup> If the North Korean economy has diverged in this way, it stands to reason that the information world in which North Koreans operate has also splintered.

The regime has shown increasing interest in providing more advanced training for elites in economic fields while keeping them within a controlled information environment. Although only a small select group can travel abroad for training, domestic opportunities for economic education have proliferated in recent years, including finance courses taught in coordination with groups like Joseon Exchange and the Pyongyang University of Science and Technology (PUST). Foreign instructors who have worked with such programs have observed that the North Koreans they encounter display a keen thirst for outside knowledge and a deep curiosity about the history and operations of global finance—particularly how other economies have developed within that order and how to most efficiently generate wealth through investment and trade.<sup>10</sup>

For the North Korean regime, the challenge is how to channel this curiosity into profitable business ventures and foster capable human talent without simultaneously opening the door to unorthodox ideas about how economic reform should work or how past policies were ill-conceived. A separate challenge is how to provide context for market principles to

6. Rim, *Achimeun binnara*, part 1, chap. 4.3.

7. Benjamin Habib, "North Korea's Parallel Economies," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 44, no. 2 (2011): 149-59; Hazel Smith, *North Korea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Justin Hastings, *A Most Enterprising Country* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016).

8. Habib, "North Korea's Parallel Economies."

9. Hastings, *A Most Enterprising Country*.

10. Andray Abrahamian, *Being in North Korea* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institute, 2020).

students who may lack direct practical experience. The new generation can learn the basic principles through courses in business and economics offered at Kim Chaek University, Kim Il Sung University, or PUST, but these courses cannot give them the real-life context of the world of banking, loans, interest rates, investment, and currency that Western students would already know from life experience. This is where the narrative form of novels shows its pedagogical value.

Because of its focus on elite materials, this article bypasses other powerful propaganda instruments directed at the masses (posters, movies, TV shows and documentaries) to focus on materials primarily seen only by relative elites (novels, poems, and editorials in party circulars).<sup>11</sup>

## STATE LITERATURE AS PEDAGOGICAL TOOL

The North Korean regime's system of information control and ideological training is well documented. Most readers are already familiar with the ubiquitous propaganda posters and TV announcers. In addition, state-employed citizens are also organized into study groups, which coordinate their ideological development through organized study and self-reflection; the amount of ideological training tends to increase with one's status in the Party.<sup>12</sup> Though most early ideological texts were stultifyingly dull and repetitive, after Kim Jong Il took over the propaganda department from the 1970s, literary fiction took on greater prominence in mass ideological instruction.<sup>13</sup> Kim Jong Il himself is credited with authoring a multi-volume series, *Juche Munhakron*, which situated the proper role of literature as a teaching tool for developing the people's ideological consciousness.

Many of the excerpts that follow are drawn from the Imperishable History and Imperishable Leadership Series of hagiographic novels chronicling the lives and achievements of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il respectively, as these represent the highest tier of the North Korean literary canon.<sup>14</sup> Only members of the elite 4.15 Writers' Group, the highest-ranking tier within the Korean Writers' Union, are tasked with contributing to these series. Describing the series' importance within North Korea, Kang writes, "This is a multifaceted text which simultaneously provides a dramatized national history and a textbook for fostering model citizens while also representing 'culture' as a work of literature. With its deliberate planning, enormous scope, and state-based aspect, it must be studied as a reflection of the regime's power and character."<sup>15</sup> Han-Shik Kim compares the series' role to that of the early Joseon dynasty epic *Song of the Dragons Flying to Heaven* in that it constructs a legend around the living ruler as a basis for legitimacy.<sup>16</sup> Remarkably, both series have continued long after their respective subjects' deaths, reflecting the uniquely North Korean sentiment that "the main character's death cannot end the story."<sup>17</sup> For instance, the most recent entry in the Imperishable Leadership Series, *Bugang Joseon* (Rich and Powerful Korea), was published in 2021 and focuses on Kim Jong Il's guidance of the steel industry. Series novels are not written in chronological order and sometimes revisit distant history, but generally at least five or six years must pass before events first get coverage in Imperishable Series novels.

According to Ju-Seong Kim, a former KWU novelist who defected in 2008, most KWU-produced literature has limited distribution, mostly to party offices or to regional "publication distribution centers." Book distribution has declined

since the 1990s because of diminishing paper supply and transportation problems. However, books in the Imperishable Series are in a different category; these get special distribution and are read by many party bureaucrats and workers in relevant fields. When a major book about the leaders comes out, often the party will issue a directive to read it.<sup>18</sup> Some bureaucratic workers or party members may be expected to discuss the books in their unions' political study sessions as part of the vast organizational life system.<sup>19</sup> However, general public access to these novels is restricted by such factors as limited supply, limited free time to read, and simple disinterest. In recent years, with the proliferation of smartphones and associated demand for more content on the domestic North Korean internet, most series novels have now been made available in both digital and audiobook format.<sup>20</sup> Their contents can thus be considered a special subset of party propaganda intended for (relatively) elite, educated technocrats and party members. The contents described next hint at the level of economic literacy expected of the readers.

As mentioned, the foreign characters one encounters in these novels are relatively rare, but memorable. Typically they are positioned within the American foreign policy or defense bureaucracies and bear witness to the thinking (and nefarious plotting) of top US policymakers. Through their conversations, and particularly through their inner thoughts, to which readers are privy, they generally serve an expository role of explaining complex economic or political developments in the outside world. Although obviously colored in the most negative possible light, these depictions reveal a surprising amount of accurate detail concerning such topics as central banks, the IMF, mortgage companies and investment hedge funds, the housing market,

11. Because many of the following excerpts were taken from e-book editions for which page numbers are not included, chapter and section numbers are supplied in lieu of page numbers where necessary.

12. Yeong-Mi Lee, *Bukan munhakgyoyugui irongwa silje* (Seoul: Hanguk Munhwasa, 2012).

13. Kim, *Tobenai kaeru*.

14. For more background on the Imperishable Series, see Kang, *Bukanui munhwajeongjeon*. For more on the uses of literature in North Korean citizen education and ideological training, see Lee, *Bukan munhakgyoyugui irongwa silje*.

15. Kang, *Bukanui munhwajeongjeon*, 5.

16. Han-Shik Kim, "Soseolgwa gieogui jeongchihak," in *Bukanui munhwajeongjeon* (Seoul: Somyong Chulpan, 2009), 218.

17. Kim, "Soseolgwa gieogui jeongchihak," 219-20.

18. Ju-Seong Kim, email correspondence, February 18, 26, 2020.

19. Lee, *Bukan munhakgyoyugui irongwa silje*; Abrahamian, *Being in North Korea*.

20. This content has also been made freely available on North Korean websites Uriminzokkiri.com and Dprktoday.com, an unexpected boon for researchers of North Korean literature.

currency exchange systems, foreign reserves, national debt, and the interdependent financial relationship between China and the United States.

Well-developed foreign characters fall into two categories – those named after real historical figures and those with fictitious names (although they often have real titles and seem to be loosely modeled after real people). Among the former, the novel *Eternal Life* gave major character development to US President

ters' bloodlines; the good are always descended from ideologically superior ancestors, the bad from inferior ones.<sup>24</sup> Similar attention is paid to the handful of strong foreign characters in the series, beginning with Jimmy Carter in the 1997 novel *Eternal Life*. Carter, portrayed as earnest but weak willed, is introduced (erroneously) as "the eldest son of a Georgian peanut farmer James Earl the Second (a British immigrant)" and "a descendant of America's first millionaire Robert (King) Carter."<sup>25</sup> A

can see from the recent sell-off of Washington Mutual, America's largest savings bank. As a certain university professor recently wrote in a magazine article entitled "Publicly Traded Companies: America's Downfall," the American brand is nearing its end.<sup>26</sup>

This device is also regularly seen in *Rodong Shinmun* editorials, which quote untraceable articles by unnamed foreign experts that appear to validate their arguments. This demonstrates another use of foreign characters, as filters for apocryphal foreign media—because most regular North Korean characters cannot be portrayed casually quoting foreign newspapers.

Such characters are used within literary narratives to flesh out and contextualize complex concepts in global finance and currency exchange. KCNA articles and *Rodong Sinmun* editorials touch on the same ideas more directly but briefly.

**Another type of foreign voice, encountered in both fiction and newspaper editorials, is the unnamed foreign expert, often incorporated to lend extra credibility to a claim made in the text.**

Jimmy Carter and the Reverend Billy Graham and seemed to mark a new era for foreign depictions in fiction.<sup>21</sup> Subsequently, President Bill Clinton's perspective takes up several chapters in both *Great Flow of History* and *Gun Barrel*.<sup>22</sup> The latter type tend to be high-level officials in the State Department, Defense, or intelligence bureaucracy with extensive experience in Korea affairs; such characters populate several chapters in the novels *Gun Barrel* and *2009*.<sup>23</sup> With the exceptions of Carter and Graham (who had well-documented and favorable meetings with Kim Il Sung), foreign point-of-view characters are distinguished by their cynical and fatalistic attitude, starkly contrasting with the selfless, noble, relentlessly optimistic North Korean characters who populate the majority of KWU fiction—and, frankly, making for much more compelling reading. Foreign point-of-view chapters will often break from the narrative for several pages to explain complex economic issues with textbook-like directness.

One feature of Imperishable novels, as Kim notes, is their emphasis on charac-

more sinister, fictitious character named Conan Jr., who in the novel *2009* is appointed Obama's deputy secretary of state for East Asia, is given a revealing background: his father was a long-time CIA operative who had despised North Korea ever since his father died fighting in the Korean War.

Another type of foreign voice, encountered in both fiction and newspaper editorials, is the unnamed foreign expert, often incorporated to lend extra credibility to a claim made in the text. Fictional foreign characters will sometimes reference an unknown "article in a major foreign newspaper" or a "leading foreign expert" giving grim analysis of the state of global capitalism. For instance, in the novel *2009*, a former Bush administration policy advisor attempts to warn his younger colleague about America's grim future by remarking

Since early this century, various political scholars have already predicted the US will decline, comparing it with the Roman and British Empires whose time has long passed... The financial system continues its decline, as you

## DEPICTIONS OF GLOBAL FINANCIAL CRISES

North Korea is eager to portray global capitalism as an exploitative but fundamentally volatile system constantly on the brink of collapse, so financial crises and other problems afflicting market economies are popular subjects for state media. However, short newspaper articles are inadequate for describing the interconnected transnational financial systems at play, particularly for domestic readers who have no contextual understanding of subprime loans and corporate bankruptcy. Literary narratives can reveal much about how North Korean elites are informed and how much they are expected to already know about free-market economics and global financial networks.

The 1997 Asian financial crisis and 2008 global financial crisis were both covered

21. Bo Heum Baek and Song Sang Won, *Yeongsaeung* (Pyongyang: Munhwa Yesul Chonghab Ch'ulpansa, 1997).

22. Gi Jong Jeong, *Ryeoksauri daeha* (Pyongyang: Munhwa Yesul Chonghab Chulpansa, 1997); Yoon Pak, *Chongdae* (Pyongyang: Munhak Yesul Chulpansa, 2003).

23. Yong Hwan Kim, *2009 nyeon* (Pyongyang: Munhak Yesul Chulpansa, 2014).

24. Kim, "Soseolgwa gieogui jeongchihak," 219.

25. Baek and Won, *Yeongsaeung*, chap 15.

26. Kim, *Tobenai kaeru*, chap. 10.

extensively and with barely concealed glee by North Korean media. A typical example is the poem "Eternal Nesting Place"<sup>27</sup> published in the literary journal *Joseon Munhak* in March 2010, which contrasts the happy lives of Pyongyang residents with the economic misery unfolding in the outside world:

While the financial crisis breaking out  
in the capitalist world  
Shakes market economies to the root  
Gorgeous houses like this one, worth  
a fortune,  
Are given to ordinary laborers and  
office workers for free  
This is how our military-first home-  
land embraces us

Although poems and propaganda posters serve well to portray this basic contrast, more concrete expository writing is needed to explain what "financial crisis" actually means as a lived experience. For this, writers need to step outside socialist paradise and depict foreign settings through foreign eyes.

The 2003 novel *Gun Barrel*, covering events in the years 1999 and 2000, gives an unusual amount of space to two American characters, Rilcy (a top Clinton advisor) and his younger cousin Milton (a US 8th Army officer working with the UN Military Armistice Committee), mainly as a way of explaining the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal through their eyes. Along the way, however, they are both affected by the ongoing Asian financial crisis. In one scene, the pair discuss their family's financial difficulties. Milton asks about rumors that Rilcy's business "is suffering a bit of indigestion." Rilcy replies,

It's turned into incurable diarrhea.  
The patient has almost lost consciousness.... It's not just the US economy anymore. Asia's suffering serious financial crisis, brought on by the shock waves of the U.S. scrambling to take care of itself. In the end, the world economy is now hanging from a dizzying cliff.... Is there a way out? Now everyone is looking for a third way. The

collapse of socialism brought disillusionment about excessive utopian visions, and capitalism's obsession with profit and rich-poor gap has convinced me that it is also headed for ruin. So now they're advocating so-called neoliberalism promoting transnationalism and free markets. In essence, market competition is supposed to produce a fair system. However, economic development has stalled, and the environment and communities are being destroyed. So what's the third way?

Stimulate the market economy and reduce state-owned companies. That's the alternative of the standard social democratic line, strengthening the role of the market and reducing the role of the state.<sup>28</sup>

This is a good example of the pedagogical approach embedded in KWU literature. The novel keeps the reader entertained with a scene of two greedy Americans bemoaning their financial woes, while at the same time teaching some general principles of neoliberal and neoclassical economic theory, as well as linking the Asian financial crisis with US economic decline.

Milton then tries to steer the conversation back to more practical matters, suggesting Rilcy should step back from politics and think about his own finances. Rilcy responds,

But this world does not have enough land to satisfy everyone's desires. A modern computer calculated that if everyone in the world were to live like people in advanced countries, the Earth could only accommodate a few hundred million people. This is the limit of growth, of democracy. So humans can never escape from the law of survival, the endless fight over life and death. It's a nightmare! We have to die or move to another planet! Don't you see?<sup>29</sup>

Thus, the author connects the financial crisis to land scarcity and first-world hyper-consumption, leading from there

to predictions of growing conflict over resources - and again predicting the collapse of global capitalism in the near future. Rilcy's character background grants the author room to explore many other facets of capitalism throughout this novel, as his personal financial problems prompt several long expository reveries about risk and investment, and the threat of personal bankruptcy ultimately drives him to sell state secrets.

Similar themes were reprised in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. North Korea media coverage paid particular attention to the Occupy movement as a potential sign of the global masses uniting to finally overthrow capitalism. Its related coverage gave significant space to explain the details of the financial crisis:

Various relief measures taken by the Western countries after the financial crisis were, in essence, for saving the big monopolistic capitals on the maw of bankruptcy. Those steps deepened concentration of capital only on big monopolistic enterprises while further deteriorating the life of the overwhelming majority of popular masses....

Stocks fell hard at the global financial markets, causing such serious upheaval as rise and fall in quotations of major currencies.

European banks, which bought national bonds issued by Eurozone countries suffering from the debt crisis, may reportedly sustain losses of 300 billion Euros in maximum.<sup>30</sup>

This excerpt appeared in English and Korean on the freely accessible KCNA website and seems to assume a certain level of financial literacy on the part of the reader. This perhaps makes sense if it is intended primarily as externally directed propaganda. But how does the average North Korean reader, having lived her entire life in a dysfunctional state-run economy with limited banking and no formal lending or investment mechanisms, interpret such concepts as stocks, global financial markets, and national bonds?

27. Il Seop Ri, "Yeongwonhan bogeumjari," *Joseon Munhak*, March 2010.

28. Pak, *Chongdae*, chap. 2.6.

29. Pak, *Chongdae*, chap. 2.6.

30. KCNA, "History Proves Absolute Truth of Socialism," October 19, 2011.

The novel *2009* provides a detailed description of the global financial crisis to the reader via a conversation between Conan Jr., the Obama State Department official, and his mentor Hulbert. Midway through their conversation, the reader is treated to Conan's internal thoughts as he cynically reflects on the unfolding crisis:

The financial crisis had been caused by real estate conglomerates chasing huge profits from skyrocketing housing prices and the lower-class people who got tied up in speculation by taking out loans from them to buy houses. When housing prices plummeted and those people were unable to pay back their loans in time, the banks' capital fluidity system collapsed. But the signs had appeared well before then.

The sharp decline in the US economy after 9/11 had brought about the current crisis. Everyone knew the cause was the excessive military spending for the invasive wars the US was waging all over the world.

Last year all the big banks had crumbled like autumn leaves, and the three big car manufacturers were facing imminent bankruptcy. Major enterprises—the auto industry hegemon Ford, the film processing company Kodak, and the communications company Motorola—had toppled over one by one with huge losses.

Fanny Mae and Freddie Mac, the two conglomerates that together accounted for over half of the mortgage market, went bust and got taken over by the US government. Consequently, Lehman Brothers—the fourth largest investment bank in the country, employing some 26,000 people—closed the final chapter on its 160 years of history, after exhausting every effort to stay afloat.

Merrill Lynch, one of America's three largest investment banks, shut down after 94 years of business, and American International Group, the largest insurance company, was facing insolvency.<sup>31</sup>

This passage includes the usual propagandistic bluster, but a distinctly pedagogical tone is also clear. The author seems to be using this sinister character's inner monologue to take a break, mid-novel, to provide a textbook-style account of the sequence of events leading from the American subprime housing crisis to the global financial crisis. The text carefully lists the various bankrupted firms along with brief supplementary information, particularly noting the size and age of each one to better convey the significance of their downfall. The rough explanation of subprime housing loans is interesting both for what it includes (allusions to "low-class" people unwittingly drawn into speculation) and what it leaves out (the phenomenon of high-risk, high-interest subprime loans). The text is more interested in describing the magnitude of the losses than explaining how each downfall led to the next, but the general sense is that the vast size and interconnectedness of the American financial system makes it fundamentally unstable, magnifying risk rather than spreading it out—making the case for greater autonomy and isolation.

The reference to 9/11 reflects a long-standing propaganda line of tying all of America's financial problems to its overspending on the war on terror. The explanation mentions the ballooning US national debt, interpreted as a consequence of fighting expensive wars, but neglects to connect the dots of how that relates to the ability of private businesses to recover from bankruptcy.

Later, as the character Conan Jr. reflects on the causes of the financial crisis, his thoughts guide the reader through a skeptical overview of investment-driven growth:

America's economic growth had been largely driven by the dollar-based financial system. Its "economic growth" was based not on actual increases in production but on profits gleaned from the dollar circulating as the global currency. The result was financials backed by financials, with no connection to pro-

duction. The US reaped tremendous advantages from the dollar system.

But now, circumstances had changed.

Global production in goods and services had reached \$50 trillion a year, but securities like stocks and bonds amounted to \$150 trillion. The plummeting prices of low-income housing mortgages brought chaos to the financial markets, as everyone wanted to convert their securities into cash. But no matter how many loans the central banks of America and the Eurozone gave out, they could not generate enough cash to convert \$150 trillion in "fake money" securities.<sup>32</sup>

The description of a global system relying on "fake money" and "financials backed by financials" is revealing. In a few sentences, the author paints a vivid image of the US-led global financial order as a house of cards, emphasizing the distinction between real wealth based on "goods and services" and fake wealth based on nebulous "stocks and bonds." This passage also connects the global financial crisis to another popular target of North Korean financial writing: the US dollar's supremacy in global currency exchange.

## CURRENCY EXCHANGE AND CURRENCY REFORM

The imminent collapse of the global dollar exchange system is a perennial topic of North Korean media. A typical example is from an English-language KCNA article:

Various countries are showing the trend of converting their foreign currencies into gold out of concern that US debt snowballing beyond 14 trillion dollars may lead to the possible dollar depreciation.... BRICS, the grouping of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, are bravely challenging the outdated West-led international economic order with South-South cooperation. They are using national currencies when settling mutual trade, thereby dealing

31. Kim, *2009 nyeon*, chap. 10.

32. Kim, *2009 nyeon*, chap. 10.

decisive counteraction to the US dollar supremacy and increasing their political and economic position.<sup>33</sup>

As with financial crises, here again we must wonder how the typical North Korean reader would contextualize such reporting. The idea of “converting currency” would certainly be familiar to many operating in illicit, military, and black market economies.<sup>34</sup> They are also doubtless familiar with the idea that a currency’s exchange value can be volatile over time and that traders may prefer not to honor a particular currency for that reason. But how precisely do they conceive of concepts like dollar supremacy and currency reserves? How do they connect high national debt with currency depreciation?

The novel *2009* weighs in on this topic, again using the perspective of the American characters Conan Jr. and Hulbert. As Hulbert explains to his young apprentice,

Presently China holds an astronomical sum in US currency reserves and bonds. If it decides to sell off its bonds or convert its dollar holdings to euros, the US will either collapse or be compelled to defend the dollar’s position as the global trade accounting currency with military force. In short, war is inevitable. Many people have pointed out that the Iraq invasion happened just after Saddam loudly threatened to change his oil trading currency to euros.

Late last year, as the America-based financial crisis spread to the world, China established the Asian Financial Cooperation Exploratory Committee. The Asian Monetary Fund (AMF), which was proposed by Japan but founded by the US in response to the Asian financial crisis, was a plot to impose a common virtual currency (가상통화) and even create an Asian Central Bank.<sup>35</sup>

Here we can detect a reference to the dollar dumping conspiracy theory of the Iraq War, which had been circulating around the internet a few years before this novel was published, and

an insinuation that a US-China military conflict will soon erupt over currency reserves. The virtual currency notion also resembles a conspiracy theory that occasionally surfaced in the wake of the Asian financial crisis. In the same scene, Conan Jr. mentions that the president of Ecuador has been blaming the capitalist system for the financial crisis and calling for a new global economic model. Both worry that the dollar’s days are numbered as the dominant global currency. The novel seems to be using this dialogue to share some of the bleaker news bites and conspiracy theories about global currency from around the internet, possibly with the goal of dampening readers’ enthusiasm for holding US dollars. But the passage also may serve to raise readers’ awareness about the role of financial institutions within the global financial order and the US-China financial relationship.

Other stories manage to educate on currency issues while staying closer to home. One good example is the treatment of currency reform in the novel *Age of Prosperity* from the Imperishable History Series.<sup>36</sup> Set in the years after liberation and before the onset of the Korean War, the novel deals with the country’s initial economic construction. One remarkable aspect about this novel is its description of how the regime established its own currency in 1947, which appears to closely foreshadow the 2009 currency reform that would greatly shock and dismay the North Korean populace just a few months after the novel was published.<sup>37</sup>

Currency instability was a major problem for the newborn regime, and the novel depicts this as a consequence of deliberate scheming by financial saboteurs from the South. In one scene, a man shows up at one of the main Pyongyang markets with a wad of freshly printed Joseon Bank notes and proceeds to buy all the rice from stall after stall. A Women’s Union cadre, seeing this, reminds the rice sellers that no individual is

permitted to buy up all the rice supplies at once. The crowd accuses the man of being a *morigansangbae* (profiteer). He is eventually taken away by state security. That night, Kim Il Sung himself hears from his wife Kim Jong Suk (who had been shopping earlier) that the price of rice is still unstable and that “a lot of new bills from the South were seen in the markets.” He begins to contemplate reforming the currency system:

As long as we continue to use the old Japanese system, with Joseon Bank notes circulating in both North and South and no way of controlling how many are printed, we’ll never be able to improve the people’s living or stabilize the market prices. We must formulate our own currency, but in order to do that we must complete this year’s economic plan and prepare sufficient capital.<sup>38</sup>

More intriguing still is the way in which the planned currency reform is revealed to the novel’s characters. One character, an economics professor, is tasked by special order from the Great Leader himself to deliver a lecture on one of his old research papers, “The Currency Problem in the Late Ri Dynasty,” for an audience of workers from various accounting offices and financial institutions as well as all city propaganda officers. Both speaker and audience are puzzled that the party should be promoting such a dry historical lecture at a time when the country is preoccupied with the great labor of reconstruction. Several days after the lecture, the professor is summoned to a late-night meeting with Kim Il Sung. There, before a handful of top officials, Kim Il Sung unrolls a propaganda poster bearing the slogan “Our country has its own money now!” With that, they all realize that a currency reform is about to be announced. Kim Il Sung explains:

The currency reform law was passed on December 1st. But it must be kept a secret until it goes into effect [December 5th], so we prepared

33. KCNA, “KCNA Commentary on Crisis of Capitalism.” November 2, 2011.

34. Habib, “North Korea’s Parallel Economies.”

35. Kim, *2009 nyeon*, chap. 10.

36. Bo Heum Baek, *Beonyeongui sidae* (Pyongyang: Munhak Yesul Chulpansa, 2009).

37. Many thanks to the blogger Chungguk Shimin for pointing out this connection (Chungguk Shimin, “Buk ’hwapyeaehyeog’ eul yeeonhan soseol,” *Jaju Shibo*, February 21, 2010)

38. Baek, *Beonyeongui sidae*, chap. 6.2, 217.

these posters without telling anyone except for the officials directly involved. Tomorrow morning, all over the country to the far northern banks of the Tumen River, at every currency exchange in every village and town, these posters will go up at once...

Professor, some ten days ago, you gave a well-received lecture to the city's propaganda workers and financial accounting groups on the currency issue in the late Ri era. The lecture topic reflected well the political and economic significance of today's currency reform. We couldn't advertise it formally as it was a secret, but your lecture did an eloquent job of promoting it...

From tomorrow, the Joseon Bank currency which has been circulating thus far, as well as the Soviet red military notes, will all be destroyed, and only our Korean money issued by the North Joseon Central Bank will be circulated as the sole currency. This is not just a currency exchange, but a currency revolution.... The new currency will have great significance in stabilizing economic life, laying the nation's economic foundation on a strong basis, and building the financial foundation for our central government going forward. The currency reform will also be a breakthrough in lowering the prices of goods. With the new money you can buy three times as much rice as with the old money. The old and new bills will have a one-to-one exchange rate.... Now, no imperialists can use currency to mess with us!<sup>39</sup>

This excerpt is even more remarkable when we recall what would happen a few months after this novel was published. Without warning, on November 30, 2009, the regime announced that new currency had been issued. Citizens were given one week to convert their old Korean won to the new currency at a rate of 100:1. As Marcus Noland wrote, "The move was sprung on the populace without warning, and most critically, enormous limits were placed on the ability to convert cash holdings, in effect wiping out consider-

able household savings and the working capital of many private entrepreneurs."<sup>40</sup> Predictably, this set off a frenzy as people frantically sought to convert their cash savings into more tangible wealth, prices fluctuated wildly, and eventually wages had to be adjusted to reflect the new prices, effectively nullifying the revaluation. The aftermath was so damaging that the WPK director of finance was executed by firing squad as a scapegoat.

With this history in mind, we can see several ways in which the novel seems to be foreshadowing, or perhaps justifying, the coming reform. The start date mentioned, December 1, closely mirrors the November 30 date of the 2009 reform, and the extreme efforts to maintain absolute secrecy were also reprised in 2009. In the novel's account of the 1947 reform, just as in 2009, a strict limit was placed on the amount of money any individual could exchange, wiping out anyone with significant cash holdings. The novel's explanation, focusing on the problem of money brought in by "impure elements" from the South to disrupt the Northern economy, resembles the rhetoric of the 2000s accusing citizens with large cash holdings of being spies. The excerpt suggests that the currency revaluation aspired to achieve an instant 3-to-1 price drop, with no anticipation of the inevitable inflation; the 2009 reform similarly promised a 100-to-1 drop.

In addition, a metatextual message seems to be embedded here for attentive readers: just as the seemingly irrelevant history lecture foreshadowed the 1947 currency reform in the novel, the novel itself seemed to foreshadow the 2009 currency reform that would follow a few months after it was published. However, if the author or editor had been made aware of this purpose, it would have given them (and their friends and families) a potentially very lucrative financial advantage over their peers. The author, Bo Heum Baek, is a geologist by training but has been a member of the elite 4.15 Writers Group since 1989 and has written some of the Imperishable

Series' most important novels. In later chapters, the novel also seems to illustrate several problems that would soon recur in real life after the 2009 reform. One day after the reform is announced, a grain factory director named Chun Seon Kim meets with statistician Eun Shil Lee to discuss the problem of a friend who needs help converting 1 million won in old notes—a suspiciously massive amount of money.

There was a limit to how much old currency could be exchanged. That was to strike back against reactionary usurers [고리대금업자] who had amassed heaps of Joseon Bank notes and ensure a stable bank note backed by actual gold, precious metals, and other national wealth held by the bank. That way all the spies and reactionary usurers who brought in stacks of money from South Korea and spent lavishly would now be stuck.

Having just attended a political lecture that morning on currency exchange, Eun Shil wondered about the 1 million won amount. "How could your friend have so much money? Is he perhaps a bad element?"

"Heh heh. You've become very politically astute. That's right, he might be," Chun Seon nodded.

The reform exposed the misdeeds not only of loan sharks and spies, but also of some executives of state-run agencies and businesses who violated state policy and held large sums of cash illegally. The People's Committee had decreed that state agencies and businesses were not allowed to hold more than 15,000 won, but there were many who violated the country's laws and held enormous amounts of cash. According to calculations done by the Ministry of Finance while implementing the currency reform, the total amount of money illegally held by institutions, businesses, political parties, social organizations and commercial institutions amounted to more than 2.5 billion won. This was all exposed through the currency reform.

The money badly needed by the

39. Baek, *Beonyeongui sidae*, chap. 8.2, 302-304.

40. Marcus Noland, "North Korea's Failed Currency Reform." *BBC Online*, February 5, 2010.

state and the people was all locked up in individual businesses and organizations.<sup>41</sup>

The pair brainstorm about ways of laundering this money, considering various acquaintances who could use a loan that could then be repaid in new money, but ultimately Chun Seon's conscience gets the better of him and he burns all the old currency instead. Chun Seon is in fact a spy and the money was from the South. Disillusioned with his mission, he eventually commits suicide.

This excerpt clearly anticipates the fiscal chaos and money-laundering phenomena that would soon follow in the wake of the 2009 reform as people tried to preserve something of their profits from the bottom-up marketization that had occurred over the previous decade.<sup>42</sup> It was precisely this burgeoning middle class and its independent wealth that the 2009 reform intended to target. In this light, the story can be read either as a morality play exhibiting virtuous responses to currency reform or as a warning to party cadres of what sort of behavior to watch out for as citizens react to the change.

## CONCLUSION

In examining select finance-related subplots in North Korea's higher-profile literary products, we see not only examples of the usual ideological indoctrination, but also somewhat more pedagogical passages that seem to pass along (relatively) useful information, possibly aimed at cadres working in financial fields or traders with experience operating in foreign networks. As the globalized world has increasingly intruded on its isolation, and its financial needs have grown more complex, its propaganda products seem to have adjusted to allow somewhat more expansive coverage of external topics such as global finance and currency exchange.

Embedded in these narratives, often through the device of a foreign

character's inner thoughts or quotes from "foreign experts," are informative passages that equip the reader with an ideologically safe interpretation of ongoing developments in global finance and currency issues. The depictions of recent financial crises seem designed to persuade the reader of global capitalism's inevitable downfall; along the way, though, they also explain how national economies are increasingly interconnected through currency reserves and foreign debt, transnational banking and investment, and international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund. Perennial favorite topics like the skyrocketing US national debt, the rich-poor gap in developed countries, and the impending demise of the US dollar as the global exchange currency appear prominently in narrative descriptions of successive financial crises. Such passages could perhaps be interpreted as an effort to discourage elites from accumulating foreign currency or to raise confidence in North Korea's domestic currency. At the same time, these narratives provide important context for the North Korean reader on the dollar's history as global currency and the emergence of the modern global financial system. Fictional foreign characters provide context through their experiences of personal debt, failed investments, and bankruptcy.

Other stories focused on more domestic problems, such as the depiction of problems associated with past domestic currency reform, may be instructive for cadres in charge of enforcing currency exchange rules, even as they expound on the official justification for currency reform as a way of regaining state control of market activity. They also establish a continuity between past financial policies—particularly those of revered Great Leader Kim Il Sung—and those of the current leadership.

To fulfil this instructive role, however, the authors often are forced to depict less-virtuous characters and less-desirable financial behaviors. The resulting chapters often step outside the comfort zone of

North Korean literature—depicting foreign settings and characters, or traitorous ethnic Koreans who are nefariously trying to sabotage the system, or quasi-capitalist behavior by market vendors, or citizens seeking loopholes in the party's economic policies. Such problematic storylines cannot be written by any but the KWU's most elite authors, likely with direct oversight from the top levels of the KWP Propaganda and Agitation Department. This observation may have important implications regarding the limits of North Korea's information control when it comes to training economic elites who operate in a different information world from average North Koreans.

The central dilemma of the North Korean information system is that it is based on a deeply entrenched Cold War-era information cordon and propaganda production system, yet the state increasingly relies on a class of informed, entrepreneurial elites to find new sources of foreign currency and find new commercial partners as the external situation evolves. Traditional Cold War ideological narratives need to be updated to match twenty-first-century realities and a global economic system that is increasingly connected in ways that Marx and Lenin never dreamed. One way of dealing with this dilemma is to use existing propaganda products in new ways, such as allowing fictional depictions of foreign settings and foreign narrators to reinterpret outside events. Yet the novelty of such uniquely nefarious characters may only pique the interest of a generation that has grown up within a literary environment populated only by virtuous North Korean characters, and even small tidbits of new information about external settings can stir readers' imaginations in new ways. As citizens' information needs diverge and become more specialized, we may see further divergence of information worlds; and if ideologically trained writers take on increasingly practical and pedagogical assignments, we may encounter increasing narrative contradictions. ■

41. Baek, *Beonyeongui sidae*, chap. 9.1, 312-313.

42. Smith, *North Korea*.

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TYCHO VAN DER HOOG

# On the Success and Failure of North Korean Development Aid in Africa

## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the largely unknown history of North Korean development aid in Africa. In the second half of the twentieth century, Pyongyang was an important partner for recently liberated African countries and actively using development aid as a tool for its foreign policy, the ultimate aim being to gain international recognition. Development aid is an ideal window for viewing the nexus between ideology and economy

in North Korea, given that the two were intertwined in establishing agricultural projects on foreign soil. In the 1980s, North Korea tried to export its Juche-inspired model of agriculture (Juche is North Korea's ideology centered around the concept of self-reliance) to countries in Africa, as illustrated in the case studies of Tanzania and Ghana. Using novel primary sources from South Korean, European, and African archives, this paper argues that North Korean development aid may have been a diplomatic success but failed in practice.

## INTRODUCTION

In the second half of the twentieth century, North Korea (the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, or DPRK) was an important partner for recently liberated African countries. African-North Korean friendship was fostered on a diplomatic level, often encouraged by strong personal ties between Kim Il Sung and the first generation of African leaders.<sup>1</sup> It became manifest in military cooperation, such as training

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1. Benjamin R. Young, *Guns, Guerrillas, and the Great Leader: North Korea and the Third World* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2021).  
2. Joseph S. Bermudez, *Terrorism, the North Korean Connection* (New York: Crane Russak, 1990); N. Michishita, *North Korea's Military-Diplomatic Campaigns, 1966-2008* (London: Routledge, 2010); Andrea Berger, *Target Markets: North Korea's Military Customers in the Sanctions Era* (London: Routledge, 2016); Bruce E. Bechtol, *North Korean Military Proliferation in the Middle East and Africa: Enabling Violence and Instability* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2018).

missions and the exchange of military hardware.<sup>2</sup> Ideology also played a significant role, and the North Korean gospel of Juche (self-reliance) was shared with African allies by establishing Juche Study Centers and distrib-

Most studies on North Korean global activities emphasize success rather than failure. Highlighting the friendly relations between Kim Il Sung and foreign leaders, the training of armies and insurgents, profitable deals cut through

Korean aid mainly took the form of agricultural development, and to a lesser extent construction work, medical aid (by dispatching doctors), and military advice—though the military advice could be better framed as military cooperation, not as aid. Agriculture is the main focus in both case studies. Using previously unpublished files from South Korean, British, Swedish, South African, and Namibian archives, this paper aims to shed light on a form of cooperation that in the end did not have a lasting impact yet deserves to be recorded.

***During the Cold War, Africa was in transition toward independence. Ghana, located in West Africa, and Tanzania, part of East Africa, performed important regional roles for the liberation of southern Africa.***

uting translated North Korean books and magazines.<sup>3</sup> A visible relic of the friendship are the numerous North Korean statues, cemeteries, museums, and other buildings in Africa that were built after independence in the respective countries.<sup>4</sup> Less known, however, are the development projects North Korea undertook.

The history of DPRK development aid in Africa is largely unexplored but offers important lessons about North Korea's engagements with the rest of the world. The goal of development aid is in essence to transform a society, often in a way that mirrors the standards of the donor country—in this case, the perceived paradise of Pyongyang and its hinterland. Development aid is thus an ideal window through which to view the nexus of North Korean ideology and economic policy outside the borders of the DPRK. One reason this cooperation remains largely unexamined might be that the aid did not have a lasting impact. North Korean aid could no longer be continued after the end of the Cold War for a lack of funds, but indications are that existing projects in Africa were already failing.

North Korean embassies and companies—existing scholarship usually aims to refute the popular notion of North Korea as an isolated “hermit kingdom” by proving the many ties that bind North Korea to the rest of the world. Yet the focus on success might be a methodological fallacy—in fact, many DPRK projects fail. Setting the state propaganda aside and switching what is an elitist lens to a more grounded experience of this strand of Afro-Asian solidarity, it becomes clear that the DPRK sometimes missed the mark. Scholar should not underestimate the importance of failing: even a failed relationship is a relationship—and therefore worth studying.<sup>5</sup>

This paper examines the developmental relations of North Korea with two African countries, Ghana and Tanzania. Although located on opposite sides of the continent, each has been a hub and gateway for numerous African liberation movements and thus the future leaders of not-yet-liberated countries. It therefore made sense for North Korea to invest there and thus showcase the North Korean model of development, given that these were strategic and regionally important locations. North

## LIBERATION AND SOCIALISM

During the Cold War, Africa was in transition toward independence. Ghana, located in West Africa, and Tanzania, part of East Africa, performed important regional roles for the liberation of southern Africa. Their first elected presidents—respectively Kwame Nkrumah and Julius Nyerere—were shaping the post-independence future of the continent. The development of newly independent African nations was influenced by assistance from outside actors, including socialist countries. Within this framework of South-South cooperation, large countries such as the Soviet Union and China are well-known donor countries; smaller actors such as the DPRK are more easily overlooked.<sup>6</sup>

Although the transfer of North Korean expertise to Africa was part of a larger trend of socialist aid, it would be a mistake to view the DPRK as a Soviet or Chinese surrogate. During the Sino-So-

3. Igor Dobrzyniecki, “Juche Ideology in Africa: Its Origins & Development,” *Acta Asiatica Varsoviensia*, no. 32 (2019): 117–38.

4. Meghan L. E. Kirkwood, “Postindependence Architecture through North Korean Modes,” in *A Companion to Modern African Art* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 548–71; Godwin Komes, “Nordkorea Transnational: Arbeiten Des Mansudae Art Studios in Frankfurt Und Windhoek,” in *Zugehörigkeiten: Erforschen, Verhandeln, Aufführen - Im Sinne von Carola Lentz*, edited by Jan Beek, Konstanze N’Guessan, and Mareike Späth (Köln: Köppe, 2019), 121–45, [https://www.academia.edu/39839768/Nordkorea\\_transnational\\_Arbeiten\\_des\\_Mansudae\\_Art\\_Studios\\_in\\_Frankfurt\\_und\\_Windhoek\\_2019\\_](https://www.academia.edu/39839768/Nordkorea_transnational_Arbeiten_des_Mansudae_Art_Studios_in_Frankfurt_und_Windhoek_2019_); Tycho van der Hoog, *Monuments of Power: The North Korean Origin of Nationalist Monuments in Namibia and Zimbabwe* (Leiden: African Studies Centre Leiden, 2019); The Sentry, “Overt Affairs,” 2020, <https://thesentry.org/reports/overt-affairs>; The Sentry, “Artful Dodgers,” 2021, <https://thesentry.org/reports/artful-dodgers>.

5. To paraphrase Frederick Cooper, who eloquently observed that “Unequal relationships are still relationships and they can be pushed and pulled on.” See Lisa Lindsay and Moses Ochonu, “History Class,” *Africa Is a Country* (blog), November 18, 2020, <https://africasacountry.com/2020/11/history-class>.

6. In recent years, research has uncovered the ties between Africa and a number of smaller socialist countries in addition to the Soviet Union and China: Gareth M. Winrow, *The Foreign Policy of the GDR in Africa, Cambridge Russian, Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511559334>; Philip Muehlenbeck, *Czechoslovakia in Africa, 1945–1968* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-137-56666-9>; Kali Argyriadis, Giulia Bonacci, and Adrien Delmas, eds., *Cuba and Africa, 1959–1994: Writing an Alternative Atlantic History* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2020).

viet split, North Korea was remarkably skilled in charting its own foreign policy course.<sup>7</sup> Its involvement with African countries was primarily motivated by the competition with South Korea (ROK) for political support. A British official rightly observed that “The North Koreans have pitched their appeal, in the eyes of recipients of their aid, very much as a small, unthreatening country, seeking and promoting independence of great power influence.”<sup>8</sup> The independence from major powers once again reinforced the success of North Korea’s self-reliance model, which was particularly appealing to countries that were hostile to foreign (or at least Western) investment.<sup>9</sup>

Ghana was a source of inspiration for large parts of Africa, in that Kwame Nkrumah (1909–1972), the country’s first president (1960–1966), was a figurehead of practical and ideological importance for African liberation movements. Nkrumah ensured that exiled movements received financial assistance and military training in Ghana through the Bureau of African Affairs, years before the Organization of African Unity (OAU) did the same in Tanzania through the Liberation Committee. Accra, Ghana’s largest city and capital, was also where in 1958 the All-African People’s Conference was organized, a pivotal moment in the history of African liberation.<sup>10</sup> North Korean officials had visited it as early as 1965, when Ghana hosted the Fourth Afro-Asian People’s Solidarity Organization (AAPSO) Conference.<sup>11</sup> The AAPSO also organized two conferences in Tanzania (in 1960

and 1963), and years later also one in Pyongyang (in 1987). It is likely that party officials from African countries and the DPRK met in venues such as these. The AAPSO considered the struggle in southern Africa to be one of its main priorities and at the same time was an avid support of the North Korean regime.<sup>12</sup>

High-ranking Ghanaian politicians were not the only ones to visit Pyongyang. North Korea also invited newspaper editors, who sometimes spent months at a time in the DPRK capital. North Korea advertised in Ghanaian newspapers and pushed for anti-South Korean coverage. The South Korean embassy tried to counter these messages but found that often the editors were “totally bought off by North Korea.”<sup>13</sup> Nkrumah was ousted in a military coup in 1966, which also resulted in severed diplomatic ties between Ghana and the DPRK as a succession of military and civilian governments followed. In 1981, the Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC), led by the charismatic Jerry Rawlings, came into power, and relations with the DPRK became once again fraternal.<sup>14</sup> A PNDC delegation traveled to Pyongyang to explain their new policy and reassured their hosts that their “Africa policy” included full support for the liberation struggles in southern Africa, including the liberation movements of Namibia and South Africa. Further, the new government of Ghana “wholeheartedly expressed its support to the DPRK” in its vision of the future of the Korean peninsula.<sup>15</sup>

Tanzania was one of the original Frontline States, a coalition of countries that opposed the apartheid rule of South Africa and therefore offered support to southern African liberation movements.<sup>16</sup> The struggle became the “touchstone” of Tanzanian foreign policy.<sup>17</sup> Dar es Salaam was the headquarters of the Liberation Committee of the OAU, which sought to support the anti-colonial cause.<sup>18</sup> The city thus became a hub for exiled freedom fighters, several national liberation movements having established their offices there.<sup>19</sup> For this reason, North Korea invested much time and money in developing a close relationship with the Tanzanian regime. The DPRK embassy in Dar es Salaam was their largest foreign office in Africa and the only one built by the Koreans themselves. They even dispatched a special diplomat to foster ties with the exiled national liberation movements from the wider region.<sup>20</sup>

The ties between Tanzanian political elites and the DPRK were quite close. Tanzanian party members regularly traveled to Pyongyang for political conferences or the opportunity to study party organization.<sup>21</sup> In the 1970s, North Korea established an Institute for Political Affairs in Zanzibar. The school consisted of seven North Korean instructors who provided three-month courses in ideological education for the members of the Tanzania People’s Defense Forces and members of the Afro-Shirazi Party, a party that in 1977 merged with the Tanganyika African

7. Andrei Lankov, *The Real North Korea: Life and Politics in the Failed Stalinist Utopia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 19.  
8. NAUK, FCO 21/3213, Relations between Uganda and North Korea.  
9. NAUK, FCO 31/948, Political relations between Somali Democratic Republic and North Korea.  
10. Matteo Grilli, “Nkrumah’s Ghana and the Armed Struggle in Southern Africa (1961–1966),” *South African Historical Journal* 70, no. 1 (January 2, 2018): 56–81, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02582473.2018.1439524>.  
11. ROKDA, 1448, AAPSO Je4cha a.a inmindangyeolgigu [The 4th Afro-Asian People’s Solidarity Conference] Accra Ghana 1965.5.9-16  
12. NAI Library, Pamphlet Collection, Regional Cooperation: AAPSO. The AAPSO “fully supported” the plans of Kim Il Sung for the reunification of the Korean peninsula and condemned the “fascist rule” of the US government and the “puppet clique” of the South Korean government.  
13. ROKDA, 17450, Bukan · gana gwangye [North Korea-Ghana Relations]. 1982.  
14. PNDC-related organizations also dedicated time to commemorate the Ghanaian-Korean friendship. For example, the June Four Movement, a militant mass revolutionary movement that sought to keep the revolutionary spirit alive, celebrated an annual “month of solidarity with the Korean people.” The Ghana-Democratic People’s Republic of Korea Friendship Society also held meetings to this end. ROKDA, 26593, Bukan · gana gwangye [North Korea-Ghana Relations], 1987–88.  
15. ROKDA, 21926, Bukan · gana gwangye [North Korea-Ghana Relations], 1985.  
16. Gilbert M. Khadiagala, *Allies in Adversity: The Frontline States in Southern African Security 1975–1993* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2007).  
17. NAUK, FCO 31/976, Tanzania’s relations with Communist countries.  
18. Chris Saunders, “SWAPO, Namibia’s Liberation Struggle and the Organisation of African Unity’s Liberation Committee,” *South African Historical Journal* 70, no. 1 (January 2, 2018): 152–67, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02582473.2018.1430846>.  
19. George Roberts, “Politics, Decolonisation, and the Cold War in Dar Es Salaam c.1965–72” (PhD diss., University of Warwick, 2016), <http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/87426>.  
20. Interview with an anonymous former North Korean diplomat working in Africa, July 19, 2021. A delegation from the Liberation Committee was also invited to Pyongyang in April 1974 (NAUK, FCO 31/1739, Liberation Committee of Organisation for African Unity).  
21. NAUK, FCO 31/3263, Visits between Tanzania and communist countries; FCO 31/3674, Relations between Tanzania and North and South Korea.  
22. The Afro-Shirazi Party (ASP), together with the Umma Party, started the Zanzibar Revolution in 1964. Before the school was established, DPRK delegations as well as athletic coaches and youth workers had already traveled to Zanzibar. An “active literature placement program” was in place. The man responsible for the organizing the school was Colonel Seif Bakari, a man described as the most powerful man in the local military and an “admirer” of the North Korean system (ROKDA, 8253, Bukan · tanjania gwangye [North Korea-Tanzania Relations]).

National Union (TANU) into Chama Cha Mapinduzi, still the ruling party of Tanzania.<sup>22</sup> North Korea was thought to have “considerable potential political influence” through their advisors in the Youth League of TANU in mainland Tanzania.<sup>23</sup> The Tanzania-Korea Friendship Society, founded in 1970, held regular monthly meetings in the North Korean embassy in Dar es Salaam.<sup>24</sup> The society translated and published the works of Kim Il Sung in Swahili.<sup>25</sup>

In sum, the newly elected leaders of Africa looked east for political and ideological inspiration. In a 1974–1975 edition of the *Third World Forum*, a publication sponsored by the Afro-Asian Latin American People’s Solidarity Committee, North Korea was hailed as an example for Africa. The author, Peter Lawrence, praised the rapid development of the DPRK as an export country, despite its relatively small population. Tanzania, for example, could benefit from “major lessons” from this experience.<sup>26</sup> This kind of celebratory literature was not unusual. In 1965, the Cambridge economist Joan Robinson praised the development of North Korea, writing that “All the economic miracles of the postwar world are put in the shade by these achievements.”<sup>27</sup> After the conclusion of the Korean War, the economic growth of the DPRK was rather impressive even as the US-backed South Korea suffered under a dictatorship and slow economic growth.<sup>28</sup> African elites were thus far more in favor of the North and remained informed about the peninsula from not only publications such as the *Third World Forum* or Western media, but also translated North Korean magazines such as *Korea Today* and the *Foreign Trade of the DPRK*.<sup>29</sup>

## JUCHE AND AGRICULTURE

The focus of DPRK literature was of course Juche, its own ideology of self-reliance.<sup>30</sup> One of the main aims of this display of ideological prowess was to convince the world of the global applicability of Juche, especially for the developing world. In Africa, this effort was primarily to establish Juche study centers. Accra, for example, was the home of the Ghana National Institute of the Juche Idea, which was founded in 1981.<sup>31</sup> The institute organized meetings in venues adorned by portraits of Kim Il Sung and a display of his works and photographs of North Korea, where Ghanaians would read keynote reports, discuss North Korean literature and agreed upon collective letters to Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il.<sup>32</sup> In 1988, for example, the institute organized a special drive of book-reading five hundred pages to mark the fortieth anniversary of the DPRK. Several study groups in Tanzania also held regular meetings, one being a seminar in 1989 in which discussion centered on “For the Development of Agriculture in African Countries,” a speech by Kim Il Sung during a symposium in 1981. This symposium was attended by several ministers of agriculture of African countries, including the minister from Tanzania.<sup>33</sup>

Juche was always formulated in incredibly vague terms and stressed the importance of self-reliance, which made it relatively easy to connect Juche thought to the desire of liberated nations in Africa to be independent. This was, for example, publicly confirmed by Seretse Khama, the first president of Botswana: during a mass rally in Pyongyang, Khama proclaimed that the Batswana

national principle of *ipelegeng/boipele-go*, which translates into self-reliance or self-help, was compatible with Juche.<sup>34</sup> In Zambia, Juche was thought to be in line with the ideas of Zambian humanism put forward by the first president, Kenneth Kaunda.<sup>35</sup> In Tanzania, the official ideology of the ruling party, *ujaama*, revolved around the central themes of “self-reliance, rural development, public control over the economy and social equality”—concepts that very much aligned with Juche.<sup>36</sup>

The African enthusiasm for Juche was widely shared across the continent, as evident in recurring issues of the journal *Study of the Juche Idea*. In this journal, ordinary non-Koreans could submit articles that either reviewed their travel experiences in Pyongyang or examined how Juche was relevant for their home country. These usually focused on a particular theme such as the economy, philosophy, art, or education. Every issue would carry submissions from interested Africans, such as E. S. Mushi, a civil servant from Tanzania, who wrote in 1989 that he was “deeply impressed and amazed” by what he had witnessed during his travels in North Korea, “the beacon of hope and a model of socialism.” The Juche model could be applied to all facets of an independent nation state, including agriculture. During the Cold War, several articles throughout the years dealt specifically with Juche and agriculture in Africa. Jean Rakotoarivelo, a school principal in Madagascar, hailed the south-south cooperation between the DPRK and other developing countries, particularly in the field of agriculture:

[The DPRK] in particular is giving vital assistance towards solving the

23. NAUK, FCO 31/976, Tanzania’s relations with Communist countries.

24. NAUK, FCO 31/692, Relations between North Korea and Tanzania.

25. NAUK, FCO 95/860, Tanzania: relations with North Korea.

26. UNAM Archives, PA3/6/121, *Third World Forum*. Quebec: *Third World Forum*, 1974/75.

27. Joan Robinson, “Korean Miracle,” *Monthly Review*, January 2, 1965, 541–49, [https://doi.org/10.14452/MR-016-09-1965-01\\_2](https://doi.org/10.14452/MR-016-09-1965-01_2).

28. Bruce Cumings, *Korea’s Place in the Sun: A Modern History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 423.

29. See, for example, UNAM Archives, PA4/5/138, *Foreign Trade of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea: 1987*; PA3/6/67, *Korea today*. – Pyongyang: The Foreign Language Magazines, 1992.

30. Brian Reynolds Myers, *North Korea’s Juche Myth* (Busan: Sthele Press, 2015).

31. UNAM Archives, PA4/5/421, *Study of the Juche Idea: 1979–1990*.

32. ROKDA, 17450.

33. UNAM Archives, PA4/5/421; NAUK, FCO 31/3263, Visits between Tanzania and communist countries.

34. Boga Thura Manatsha, “Geopolitical Implications of President Seretse Khama’s 1976 State Visit to North Korea,” *Botswana Notes and Records* 50 (2018): 138–52.

35. NAUK, FCO 106/850, Political relations between Zambia and communist countries.

36. Dharam Ghai and Reginald Herbold Green, “Ujamaa and Villagisation in Tanzania,” in *Agrarian Systems and Rural Development*, edited by Dharam Ghai et al. (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1979).

food problem and laying the foundations of agricultural production in many African countries: it is helping these institutions based on the Juche farming methods created by President Kim Il Sung, and sending its agricultural scientists, technicians and irrigation experts to these countries.<sup>37</sup>

In 1986, the Tanzanian R. Nyambuka referred to the symposium in an issue of the *Study of the Juche Idea* by describing the progress subsequently made in his country. "The cooperation between Tanzania and the DPRK shows that newly-emerging countries have good experience and techniques for mutual cooperation," Nyambuka wrote, mentioning the "great successes achieved in the agricultural field through the cooperation between Korean and Tanzanian agricultural scientists and experts."<sup>38</sup> No comprehensive study of such agricultural interventions has ever been undertaken, however. The scant evidence suggests that in truth North Korean development aid did not live up to the praise of North Korea's admirers, as illustrated in two case studies.

Juche agriculture was "the poster child" for the successful socialist modernization of the DPRK. Chong-Ae Yu argues that soon after North Korea was established, the state "embarked on a modernization project that fundamentally transformed its society from agrarian to industrial, with the aim of achieving food self-sufficiency." The key to this project was the perception of agriculture as a matter of national security. In practice, Juche agriculture consisted of rescaling the land through collectivization and the heavy techno-

logical intervention. The use of capital intensive, mechanized production, the heavy application of agro-chemicals, an extensive system of irrigation, and mono-cropping were essential.<sup>39</sup> In the 1950s, according to Balázs Szalontai, North Korean agricultural production was "very low" and techniques were "quite primitive." Severe food scarcity led to a crisis in 1955.<sup>40</sup> In 1978, howev-

**North Korea's miraculous economic growth, coupled with its philosophy of self-reliance, thus made the DPRK an attractive partner for countries across Africa that sought to achieve the same.**

er, the US Central Intelligence Agency reported that the North Korean "grain production may have grown at a more rapid pace" than South Korea, due to its advances in agriculture.<sup>41</sup> In 1984, the DPRK had a record grain production and exceeded the consumption requirements of its population. Its ability to supply the daily caloric requirements to its population was "consistently higher" than that of China.<sup>42</sup>

Most African countries were at the time predominantly rural. Agriculture—especially subsistence farming—was vital for large parts of the population in Ghana, Tanzania, and other African nations. Lynn Krieger Mytelka observes that "the limited scope and scale of African industrialization was widely regarded as an opportunity" as newly independent states developed policies to nationalize and modernize industries.<sup>43</sup> North Korea's miraculous economic growth, coupled with its philosophy of self-reliance, thus made the DPRK an attractive partner for countries across Africa that sought to achieve the same.

## TANZANIA

The aid relationship between Tanzania and North Korea, politically close countries, commenced in the 1970s. A few years earlier, in 1967, Nyerere announced the Arusha Declaration and TANU's Policy on Socialism and Self-Reliance. This policy was Tanzania's

philosophy of self-reliant development and one of multiple examples where African postcolonial political ideologies aligned very well with Juche. The declaration stated that "agriculture is the basis of development", and stressed that "Tanzanians can live well without depending on help from outside if they use their land properly."<sup>44</sup> Agricultural aid from North Korea was thus a logical way to strengthen the ties between both countries.

The first DPRK agricultural project in Tanzania, the Dakawa Rice Irrigation Project, was launched in 1975 near Morogoro and became known as the Cheollima Agricultural Science Institute. Located two hundred kilometers from Dar es Salaam, this 260 million shilling project concerned two thousand hectares (roughly five thousand acres) of rice fields and facilities to process paddy and store ten thousand tons of rice.<sup>45</sup> The project was funded primarily by the African Development Bank and the Tanzania Development Bank, but executed with the help of North Korean ex-

37. UNAM Archives, PA4/5/421.

38. UNAM Archives, PA4/5/421.

39. Chong-Ae Yu, "The Rise and Demise of Industrial Agriculture in North Korea," *Journal of Korean Studies* 12, no. 1 (2007): 75-109.

40. Balázs Szalontai, *Kim Il Sung in the Khrushchev Era: Soviet-DPRK Relations and the Roots of North Korean Despotism, 1953-1964* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 63-65.

41. Central Intelligence Agency, *Korea: The Economic Race Between the North and the South, 1978*. It should, however, be noted that the report acknowledges that higher production levels did not automatically result in higher living standards. In fact, while grain production may have grown faster in North Korea, "general living standards improved faster in the South." I want to thank William Brown for his useful comments on this important point.

42. Yu, "Rise and Demise."

43. Lynn Krieger Mytelka, "The Unfulfilled Promise of African Industrialization," *African Studies Review* 32, no. 3 (1989): 77-137, <https://doi.org/10.2307/524549>.

44. NAI Library, Pamphlet Collection, Tanzania: National Liberation Movements: TANU: TANU, The Arusha Declaration and TANU's Policy on Socialism and Self-Reliance, 1967.

45. ROKDA, 23558, Bukan · tanjania gwangye [North Korea-Tanzania Relations], 1985-86.

perts.<sup>46</sup> Dakawa was a strategic location, because it was also closely connected to the exile camps of the African National Congress (ANC), the South African liberation movement that gained power in 1994. In 1982 the Tanzanian government granted 7500 acres (300 ha) of land at Dakawa to the ANC, for the construction of the ANC Development Centre. The goal was to develop self-reliant agriculture and house 5000 exiled South Africans who would prepare for independence.<sup>47</sup> The North Korean Dakawa Rice

Agriculture Joseph Mungai traveled to Pyongyang for a special agriculture meeting, after which teams of Korean experts were dispatched to eight regions in the country. In all, 105 advisors were set to work abroad: thirty on irrigation projects, forty-eight in maize production, ten on vegetable garden projects, and others on feasibility studies for mini-hydroelectric power stations. Dozens more followed in later years.<sup>49</sup> In 1985, for example, a team of twelve North Korean experts visited Tanzania to survey areas suitable for irriga-

southern Africa's liberation struggle—was again confirmed by this decision. The center was constructed by the DPRK, a large and expensive project that took two years and estimated as costing approximately £2.4 million.<sup>54</sup> It is clear that in the eyes of the Kim regime, Tanzania was set to become an example of Juche agriculture for the rest of the African continent. The DPRK wanted Tanzania become self-reliant in terms of food and proposed ambitious plans for irrigated farmlands around Lake Victoria (two hundred

thousand hectares) and the Rufiji River basin (fifty thousand), which should result in the production of 1.5 million tons of food per year. Tanzania was promised machinery and technical support. Agriculture was simply the basis: the Kore-

*Prime Minister Rashidi Kawawa praised the “exemplary” work of the Koreans in his country, which he said was an example of “that spirit of hard work and dedication which has made Korea a strong and prosperous nation.”*

Irrigation Project (or Cheollima Agricultural Science Institute), however, came to a conclusion in 1982, having been delayed for a year because of a difference of opinion between the Koreans and other workers. Similar to their Ghanaian counterparts, the Tanzanian hosts paid for the accommodation, international transport, leave, and salaries of the Korean advisors.

In subsequent years, cooperation between the countries deepened from 1981 onward. In June 1981, an eighteen-man North Korean delegation led by Prime Minister Jong Ok Li visited Tanzania for five days and offered to help their host with irrigation and hydro-power projects, particularly experts to advance modern agriculture techniques such as “soil science, seed improvement, fertilizer application and the operation of agricultural machinery.”<sup>48</sup> A few months later, in August 1981, Tanzanian Minister of

tion farming. Shortly after the submission of the first report, Tanzanian Vice President Ndugu Mwinyi visited the DPRK to discuss the prospects of irrigated agricultural projects.<sup>50</sup> The agreement also included an interest-free loan for machinery. A DPRK team stayed for five years on a farm in the Iringa region, where they supervised farm work and established a weather forecasting station and tools for a workshop.<sup>51</sup> Meanwhile, former president Nyerere's home village became a hotspot for North Korean agricultural experts and town planners, probably not a coincidence considering the symbolic location.<sup>52</sup>

In 1982, the construction of an Agro-Scientific Research Center was announced. It had a distinct regional function for East and Central Africa and was therefore a great opportunity to market Juche methods in neighboring countries.<sup>53</sup> The strategic location of Tanzania—not just for

ans developed plans for brick and tile production, medical training, a national irrigation program, and seven hundred technical drawings for parks, gardens, and playing grounds.<sup>55</sup>

The North Koreans clearly pushed for Juche-style development in Tanzania, but their African hosts expressed public gratitude to the Kim regime. Prime Minister Rashidi Kawawa praised the “exemplary” work of the Koreans in his country, which he said was an example of “that spirit of hard work and dedication which has made Korea a strong and prosperous nation.”<sup>56</sup> This was of course music in the ears of the Koreans and a diplomatic victory. In 1985, a few years after the flurry of aid projects and propositions began, Nyerere traveled to Pyongyang with a large entourage to meet with Kim Il Sung and discuss the progress of their mutual enterprises. During a banquet

46. British diplomatic staff observed that “The North Koreans will no doubt continue to gain cheap credit here by providing experts to superintend projects financed from other sources” (NAUK, FCO 21/1879, Foreign policy of North Korea).

47. NAI Library, Pamphlet Collection, South Africa: National Liberation Movement: ANC: Solomon Mahlangu Freedom College, ANC Development Centre, Dakawa, ANC progress report, 1982/1983; SOMAFSCO, Official Opening, 21-23 August 1985.

48. NAUK, FCO 21/1879, Foreign policy of North Korea.

49. The irrigation projects included “4000 hectares around Lake Victoria; 5000 hectares in Kilombero Valley; 3000 hectares along the Lukosi River, in Iringa Region; 200 hectares at Kalenga, on Pemba; 1000 hectares in the Rufiji River basin; 600 hectares at Mwanampuli dam, in Tabora Region; and a further area long the Kitivo River, in Tanga Region” (NAUK, FCO 31/3674).

50. ROKDA, 23558.

51. ROKDA, 23558.

52. NAUK, FCO 31/3674.

53. ROKDA, 23558.

54. NAUK, FCO 31/3674.

55. ROKDA, 23558; NAUK, FCO 31/3674.

56. ROKDA, 6029, Bukan · tanjania gwangye [North Korea-Tanzania Relations].

in his honor, Nyerere thanked the Great Leader: "We greatly appreciate the work which Korean citizens have done, and are doing, to help in our agricultural development. [The Koreans] are innovative, and encourage by example and practical action the development of our self-reliance. I can only say thank you."<sup>57</sup>

Careful archival research revealed to some extent the aid relation between Tanzania and North Korea but is of little use to assess the outcomes of these projects. In terms of the continuation of the Tanzania-Korean aid relation, it is likely that the limited funds of the DPRK in the post-Cold War era prevented further cooperation. While it lasted, however, the British embassy reported that North Korea was able to maintain "a high profile here at little real cost." In terms of optics, the DPRK aid was clearly successful in that it was able to project a public image of success. The deployment of Korean experts in various projects around the country left the impression that said projects were also funded by the DPRK, though usually they were not. "The overriding impression," one cynical British embassy official wrote, "is that of one poor, agricultural national helping another."<sup>58</sup> Although the Tanzanian case study does reveal the establishment of a large number of smaller and larger projects, much empirical evidence attests to the day-to-day operations of these projects. The Ghanaian case study, on the other hand, includes a detailed assessment of an agricultural aid project that was similar to the ones established in Tanzania and elsewhere in Africa. This story contains a number of clues that show that such aid projects were, contrary to the public image of success, not as rewarding as intended.

## GHANA

The aid relation between Ghana and the DPRK similarly reached a peak in the

1980s. Between 1982 and 1983, the North Koreans provided technological aid and expertise to develop 13,200 hectares (32,618 acres) of farmland in the West African country and supported the establishment of three agricultural research stations in the vicinity of Accra, which were used as training centers for Ghanaian farmers. In this instance, the DPRK organized the storage of agriculture products and equipment, and in return Ghana promised to export produce to the DPRK as payment. The same year, North Korea developed the Ghana Juche Farm in Akatsi, near the Togolese border, a project proudly announced on the front page of a national newspaper. The fifty-hectare farm produced rice, corn, and other vegetables. It was agreed that in subsequent years the farm would be enlarged to about one hundred hectares and that the knowledge gained there would be applied to other areas across the country.<sup>59</sup>

However, poor results led to the decision to move the Akatsi team to Aveyime, a rice farm some ninety kilometers from the capitol city of Accra and operated by the Ghanaian Development Authority (IDA). The Aveyime Rice Project would become the centerpiece of Ghana-DPRK aid relations. It is one of the few if only DPRK aid projects described in detail, in a book by Donald Bobiash. The North Korean team arrived in 1984 with the aim of providing technical assistance in rice cultivation. The team consisted of five members: a rice specialist, a mechanical engineer, an irrigation engineer, an interpreter, and a group leader. It brought with it fertilizer, a bulldozer, four Cheolima tractors (named after the mythical winged horse), and a plow.<sup>60</sup>

IDA, remarkably, did not request the presence of the North Korean team in Aveyime and one interviewed executive confessed that he had not seen any

documentation about the offer of aid. Nor was he informed about how long the team would be staying or how the finances were organized. That IDA was not aware of the arrival of the North Koreans indicates that this decision was made at the highest administrative level and thus politically motivated rather than economically based on developmental needs. Bobiash suggests that one explanation might be the ties between radical factions of the ruling military junta and the DPRK.<sup>61</sup> South Korean embassy cables reveal that indeed the details of this project were discussed during the 1982 visit of a Ghanaian minister to Pyongyang for Kim Il Sung's birthday.<sup>62</sup>

The Ghanaian government was eager to receive North Korean agricultural experts. The administration provided air transportation (including an annual holiday trip to the DPRK), local transportation, accommodation, food, and a living allowance. The South Korean embassy cynically remarked that the North Korean demands "are bigger than the aid itself, and their purpose is to advertise their propaganda rather than to help."<sup>63</sup> Despite the high expectations of both the Ghanaian and the North Korean governments, the project failed miserably. First, local staff did not want the assistance and, second, preparation was minimal. The Korean equipment broke down on the unfamiliar terrain and was difficult to repair because no spare parts were available. Contact between the North Koreans and the Ghanaians was also limited, in part because of communication problems, the one interpreter apparently difficult to understand. Social relations between the two nationalities, Bobiash observed, "were poor, and at times appeared overtly hostile."<sup>64</sup> The development of the Ghana Juche Farm in Ghana thus followed a similar pattern

57. ROKDA, 23558.

58. NAUK, FCO 31/3674.

59. ROKDA, 17450.

60. Donald Bobiash, *South-South Aid: How Developing Countries Help Each Other* (London: MacMillan/St. Martin's Press, 1992).

61. Bobiash, *South-South Aid*. Indeed, a Ghanaian newspaper in 1982 wrote that the DPRK "is to set up agricultural research stations and experimental farms in the country as her contribution to the PNDC's green revolution" (ROKDA, 17450).

62. The project was further discussed during high-level meetings between the North Korean Foreign Economic Business Department and the Ghanaian State Committee for Economic Cooperation (see ROKDA, 17450).

63. ROKDA, 17450.

64. Bobiash, *South-South Aid*.

65. NAUK, FCO 31/3674.

as the Cheollima Agricultural Science Institute in Tanzania.<sup>65</sup>

The North Koreans executed a field survey and repaired an irrigation pump, which IDA appreciated. In terms of agricultural yields, however, the results were disappointing. To the request for twenty hectares to conduct rice-growing trials, the Ghanaians provided only one because they had no confidence in the abilities of the North Koreans. The yield on this hectare was half the usual average yield of the farm, despite heavier use of fertilizer, and thus seemed to confirm this suspicion. During a 1986 visit of North Korean Vice Premier Jun Gi Jeong to the farm, Ghanaian officials explained the need to reappraise the project and see how the North Koreans “could be fully integrated into better projects” considering the disappointing results.<sup>66</sup> In 1989, the two governments signed a technical services agreement that resulted in the arrival of seven North Korean irrigation experts for the Accra Plains Irrigation Project. Despite the concerns from local staff about the progress of the projects, this team also worked on the Aveyime Rice Project. Again, Ghana paid the accommodation, feeding, and logistical costs of the team, which stayed in the country for fifteen months.<sup>67</sup>

The available archival evidence indicates that the Aveyime Rice Project was possibly the focal point of North Korean development aid to Ghana. Bilateral relations were strained for a number of years after Kwame Nkrumah was ousted but resumed when the PNDC came into power in the 1980s. Agricultural aid from the DPRK was particularly welcome for the newly installed revolutionary regime. We can, however, observe a clear disconnection between high-level political aspira-

tions and the on-the-ground experiences of the farmers and staff members. What eventually happened with the Aveyime Rice Project is unclear, but it can be assumed that, with the end of the Cold War, the North Korean team returned home a few years after the project’s inception. “Any long-term contribution to self-reliance or development of local resources would be limited,” Bobiash concludes.<sup>68</sup>

## DEVELOPMENT AID AS FOREIGN POLICY

The highs and lows of North Korea’s aid relation to Africa unfolded in what can be fairly described as the long 1980s, marked by two international conferences in Pyongyang. For decades, the DPRK had been investing in strong and often personal ties to the newly established regimes in Africa; this ensured that several African agriculture ministers attended the Symposium of the Non-Aligned and Other Developing Countries on Increasing Food and Agricultural Production in Pyongyang in August 1981. As noted earlier, during a consultative meeting of ministers of agriculture from eastern and western Africa, Kim Il Sung gave an eloquent speech in which he stipulated that it would not be enough to simply organize a symposium and agree on a declaration—practical action was necessary. Kim vowed to increase agricultural production in East and West Africa by providing farm machinery, irrigation projects, and experts. The 1981 symposium was thus the kick-off of the North Korean agricultural campaign on the African continent.<sup>69</sup>

The North Korean aid crusade was framed as “South-South cooperation,” a phrase

coined for the “building of independent economies based on self-reliance” that implies the central role of Juche ideology in North Korean development aid. Kim believed that African countries had won political independence, but had yet to gain economic independence. The North Koreans were convinced that their efforts to invoke south-south cooperation would ultimately establish the New International Economic Order. Their African allies offered vocal support. The PNDC government of Ghana, for example, confirmed that it “strongly believed” and were committed to this vision.<sup>70</sup> Ultimately, the Korean strategy aimed to rally support within the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) for its foreign policy objectives, which sought to diminish South Korea’s standing in the world.<sup>71</sup> The DPRK was a member of the NAM and the ROK was not, which presented the DPRK an opportunity to improve its prestige and further isolate its rival.<sup>72</sup>

North Korea is estimated to have undertaken aid programs in at least twenty African countries.<sup>73</sup> In Lesotho, the DPRK team rebuilt the national stadium, ran vegetable farms, and experimented with maize production and irrigation, although frustration arose on the basis of the North Koreans’ language difficulties and their failure to submit reports to the Ministry of Agriculture.<sup>74</sup> The Seychelles benefited from the donation of thousands of tons of cement for housing projects, tractors for agricultural development and the supply of rice for a reduced price.<sup>75</sup> In Angola, the North Koreans ran an irrigation project and were involved in the production of cotton and the construction of a dam. The Angolans turned down the offer to establish state farms.<sup>76</sup> The Zambian government was grateful for in paddy rice growing.<sup>77</sup> During a visit to Zimbabwe in

66. ROKDA, 23535, Bukan · gana gwangye [North Korea-Ghana Relations], 1986.

67. ROKDA, 28215, Bukan · gana gwangye [North Korea-Ghana Relations], 1989.

68. Bobiash, *South-South Aid*.

69. The exclusion of southern Africa can be explained through the political situation at the time, when large parts of that region were embroiled in liberation wars (DPRK Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Immortal Program Illuminating Road to Agricultural Development in African Countries,” *ForeignPolicyWatchdog*, August 31, 2021, <https://web.archive.org/web/20220201154322/https://foreign-policywatchdog.com/north-korea/immortal-program-illuminating-road-to-agricultural-development-in-african-countries>).

70. ROKDA, 21926.

71. NAUK, FCO 21/2876, North Korea and the Non-Aligned Movement.

72. Nate Kerkhoff, “North Korea and the Non-Aligned Movement: From Adulation to Marginalization,” *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 28, no. 1 (May 7, 2020): 41–71, <https://doi.org/10.1163/18765610-28010003>.

73. NAUK, FCO 31/3922, Political relations between Ethiopia and North Korea.

74. NAUK, FCO 105/1889, Bilateral relations between Lesotho and Communist countries; FCO 105/2183, Relations between Lesotho and Communist countries.

75. NAUK, FCO 31/2433, Relations between the Seychelles and the Communist states.

76. NAUK, FCO 21/3884, External relations of North Korea.

1981, Jeong Ok Li promised “total assistance” in the agricultural development of Zimbabwe when he toured a farm.<sup>78</sup> Other programs were implemented in Guinea, Equatorial Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Uganda.<sup>79</sup> More examples can be found in archival repositories around the world—it is a history yet to be written.

The orchestrated campaign to woo African allies through agriculture reached its pinnacle in 1987 in Pyongyang with the Extraordinary Ministerial Conference of the NAM on South-South Cooperation. This four-day summit resulted in the Pyongyang Declaration and Plan of Action on South-South Co-operation, a lengthy document that outlined an entire new world order, based on the principles of Juche thought.<sup>80</sup> The conference had a clear African connection, in that the decision to organize it in Pyongyang was made in Harare, Zimbabwe, during the 8th Non-Aligned Summit in 1986.<sup>81</sup> Robert Mugabe was a friend of Kim Il Sung and not only admired the North Koreans for their military prowess—an appreciation manifested in the establishment of the 5th Brigade—but also for their achievements in agriculture.<sup>82</sup> When he ascended to power in 1980, Mugabe publicly praised the 5th Brigade and suggested that “Zimbabwe had much to learn from the North Korean experience.”<sup>83</sup> In Kim Il Sung’s keynote speech at the 1987 conference, he expressed his “deep gratitude” to the government of Zimbabwe and underlined the importance of agriculture by summarizing the premise of North Korean development aid to Africa:

The developing countries must advance agriculture. . . . It is a most

appropriate type of cooperation that the non-aligned countries, having set an inspiring target of achieving complete self-sufficiency in food as soon as possible, undertake joint venture in agriculture through various forms and means and closely cooperate with each other in the construction of irrigation works, in the improvement of farming methods, in researches on agricultural science and in the production of farm machinery.<sup>84</sup>

The Pyongyang conferences, one in 1981 and one in 1987, were ideal opportunities to market the North Korean experience to foreign parties. The importance of the African bloc should not be underestimated given that it accounted for dozens of votes in multilateral fora.<sup>85</sup> The DPRK was always a sharp observer of the times and thus able to connect with developing nations around the world, but its campaign for south-south cooperation was ultimately overtaken by external geopolitical shifts it could not control. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the DPRK was thrown into economic disarray and no longer able to fund its projects in Africa and beyond. Because nothing left to prop up the North Korean economy, the Public Distribution System in the DPRK collapsed. A widespread famine followed, Kim Il Sung died, new leadership was assumed, and North Korea would never be the same again.<sup>86</sup> The North Korean embassies in Africa went into survival mode and were instructed to earn money rather than spend it on aid. The era of development was over.<sup>87</sup>

North Korean aid is thus a thing of the past. The examples of Ghana and

Tanzania offer a number of observations relevant to DPRK development assistance in Africa. North Korea was usually keen to offer aid and tried to push their expertise on envisaged host countries, as in Ghana. Their offers were repeated multiple times even if the partners were reluctant.<sup>88</sup> A common feature was the invitation diplomacy of the DPRK, in which high-level African political elites were received in Pyongyang and deals were made.<sup>89</sup> Most African countries signed large and vague friendship treaties with North Korea that covered many areas, including technical assistance and agriculture.

The tradition of top-down decisions in Pyongyang demonstrates the scant thought given to on-the-ground advice from experts. Nor was there much room for preparation. This is showcased in the Ghana study, where the deployment of Korean advisors was decided by political elites and eventually failed because local staff did not accept it. As discussed, the language barrier between the Korean and local staff was a problem, as it was when imported tractors and other equipment broke down on unfamiliar terrain. Yet, despite such issues, African host countries usually offered to pay the salaries and other costs of the foreign advisors.

The issue of development is inherently political, and in the case of North Korean aid the objectives of ideology and economy went hand in hand.<sup>90</sup> Juche was the alpha and omega of North Korean aid, as reflected in the names of the Ghana Juche Farm and

77. This probably concerned a rice-production scheme near Mumbwa (NAUK, FCO 21/4124, External relations of North Korea; FCO 106/850).

78. University of South Africa Archives, *Spotlight on Zimbabwe* 2, no. 4 (August/September 1981). I thank Brooks Marmon for sharing this file with me.

79. DPRK Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Immortal Program Illuminating Road.”

80. UNDL, A/42/411, Letter dated 87/07/06 from the Permanent Representative of Zimbabwe to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General.

81. UNAM Archives, PA4/12/73/22, “Report of the delegation of the United Nations Council for Namibia to the extraordinary ministerial conference of the movement of non-aligned countries on South-South co-operation, held at Pyongyang from 9 to 13 June 1987,” A/AC.131/260, October 5, 1987; NAUK, FCO 21/3602, North and South Korea and the Non-Aligned Movement Summit, Harare, August-September 1986.

82. See for a discussion from different perspectives, see Lyong Choi and Il-young Jeong, “North Korea and Zimbabwe, 1978–1982: From the Strategic Alliance to the Symbolic Comradeship between Kim Il Sung and Robert Mugabe,” *Cold War History* 17, no. 4 (October 2, 2017): 329–49, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2017.1328406>; Benjamin R. Young, “An Emotional Relationship: Trust, Admiration, and Fear in North Korea-Zimbabwe Relations, 1976–1988,” *S/N Korean Humanities* 4, no. 2 (2018): 129–49; Tycho van der Hoog, “Uncovering North Korean Forced Labour in Africa: Towards a Research Framework,” in *People for Profit: North Korean Forced Labour on a Global Scale*, edited by Remco Breuker and Imke van Gardingen (Leiden: LeidenAsiaCentre, 2018), 67–83.

83. NAUK, FCO 36/2764, Involvement of Korea in Rhodesian problem.

84. ROKDA, 25182, Namnamhyeomnyeoge gwanhan bidongmaeng teukbyeol gangnyohoeui. Pyeongyang [Special Non-Aligned Movement Ministerial Meeting on South-South Cooperation, Pyeongyang], 1987.6.9-6.13. no. 17 (V.17).

85. See, for example, ROKDA, 25177, Namnamhyeomnyeoge gwanhan bidongmaeng teukbyeol gangnyohoeui. Pyeongyang [Special Non-Aligned Movement Ministerial Meeting on South-South Cooperation, Pyeongyang], 1987.6.9-6.13. no.17 (V.12).

86. Lankov, *The Real North Korea*, 75.

87. Interview with an anonymous former North Korean diplomat working in Africa, July 19, 2021.

88. ROKDA, 17450.

89. Sang-Seek Park, “Africa and Two Koreas: A Study of African Non-Alignment,” *African Studies Review* 21, no. 1 (1978): 73–88, <https://doi.org/10.2307/523764>.

90. No evidence indicates that economic development aid was directly linked to military cooperation or was used as a front for espionage. Korean aid was indeed a practical way to gain influence in Africa and improve North Korea’s standing in the world, but at the same time it is credible that Kim Il Sung was genuinely interested in supporting his African allies and aiding the anti-imperialist cause.

the Cheollima Agricultural Science Institute in Tanzania. North Korean farms, however, were not suitable venues for promoting socialist ideas given that language problems and cultural differences meant that exchanges between local staff and foreign experts were at best limited. Ideological education mainly occurred through the Juche study centers established all over Africa and through political exchanges between DPRK nationals and ruling party members from African countries. On the other hand, the emphasis on Juche might explain the little preparation in North Korean aid projects for local circumstances. Juche was designed as a one-size-fits-all ideology. North Korea saw all African countries as the same, as having an experience similar to North Korea's: postwar, anti-imperialist nations with a desire for self-reliance. Yet the conditions on African soil were often very different than in the mountains of the Korean peninsula.

## CONCLUSION

During the Cold War, North Korea presented itself as a development model for newly liberated nations. Its remarkable reconstruction after the Korean War was impressive and caught the eye of African leaders. North Korea had a vision for a new world that was articulated through its ideology of self-reliance and could be backed up by its military power. Yet crucial evidence demonstrates that its attempts to help recently liberated African countries were fraught with difficulties. This article has sketched an outline of North Korean development aid, an unknown area of African-North Korean cooperation where the pitfalls of North Korean foreign policy can be observed.

The Tanzanian study demonstrates the diplomatic success of North Korean agricultural aid, in that the Tanzanian government was prepared to indulge many North Korean aid projects and publicly praise the regime. Yet this study also contains hints of failure. One is the men-

tioned delay in the development of the Dakawa Rice Irrigation Project because of problems between local and Korean staff members. A further assessment of the day-to-day operations of the Tanzanian projects is difficult without access to Tanzanian archives. However, the Ghanaian study provides a detailed, empirical assessment of a rice project in many ways comparable to other North Korean aid projects in Africa. It shows that fundamental organizational problems could render aid projects largely unsuccessful even as North Korea publicly boasted of its domestic economic development. At the same time, an element of diplomatic success could be argued given the close ties between the Ghanaian and Korean political elites at the time.

In other words, the Tanzanian study is a story of diplomatic success but includes elements of practical failure, whereas the Ghanaian study is the other way around. The connection between economic policy and ideology is distinct in this area of cooperation in that the practical failure of North Korean development aid was in part also the failure of Juche. B. R. Myers argues that Juche was unlikely to function as a coherent ideological framework but instead the key to Pyongyang's external propaganda.<sup>91</sup> Juche worked wonders in North Korea's pursuit of an independent foreign policy but fell flat when executed in Africa through agricultural projects. Simply copying the North Korean methods of Juche agriculture on African soil did not work in practice, as the Ghana study makes clear, a field study of the Korean yielding far lower results than local methods despite heavy use of fertilizer.

Today, no Juche farms in Africa are active. Even though this form of aid is thing of the past, we can distill three lessons that may inform contemporary policies on African-Korean cooperation. The first is that diplomatic success can trump actual. The extensive aid relationships between African countries and North Korea does not mean that they were successful on a practical level

or even appreciated by the staff that executes the collaborative projects. This article stresses an obvious but important disconnect between political aspirations and on-the-ground realities. The second is that this disconnect can only be observed through empirical findings, which necessitates shifting the lens from high-level diplomacy to low-level experiences. As this article shows, empirical research concerning DPRK projects on foreign soil is difficult but possible—and necessary—to determine the ups and downs of North Korean foreign policy. The study of Bobiash shows a different picture than is shown in the diplomatic cables from South Korea or the United Kingdom. We need to refine our methodologies for such undertakings, one that makes it possible to find and analyze North Korean foreign projects on a small scale. Thirdly, it should be underlined that the motives for African-Korean cooperation may diverge from the goals of the agreed projects. In the 1980s agriculture was the buzzword for North Korean aid projects in Africa. Yet the larger goal was to win support for the 1987 conference in Pyongyang about South-South Cooperation and the development of a new world order. Contemporary cooperation projects may also relate to different and larger ambitions of the countries involved.

The British embassy in Dar es Salaam shrewdly remarked that the Koreans appeared to be much more involved in African development than they were.<sup>92</sup> In terms of diplomacy and public relations, the outsourcing of North Korean experts, the establishment of Juche farms in Africa, and the public praise from African leaders for North Korean agriculture constituted a major victory for the North Korean regime. Ultimately, external geopolitical factors, such as the fall of the Soviet Union and the subsequent economic crisis in North Korea, ensured that these aid programs were discontinued and North Korea's dream of leading the developing world in the quest for South-South cooperation would vanish. ■

91. Myers, *North Korea's Juche Myth*.  
92. NAUK, FCO 31/3674.

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JONATHAN CORRADO

# Rose-Colored Glasses

## *The Information Ecosystem's Influence on Generational Variation in Attitudes on North Korea's Economic Management*

### ABSTRACT

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This paper assesses the generational variation in attitudes among the general North Korean population toward the economic management of the Kim Jong Un government. Describing how general economic conditions deteriorated between 2014 and 2020 and how households became more dependent on market earnings to make a living, it uses survey data to demonstrate a generational variation in North Korean viewpoints toward the leadership's economic management. Two trends are noteworthy: that the older cohort is more critical than the younger one, and that between 2014 and 2020 the older cohort became more critical and the younger more

positive. Potential reasons for this variation include the role of trauma, market experience, and changes to the information ecosystem. More statistical evidence is needed to establish a causal link, but this initial analysis suggests that the young cohort has become more positive because of their comparatively large vulnerability to changes in the information ecosystem, including a concerted youth loyalty campaign and a reduction in the availability of foreign information.

### INTRODUCTION

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What are the generational variations in North Korean perceptions about the government's economic management? How does the younger cohort (those in

their thirties and younger) perceive the government's economic management performance? Do they perceive things differently than the older cohort (those in their forties and older) does? The latest survey data, collected from refugees who left North Korea in 2019, yield a surprising finding: the younger cohort is more positive than the older about government economic performance and more positive than the young cohort who responded to the same questions five years prior, closer to the beginning of Kim Jong Un's rule. This is surprising because not only did North Korea's economy deteriorate by almost every measure over this time, but the burden has also increasingly fallen on households to seek market-based income outside their state professions. This finding

**Figure 1: North Korea Real GDP Growth Rate**



Source: Bank of Korea

also contradicts expectations that the younger cohort, raised by families highly dependent on the marketplace, would be more critical than the older, or at least similarly critical. What could explain this rosy perception?

Three reasons are considered for the cause of the young cohort's increasingly positive assessment. First is its lack of a traumatic experience such as famine or other forms of heightened, widespread hardship. Second is its lack of experience in the markets. Last relates to changes in the information ecosystem, including the decreased availability of foreign information and the authorities' youth loyalty campaign. Initial evidence sourced from survey data, refugee testimonials, media reports, and scholarly works indicates that the young cohort's lack of market experience makes them more vulnerable to changes in the information ecosystem, explaining why the young cohort has become more positive and the older more negative.

Currently, too little data is available to statistically establish a causal relationship between any of the independent variables with the dependent variable (defined as positive appraisal of the government economic management).

This is because it is not feasible to access a sample population representative enough to make claims of such strength, nor are the questions from the surveys specific enough to definitively rule out intervening variables. However, information is sufficient to begin sketching the outlines of a trend that points to the most plausible explanation. It is hoped that this can inform and motivate future research on the topic. Because survey respondents left North Korea in 2019, the findings refer to the state of society before the coronavirus pandemic and the resulting socioeconomic changes took place. Future survey research findings could reveal how attitudes have changed since then.

### HOUSEHOLD ECONOMIC DIFFICULTY IN THE KIM JONG UN ERA

Relevant economic trends over the period leading up to 2019 demonstrate the conditions respondents experienced. The focus here is on general economic trends, policy shifts, and consequences for households. This context illuminates the importance and surprising nature of the survey results that reveal that the younger cohort has become increasingly positive

in their assessment of the economy. Over this time, North Korea faced profound economic challenges that limited the government's ability to provide services and stifled the population's ability to maintain a livelihood. The economy, according to an estimate by South Korea's Central Bank, contracted by 3.5 percent in 2017, contracted again by 4.1 percent in 2018, but grew by 0.4 percent in 2019.<sup>1</sup> More than 40 percent of the population or ten million people were "food insecure and in urgent need of food assistance," according to a May 2019 Joint Rapid Food Security Assessment by the United Nations and the World Food Programme.<sup>2</sup>

How, then, did the North Korean leadership's economic management practices evolve during the period of interest? The most salient aspect is that households were forced to contend with elevated hardship given the convergence of two trends—a progressively increasing reliance on the market and government crackdowns on that market system. Put another way, people needed the markets more because they earned less from their state-assigned workplaces, but they also earned less in absolute terms from the markets, largely because of policies that placed restrictions on the market-based economy.

After coming to power, Kim Jong Un took a number of steps to decentralize control over the economy, attempting to boost efficiency by conferring additional autonomy to the local level. The country's system of marketplaces grew and entrepreneurs were permitted to finance state enterprises.<sup>3</sup> Kim announced agricultural reforms to give farmers a greater share of their harvest.<sup>4</sup> However, more fundamental reforms and opening did not unfold out as hoped and expected.<sup>5</sup> According to analysis by the OECD, marketization struggled to produce a more lasting and widespread impact because "the authorities, the Party and corporation managers extract a considerable share of the gains from marketization,"

1. Bank of Korea, "Gross Domestic Product Estimates for North Korea in 2020," July 30, 2021, <https://www.bok.or.kr/eng/bbs/E0000634/view.do?nttid=10065833&menuNo=400069>.

2. FAO/WFP, "Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK): FAO/WFP Joint Rapid Food Security Assessment," May 3, 2019, <https://www.wfp.org/publications/democratic-peoples-republic-korea-dprk-faowfp-joint-rapid-food-security-assessment>.

3. Peter Ward, "Market Reforms with North Korean Characteristics: Loosening the Grip on State-Owned Enterprises," *38 North*, December 21, 2017, <https://www.38north.org/2017/12/pward122117>.

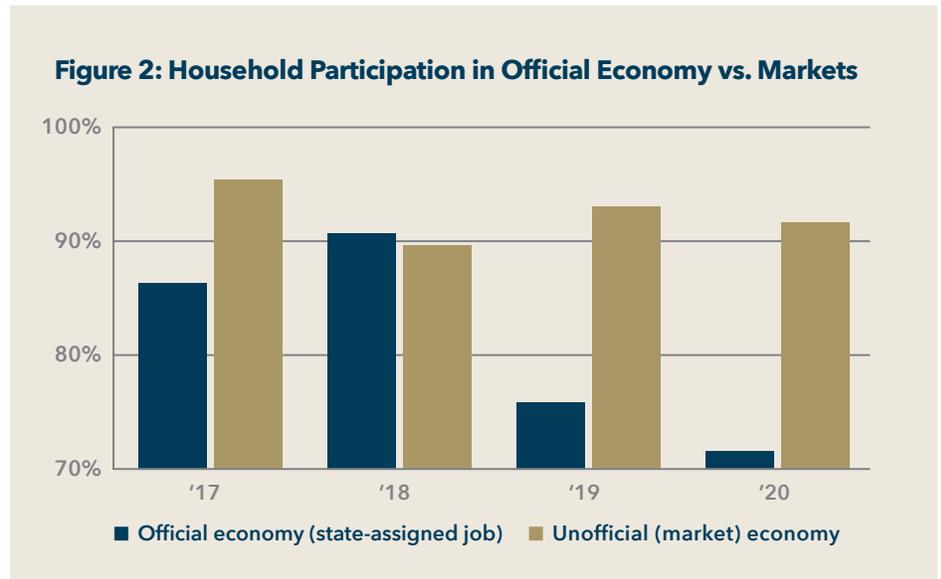
4. Benjamin Silberstein, "The Limits of Agricultural Reform in North Korea," *The Diplomat*, December 19, 2015, <https://thediplomat.com/2015/12/the-limits-of-agricultural-reform-in-north-korea>; Yoo Jin Kim, "Key North Korean Agricultural Reform Measure Faces Snags," *Daily NK*, November 4, 2019, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/key-north-korean-agricultural-reform-measure-faces-snags>.

5. Yonhap News Agency, "N. Korea Emphasizes Corporate Profits in Economic Policies," April 4, 2017, <https://en.yn.a.co.kr/view/AEN20170404013600315>.

thereby undermining capital accumulation.<sup>6</sup> The reason for this situation is that economic decentralization became a casualty of the leadership's prioritization of weapons development.

To cope with the effects of international sanctions and the resulting loss in revenue for state trading companies, North Korea's leadership strived to increase self-sufficiency and consolidate centralized control over the domestic economy. This trend affected households and businesses on the ground level. In 2018, a far-ranging crackdown on "anti-socialist" activities caused disruptions in private businesses such as taxis called *servicha*.<sup>7</sup> In 2019, market stall fees were raised,<sup>8</sup> market operating hours were reduced,<sup>9</sup> and raids were conducted on unofficial markets.<sup>10</sup> Kim Jong Un's New Year Address in 2019 stated that "the Cabinet and other state and economic guidance organs should improve planning, pricing, and monetary and financial management in line with socialist economic law."<sup>11</sup> Researcher Benjamin Silberstein observes that "the state has placed a high priority on reigning [*sic*] in—and at the very least, governing and administering—the market economy for some time, and with heightened intensity since the 2019 December plenum in particular."<sup>12</sup> As evidence of this trend, he notes continued emphasis from state officials about increasing control over the economy throughout 2019 and an amendment to the enterprise law creating new obstacles for private businesses.

Survey data reveals how these policies impacted North Korean income sources. It is



Source: SNU Survey (2020)

well known that North Koreans have grown increasingly reliant on the unofficial (market) economy, but the latest survey information suggests that this dependency has accelerated and that participation in the official economy hit a new low during the period of observation. Figure 2 illustrates that more than 90 percent of respondents participated in the market economy, a rate that has stayed strong for the past few years, according to a 2020 survey by Seoul National University.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, participation in the official economy has declined. Only 72 percent of respondents engaged in the official economy in 2020, the fewest ever recorded in the survey, which began to ask this question at the beginning of Kim's tenure in 2012.

The reason for the declining participation in the official economy becomes

clear in unpacking the findings on monthly income sources, which show that most households rely on unofficial income for the most basic of provisions. Only 12.8 percent of respondents earned more than ₩5,000 (North Korean won) per month from state jobs, 55 percent earned nothing, and 23.8 percent earned ₩5,000 or less. This has been the case for the whole of Kim's tenure but has gotten progressively worse since 2017. Although more people than ever rely on the markets, survey data also show that unofficial income has also steadily decreased (figure 3). Most household income is spent on basic provisions: 45.8 percent on food and 19.8 percent on clothes. The earnings slowdown has also had an impact on the upper end of the earning spectrum, the smallest proportion of

6. Vincent Koen and Jinwoan Beom, "North Korea: The Last Transition Economy?" (Paris: Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, November 25, 2020), <https://www.oecd.org/officialdocuments/publicdisplaydocumentpdf/?cote=ECO/WKP%282020%2915&docLanguage=En>.

7. Mi Jin Kang, "Anti-Socialist Crackdown Disrupts Market Activity," *Daily NK*, April 24, 2019, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/antisocialist-crackdown-disrupts-m>.

8. Hyon Jo, "Probing the Effects of North Korea's Skyrocketing Market Fees," *Daily NK*, December 17, 2019, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/probing-effects-north-korea-skyrocketing-market-fees>.

9. Jieun Kim, "North Korea Reduces Local Market Hours Through Autumn Harvest Period," *Radio Free Asia*, July 12, 2019, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/nk-market-reduced-hours-07122019143944.html>.

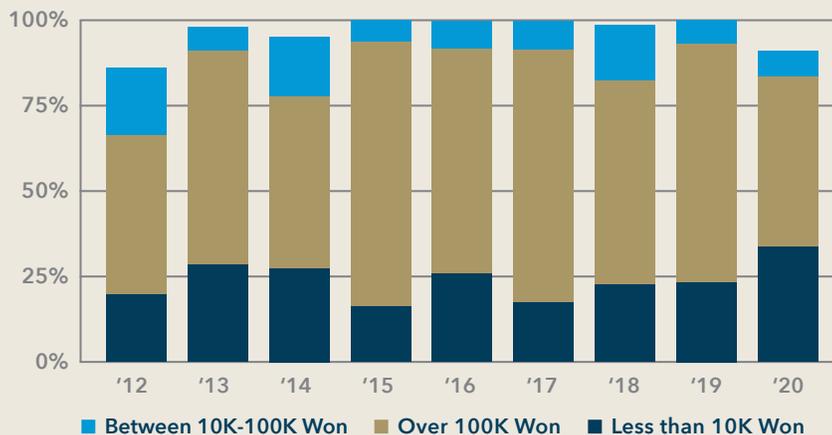
10. Dong Hui Mun, "N. Korean Authorities Conduct Raids on Unofficial Markets," *Daily NK*, November 25, 2019, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korean-authorities-conduct-raids-markets>.

11. National Committee on North Korea, "Kim Jong Un's 2019 New Year Address," January 1, 2019, [https://www.ncnk.org/resources/publications/kimjongun\\_2019\\_newyearaddress.pdf/file\\_view](https://www.ncnk.org/resources/publications/kimjongun_2019_newyearaddress.pdf/file_view) 2019.

12. Benjamin Silberstein, "A Crackdown on the North Korean Market Economy?" *North Korean Economy Watch*, December 1, 2020, <https://www.nkeconwatch.com/2020/12/01/the-crackdown-on-the-north-korean-market-economy-what-does-it-really-mean>.

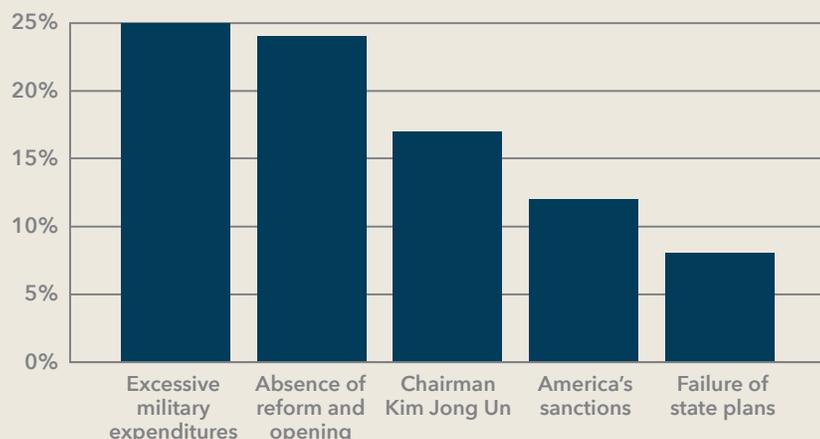
13. This analysis derives much of its findings from two surveys. That cited most often was conducted in 2020 and published in 2021 by the Seoul National University (SNU) Institute for Peace and Unification Studies (SNU, "2020 Unification Consciousness Survey," Institute for Peace and Unification Studies, August 31, 2021, <https://ipus.snu.ac.kr/blog/archives/research/5167>); "North Korean Social Change 2020: Marketization, Information-ization, Social Differentiation, and Social Security," August 31, 2021, <https://ipus.snu.ac.kr/blog/archives/research/5161>). The next was conducted by Unification Media Group (UMG) in 2019 (UMG, "Factual Survey on the North Korean Media Environment and the Usage of Foreign Contents," 2019). The respondents of both are refugees from North Korea. These are the most up-to-date surveys available on the topic, yet all respondents left North Korea before the coronavirus epidemic. The overall number of refugees resettling in South Korea has plummeted since the border closed in 2020 (Republic of Korea, Ministry of Unification, "Policy on North Korean Defectors," 2021, [https://www.unikorea.go.kr/eng\\_unikorea/relations/statistics/defectors](https://www.unikorea.go.kr/eng_unikorea/relations/statistics/defectors)). The findings therefore do not represent reactions to the significant changes in North Korea since the pandemic. Like all surveys of North Korean refugees, these use nonrepresentative convenience samples and, by necessity, no statistical sampling. Surveys of North Korean refugees tend to have the same demographic characteristics as the total population of refugees, with a high proportion of females and people from northern provinces bordering China. SNU has conducted surveys annually, recruiting respondents within one or two years after they leave North Korea. Each survey therefore yields the most recent information possible and provides a basis for comparing how conditions have changed over time. The 2020 SNU survey involved face-to-face interviews with 109 defectors who left North Korea in 2019, more than 70 percent of whom came from Ryanggang Province and 13 percent from North Hamgyong Province. More than 65 percent were female. Similar to previous years, 12.8 percent were members of the Choson Workers' Party and 84.4 percent were not. The Unification Media Group conducted a survey of 200 defectors in 2019. This survey had a similar demographic profile: 72 percent female, and more than 75 percent from North Hamgyong and Ryanggang Provinces. It then conducted a survey of two hundred defectors in 2019 using a similar demographic profile as the SNU study: 72 percent female and more than 75 percent from North Hamgyong and Ryanggang Provinces. The defectors left between 2012 and 2018.

**Figure 3: Monthly Income from Market (Unofficial Wages)**



Source: SNU Survey (2020)

**Figure 4: Why is the Economy Struggling?**



Source: SNU Survey (2020)

respondents since 2012 indicating that they earn a monthly income of more than ₩100,000.

## GENERATIONAL VARIATION

A comparison of responses from the 2020 survey with those from a 2014 survey demonstrates that the views of young people have become more

positive over time. Overall, the findings suggest that North Koreans tend to evaluate their country's system poorly when it comes to the economy. Given the context presented earlier, this is not surprising. However, when we parse these questions by age group and compare, the picture is much more nuanced. The surveys reveal an interesting and surprising pattern. Far from being the reactionary and antisocialist *jangmadang* generation that the North

Korean media frets about,<sup>14</sup> the younger cohort (and particularly those in their twenties) has become increasingly positive about the government and the economy. The twenty- and thirty-year-old groups are both more positive than the older cohort (forties through sixties), and more positive than they were just five years prior.

In general terms, North Koreans disagree with the government's overall approach to economic policy. At a support rate of over 80 percent for the fourth year running for 2020, North Koreans are in favor of conducting the following business activities in a free manner: trading in the market, production, sales, establishing companies, employment, and financial trading. More than 65 percent of respondents support capitalism over socialism. Unsurprisingly, nearly 80 percent of market traders support capitalism. When asked why the economy continues to struggle, respondents blamed excessive military expenditures, the absence of reform and opening, Kim Jong Un, and America's sanctions, in that order (figure 4). When asked how the economy could be improved, the top answers were introducing capitalism, instituting reform, and cooperating with foreign countries. The answers receiving the fewest responses (less than 10 percent each) were "ideological strengthening" and "development of scientific technology," two aspects regularly emphasized by Kim in his New Year's addresses.

It is therefore not surprising to learn that North Korean pride in the state ideology of *juche* hit a five-year low among respondents of the 2020 survey when averaged for all age groups. Although the highly nuanced term carries historical baggage and can change depending on context, *juche* is often translated into the English expression "self-reliance."<sup>15</sup> It conveys themes of North Korean self-sufficiency and independence, including in an economic sense. Because of the dynamic and variable

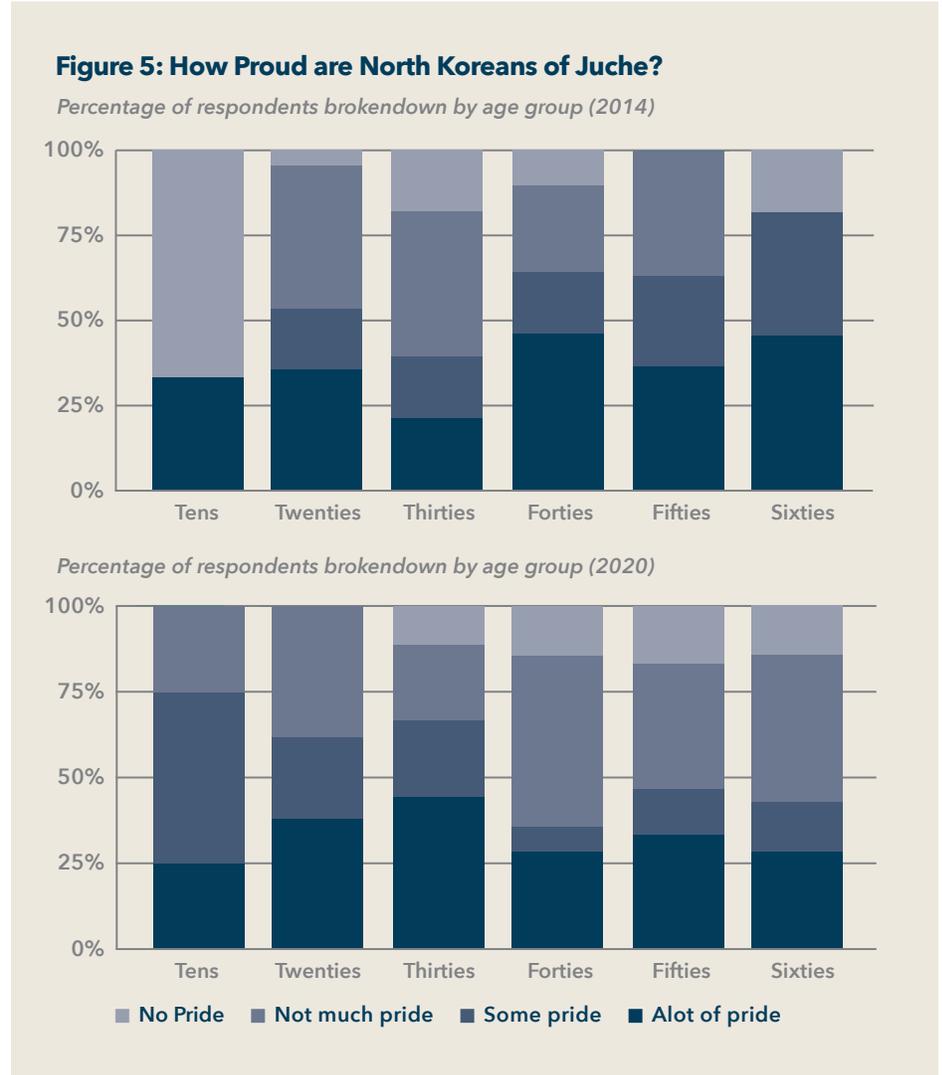
14. The *jangmadang* generation describes those who came up during or after the 1990s famine and "grew up with the markets as part of their daily life and are, in many ways, native capitalists" (Anna Fifield, "A New Film Captures North Korea's 'Bold and Audacious' Millennials," *Washington Post*, December 15, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/12/15/the-jangmadang-generation-new-film-shows-how-millennials-are-changing-north-korea/>).

15. Foster Klug, "Juche Rules North Korean Propaganda, But What Does It Mean?" *AP News*, September 29, 2019, <https://apnews.com/article/united-nations-financial-markets-ap-top-news-north-korea-international-news-d63d00ce9de042dc88b9df2c40be53ee>.

definitions of the term, declining pride in *juche* likely reflects criticisms of both the leader and the country's socialist economy. The theme of self-sufficiency has become even more relevant in the post-sanctions era because of Kim's emphasis on the need for a self-supporting economy. The SNU survey asked how much pride respondents have for *juche*. The interesting aspect of this finding is the variation of responses between the age groups. The bottom panel of figure 5 illustrates that teenagers, twenty-year-olds, and thirty-year-olds in 2020 exhibited more pride for *juche* than their older peers. Comparing the two charts, it is clear that the 2014 young cohort had much less pride than the 2020 cohort. This pattern is replicated in the responses to the other questions.

North Koreans do criticize the government, albeit mostly in private.<sup>16</sup> According to a 2017 survey conducted inside North Korea, all but one of the thirty-six respondents said that their "family, friends, or neighbors complain or make jokes about the government in private."<sup>17</sup> The SNU survey asked about the extent of criticism toward the government and the leader. Perceptions of criticism were influenced by the respondents' age and position. The bottom panel of figure 6 shows that the 2020 young cohort perceived less criticism than the older cohort did. In terms of profession, foreign currency earners perceived the highest government criticism, followed by office workers and market traders. Soldiers and farmers perceived the least. Those with experience in the market tend to perceive more criticism.

North Koreans perceive the authorities as an obstacle to deal with as they make a living. When asked about the greatest difficulty when engaging in economic activity, more than 46 percent of respondents said "crackdowns and bribery." Asked who has the greatest impact on their economic activities, 80 percent identified "the legal authorities." The survey authors believe that these responses are explained by the



Source: SNU Survey (2020)

legal authorities' ability to extract bribes at a rate that far exceeds other socialist states. The average person spends about 20 percent of their total income on bribes.

It stands to reason that perceptions of Kim Jong Un's overall approval rating also decreased in 2020, as shown in figure 7. A breakdown by age group (figure 8) reveals a similar distribution as seen previously. The only group that maintained a highly positive assessment was the twenty-year-olds, about three-quarters of whom said that Kim has an approval rating above 50 percent in both 2014 and 2020. On the other hand, the assessment of the thirty-year-olds and the fifty-year-olds

both dropped by over 15 percentage points from 2014 to 2020, and the forty-year-olds maintained their low assessment. Unlike the findings for "pride in *juche*" and "extent of criticism towards the leader," only the twenty-somethings remained positive from 2014 to 2020. The thirty-somethings joined the older cohorts in becoming more critical over that span. This suggests that some variable is influencing the perceptions of the twenty-somethings and thirty-somethings in different ways. A potential explanation for this discrepancy is discussed later.

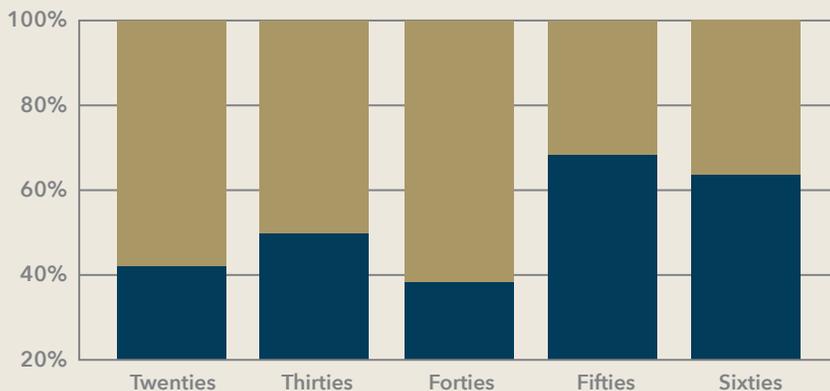
All age groups indicated more support for capitalism than for socialism in both periods, a cross-cutting recognition of

16. Victor Cha and Marie DuMond, "No Laughing Matter: North Koreans' Discontent and Daring Jokes," *Beyond Parallel* (CSIS blog), November 2, 2016, <https://beyondparallel.csis.org/no-laughing-matter-north-koreans-discontent-and-daring-jokes>.

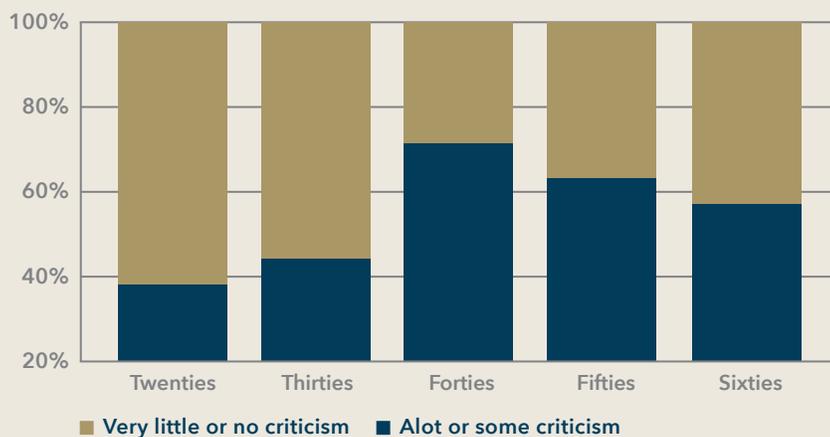
17. Although the sample size is small, this survey is important because it was one of very few administered inside North Korea and its findings are largely consistent with surveys of defectors abroad.

**Figure 6: Extent of Criticism Towards NK Gov/Leader**

Percentage of respondents broken down by age group (2014)



Percentage of respondents broken down by age group (2020)



■ Very little or no criticism ■ Alot or some criticism

Source: SNU Survey (2020)

**Figure 7: What is Kim Jong Un’s Approval Rating?**

Percentage of respondents



■ Above 50% approval rating ■ Below 50% approval rating

Source: SNU Survey (2020)

the faults of the current socialist system (figure 9). That enthusiasm has ebbed slightly, however. In the most recent survey, more than 65 percent of respondents indicated that they strongly or somewhat support capitalism, down slightly from the 75 percent in 2014. Strength of conviction has dipped as well: about 40 percent strongly supported capitalism in 2014, versus 27.5 percent in 2020. In terms of age groups, the twenty-something support for capitalism declined by nearly 20 percentage points from 2014 to 2020, and 25 percent of twenty-year-old respondents said in 2020 that the two systems are roughly the same, a jump of twenty points from 2014. The major takeaway is the context of the country’s economic context. Even though macro and micro economic indicators show that North Korea’s socialist economic system is extremely strained and that households are struggling to provide the bare necessities, fewer people today support capitalism than before and do so less strongly.

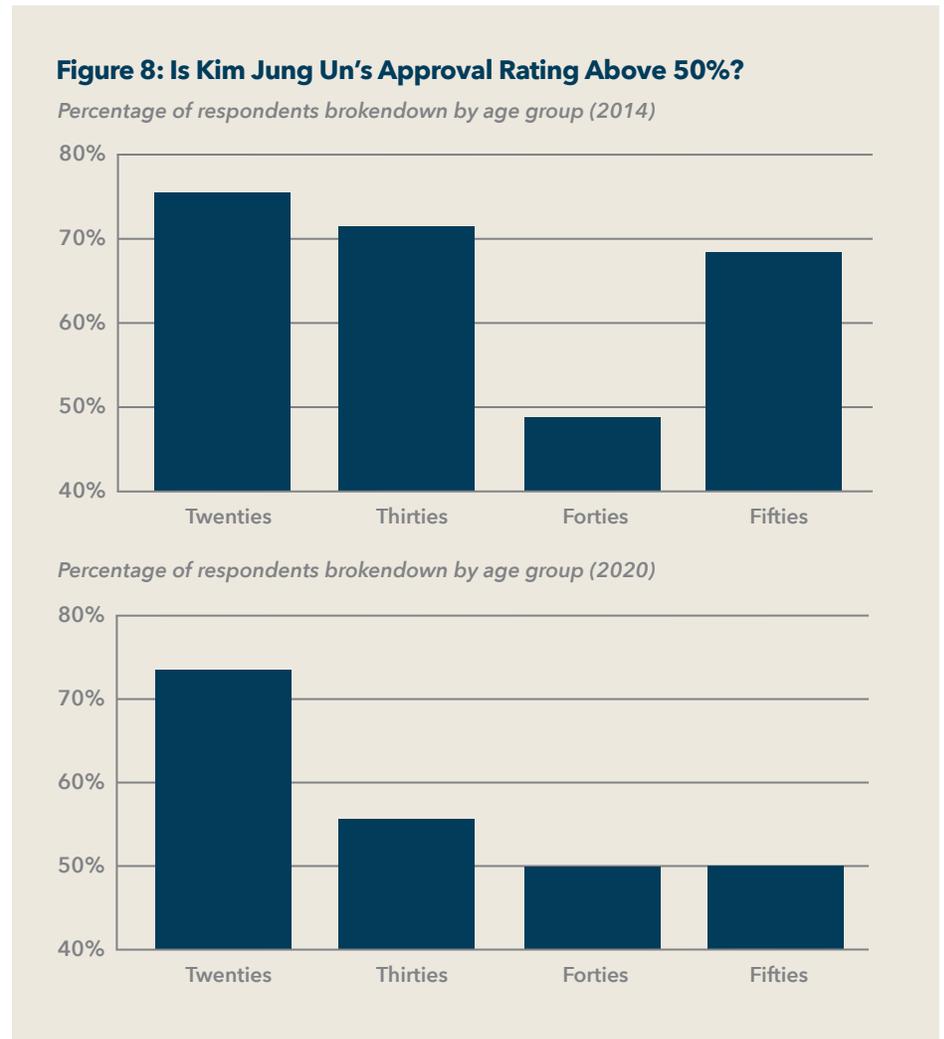
Taken together, these findings point to a consistent pattern: the young cohort (and particularly those in their twenties) have become more positive about the government and the economy, while the older age groups have become more negative. From 2014 to 2020, pride in *juche* rose for teens, twenty-year-olds, and thirty-year-olds but dropped for all older age groups. Similarly, from 2014 to 2020, the young cohort’s perception of criticism toward the government and the leader decreased and was significantly lower than that of older respondents. As to Kim Jong Un’s approval rating, the twenty-year-olds maintained a highly positive assessment (nearly 75 percent thought Kim had a rating of above 50 percent), whereas all other age groups dropped (or remained low in the case of the forty-year-olds). Most of the 2020 respondents continue to support capitalism over socialism, albeit slightly less than the 2014 respondents did. The standout change from 2014 to 2020 is that the twenty-year-old group’s support for capitalism decreased by 20 percent. This leads to a central question. Why did the younger group become more positive even though the economy was ailing? Why was it only the younger group?

## EVALUATING REASONS FOR GENERATIONAL VARIATION

Three potential reasons for the generational variation are trauma, market experience, and the information ecosystem. First, is the younger cohort becoming increasingly positive because it did not directly experience an economic trauma on a national scale like the older cohort did? Next, was the positive perception driven by a lack of market experience? Last, was the more positive perspective caused by changes in the information ecosystem, including stepped-up ideological training and a decrease in access to foreign information? More statistical evidence from larger surveys with representative samples and more specific questions is needed to further isolate the variables, rule out intervening variables, and identify the specific chains of causality. However, enough information is available to begin honing in on potential key drivers.

Collective trauma could be an important factor in explaining the expanding variation in viewpoint between the older and younger cohorts. In the 1990s, North Korea experienced a famine (known as the Arduous March) that resulted in the deaths of millions of people from starvation.<sup>18</sup> The social contract was broken when government provisions dried up and people were forced to fend for themselves. This also ushered in an era of dependence on the marketplace for survival. This watershed event reconfigured the relationship between people and the government, and reorganized the basic foundations of the economy.

At face value, this appears to be a satisfactory solution, but the presence of a traumatic experience is likely not the most important factor in explaining the variation in critical views. First, the trauma does not explain the increased criticism of the older generation between the two periods. In general, the older generation is more critical now (as reflected in the 2020 survey results) than



Source: SNU Survey (2020)

in 2014, despite the fact that the older cohort had by 2014 already experienced two traumatic economic episodes (the famine and a currency redenomination in 2009 that devalued the cash savings of many families). Next, this answer would not account for the thirty-year-old cohort. These respondents for both surveys (2014 and 2020) experienced a childhood affected by the Arduous March. Why then did they become less critical over time and the older cohorts more so? Last, we might also question the marginal difference of the twenty-year-olds' experience between 2014 and 2020. A twenty-five-year-old responding to the 2020 survey would have also experienced a childhood affected by the Arduous March. For these reasons,

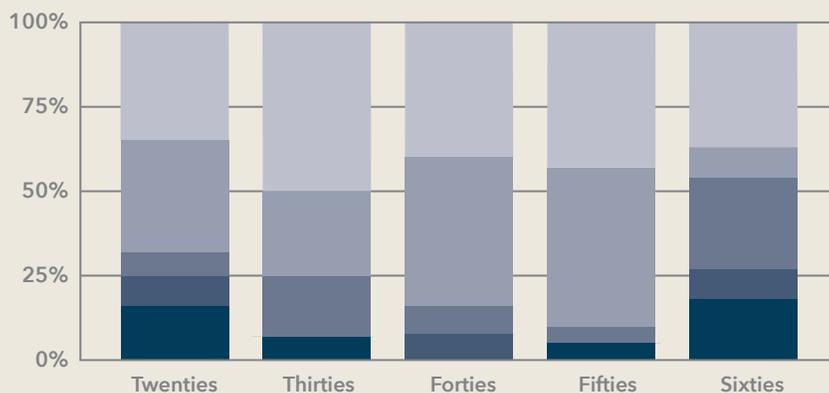
trauma does not seem to be the most prominent factor. However, it does open up a possibility for future research and analysis. With food prices spiking, tighter economic restrictions introduced, and the government struggling to provide for the population, it is possible that the coronavirus pandemic may have become a new traumatic event that could cause the younger population to reverse its tendency to view the government with rose-colored glasses. Future surveys will help elucidate this point.

The next possible explanation for the generational variation is market experience. Earlier research indicates that people who rely more on the markets tend to be more critical of the government.

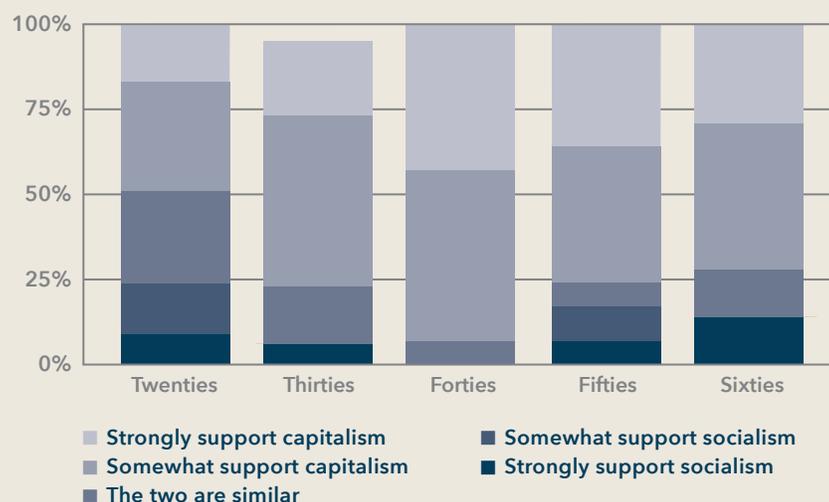
18. The North Korean government asserts that less than 250,000 people died, but experts dispute this number. Former USAID administrator and author of *The Great North Korean Famine* Andrew S. Natsios estimates between 2.5 and 3.5 million died, using both publicly accessible death records from local North Korean towns and regions and a reduction in the number of voters in the 1998 election as a proxy (Wilson Center "How Did the North Korean Famine Happen?" April 30, 2002, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/how-did-the-north-korean-famine-happen>).

**Figure 9: What do You Support, Capitalism or Socialism?**

Breakdown by age group (2014)



Breakdown by age group (2020)



Source: SNU Survey (2020)

“The share of household income derived from market sources is positively associated with both perceptions of tightening restrictions and joking with peers about the government.”<sup>19</sup> A 2017 survey reveals that “North Koreans express the most animosity toward the government when it undercuts their entrepreneurial activities.”<sup>20</sup> As the SNU survey shows, people engaged in market activity are forced to deal with crackdowns and extortion by the legal authorities, which is, they say, their greatest source of economic difficulty. Respondents who had market experience perceived more criticism, were more likely to support capitalism over socialism, and demonstrated less

pride in *juche* than those without market experience.

Some overlap is evident between the group of respondents with market experience and the older cohorts. The reason, broadly speaking, is that the older cohort is much more likely to engage in market activity than the younger cohorts. As noted, the marketplace is where North Koreans typically encounter the more adversarial aspects of their relationship with the government. When a person tries to earn a living through the marketplace, they tend to view the authorities as an impediment. The younger cohort is engrossed in state education and

organizational life. They may assist their families with entrepreneurial activities on the side, but generally their schedule is packed with state-mandated education and service. After completing their education, both men and women are forced to join the military. While serving, they largely depend on the state for sustenance, though the military has historically struggled to provide adequate nutrition to its soldiers, forcing soldiers to supplement their state food distribution with help from their parents and even by stealing from residents.<sup>21</sup> Despite this shortcoming, the military service period is characteristically quite different from the relationship with the government thereafter. This is reflected in the 2020 SNU survey findings, which show that soldiers and farmers hear the least amount of government criticism, and foreign currency traders, merchants, and office workers hear the most.

This explanation, market experience, is intuitively appealing but does not hold up to scrutiny. First, it fails to account for the thirty-year-old group, which became more positive for a number of indicators between 2014 and 2020, including pride in *juche* and support for socialism. Teenagers and twenty-somethings are busy with school and military service. In contrast, most thirty-somethings have entered the work force and therefore depend on market earnings. How is it, then, that thirty-somethings are so positive despite having the same types of experiences as the older cohort? Another prominent variable would seem to be at play. Second, it is unlikely that market experience explains the variation across the two periods (2014 and 2020), which saw the youth become increasingly positive. For that to be true, it must have been the case that the 2020 young cohort engaged in less market activities than their peers from the 2014 survey. This is unlikely. First, the twenty-somethings could not have had much market experience in either time period. Further, as noted, households have become more dependent on the markets during this time, not less, and more restrictions have been introduced. Thus it is un-

19. Stephan Noland and Marcus Haggard, *Witness to Transformation: Refugee Insights into North Korea* (Washington, DC: Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2011), 111.

20. Cha and DuMond, “No Laughing Matter.”

21. Yoo Jin Kim, “North Korean Soldiers Plunder Civilian Farmland,” *Daily NK*, October 1, 2019, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korean-soldiers-plunder-civilian-farmland>.

likely that fewer of the thirty-something respondents in 2020 engaged in market activity than their counterparts in 2014. This reason also suggests that a different variable can better explain the increasingly positive youth perspective.

The next variable to consider is changes to the informational ecosystem. Has North Korea's ideological campaign and foreign information blockade helped improve youth perceptions on the leadership's economic management? If so, why have these variables not had a similar effect on the older cohort? Presently, statistical evidence to establish a causal relationship is lacking, but strong indicators suggest that the information ecosystem plays a prominent role in the formation of these assessments. The targeted ideological loyalty campaign and the deprivation of foreign media are mutually reinforcing variables that work in close conjunction. They are difficult to isolate without more specific survey questions and more data, and thus this analysis considers them as a single umbrella variable, *the information ecosystem*. What follows is a systematic explanation of how the information ecosystem changed to such an extent within this window and how it may explain the increasingly positive youth outlook despite deteriorating economic conditions.

Since coming to power, Kim Jong Un has devoted significant time and resources to improving the ideological state of the population, paying particular focus to the younger generation. This *hearts and minds* campaign, composed of both offensive and defensive tactics, is aimed at improving the population's assessment of the government by projecting narratives favorable to the regime (offense) and depriving the people of the information they need to make a comparative

judgment (defense). Key aspects of Kim's legitimacy are predicated on propaganda narratives that could be undermined by the availability of disconfirming information. Foreign sources of information contradict the carefully crafted narratives depicted in state media by the Workers' Party's Propaganda and Agitation Department. News and entertainment from South Korea and elsewhere have the power to provide North Koreans with a

stadium in celebration of the anniversary of the Korean Children's Union.<sup>24</sup> To an audience of twenty thousand, the new leader posed in a paternalistic style approaching the stadium accompanied by two children. Early in his tenure, Kim pivoted away from his father's predilection for films about loyal soldiers, instead developing television programs featuring young people and technology.<sup>25</sup> In a 2016 speech to the Socialist Youth

*Since coming to power, Kim Jong Un has devoted significant time and resources to improving the ideological state of the population, paying particular focus to the younger generation.*

way to compare their lives, circumstances, and government against an international alternative.

In terms of playing offense in the information ecosystem, North Korea's government uses ideological training, education, propaganda, and organizational life. Although all North Koreans are affected, children and adolescents are an especially captive and malleable audience. Youth are subject to considerable surveillance, censorship, and control. From a young age, students are taught to idolize the Kim family, demonstrate loyalty to the Party, and distrust the outside world, especially South Korea and the United States.<sup>22</sup> After graduation, the indoctrination continues in weekly lectures and weekly self-criticism sessions, at which individuals "confess their shortcomings" and receive criticism from peers.<sup>23</sup>

Kim has personally expended political capital into cultivating loyalty among the youth, a running theme throughout his rule. Kim's second public speech as ruler in 2012 took place at Kim Il Sung

League, Kim urged that "young people should become creators of socialist civilization."<sup>26</sup> He also called on the youth to "counter the enemy's schemes for ideological and cultural infiltration . . . [and] prevent any alien ideology and culture and unnatural lifestyle from penetrating our interior." One example illustrates why the Kim regime is particularly concerned about potential of foreign media to influence youth. The South Korean television show "Full House" was smuggled into the North where, according to the defector-run organization North Korea Intellectuals Solidarity, it gained in popularity.<sup>27</sup> The lyrics from a children's song performed in the show, "The Three Bears," were adapted to insult the Kim family regime. The satirical song spread through elementary, middle, and high schools, prompting the authorities to identify and punish the offending students.<sup>28</sup>

In terms of defense, the North Korean government has introduced a series of measures to block the import, distribution, and consumption of foreign media. Although North Korea is an extreme

22. People for Successful Corean Reunification, n.d., "Forced to Hate: North Korean Education System," <http://pscore.org/life-north-korea/forced-to-hate>.

23. Joonho Kim, "North Korean Authorities Increase Intensity at Weekly Self-Criticism Sessions," Radio Free Asia, March 18, 2019, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/nk-self-criticism-03182019142135.html>.

24. CBS News, "North Korea Leader Kim Jong Un Tries to Win Over New Generation with Youth Rally Speech," June 6, 2012, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/north-korea-leader-kim-jong-un-tries-to-win-over-new-generation-with-youth-rally-speech>.

25. Nyshka Chandran, "How Kim Jong Un Is Using TV Dramas to Change North Korea," CNBC, November 30, 2017, <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/11/30/kim-jong-un-uses-tv-dramas-to-change-north-korea.html>.

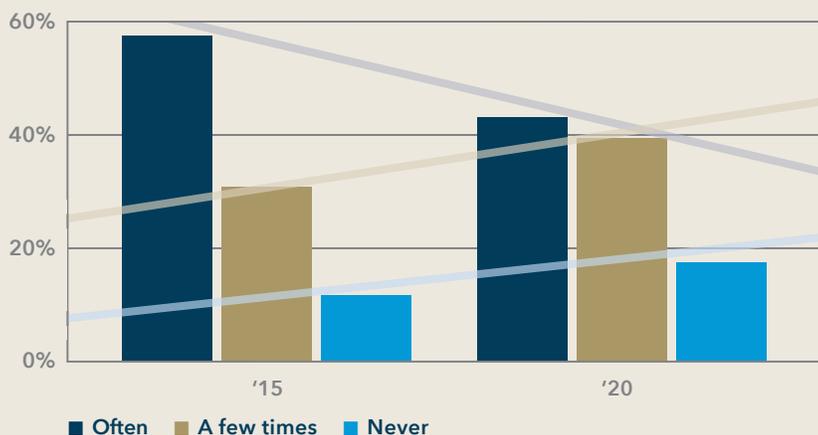
26. National Committee on North Korea, "Kim Jong Un Speech Ninth Congress of Kim Il Sung Socialist Youth League," August 28, 2016, <https://www.ncnk.org/node/1813>.

27. Daily NK, "Satirical Song Causing Consternation," October 27, 2010, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/satirical-song-causing-consternati>.

28. Daily NK, "SK Children's Song Under Fire Above Border," November 17, 2015, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/sk-childrens-song-under-fire-above>.

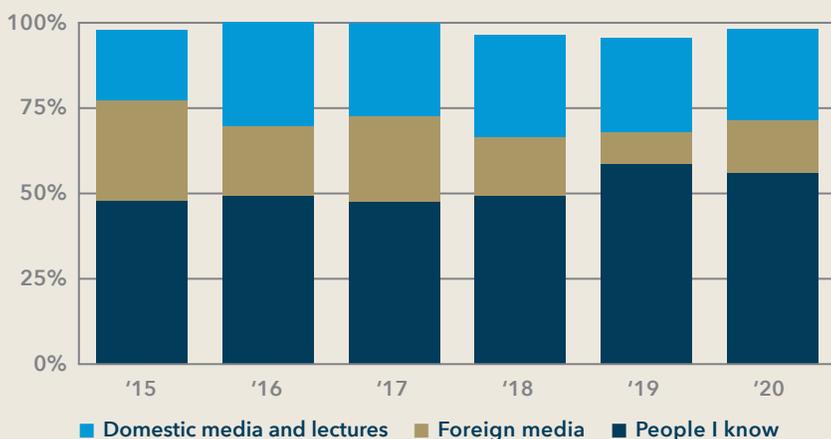
**Figure 10: Have You Encountered South Korean Media?**

*Including movies, dramas, broadcasts, and music*



Source: SNU Survey (2020)

**Figure 11: How do you learn about the Outside World?**



Source: SNU Survey (2020)

example of information isolation, Pyongyang is not alone in using this strategy. Beijing and Moscow portray their countries as “besieged fortresses” against which hostile outside powers seek to “topple the government and deny the nation its rightful place in the world.”<sup>29</sup> North Korea’s information

isolation, however, is so severe that it is nearly without parallel. It is ranked 179th (second to last) in *The 2019 World Press Freedom Index* by Reporters Without Borders, which says that the country exercises “meticulous control” over information to keep the population in “a state of ignorance.”<sup>30</sup>

A number of governments, organizations, and individuals work to counteract the information blockade. The US government is authorized to spend \$3 million per year on information distribution to North Korea. The National Endowment for Democracy provides funding to nongovernment organizations (many staffed by refugees) that broadcast radio programs and distribute USBs and SD cards. The BBC and South Korea’s national public broadcaster KBS also broadcast radio to North Korea.<sup>31</sup> North Koreans can also purchase digital devices loaded with foreign media content and smuggled into the country by profit-seeking merchants. Although consumption of illicit foreign media is risky, North Koreans have showed a persistent interest in it. According to the 2019 UMG survey of defectors, 91 percent of respondents had consumed foreign media while in North Korea. This consumption, though, has been affected by the government’s increasingly airtight blockade.

Between the 2014 and 2020 survey, North Korea’s authorities carried out a far-ranging crackdown on foreign information and ideas, paying special attention to rectifying youth ideology. To combat the importation and circulation of foreign information, the authorities increased punishments for those who consume foreign media and tightened border controls to catch smugglers. Starting in 2014, the authorities took measures to prevent border guards posted from accepting bribes to turn a blind eye to foreign media smugglers.<sup>32</sup> The State Security Department’s Central 109 Inspection Command (called Group 109) was created after an emergency meeting by national security officials in 2014, at which Kim Jong Un “discussed how this agency is leading the crackdown on the . . . spread of foreign trends inside the regime.”<sup>33</sup> In 2015, North Korea revised its law to augment the

29. Arch Puddington, “Breaking Down Democracy: Goals, Strategies, and Methods of Modern Authoritarians,” Freedom House, June 2017, [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/June2017\\_FH\\_Report\\_Breaking\\_Down\\_Democracy.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/June2017_FH_Report_Breaking_Down_Democracy.pdf).

30. Reporters Without Borders. 2019. “2019 World Press Freedom Index – A Cycle of Fear.” <https://rsf.org/en/2019-world-press-freedom-index-cycle-fear>.

31. Rachel Lee and Jonathan Corrado, “Getting Outside Information Past Big Brother in North Korea,” *War on the Rocks*, August 2, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/08/getting-outside-information-past-big-brother-in-north-korea>.

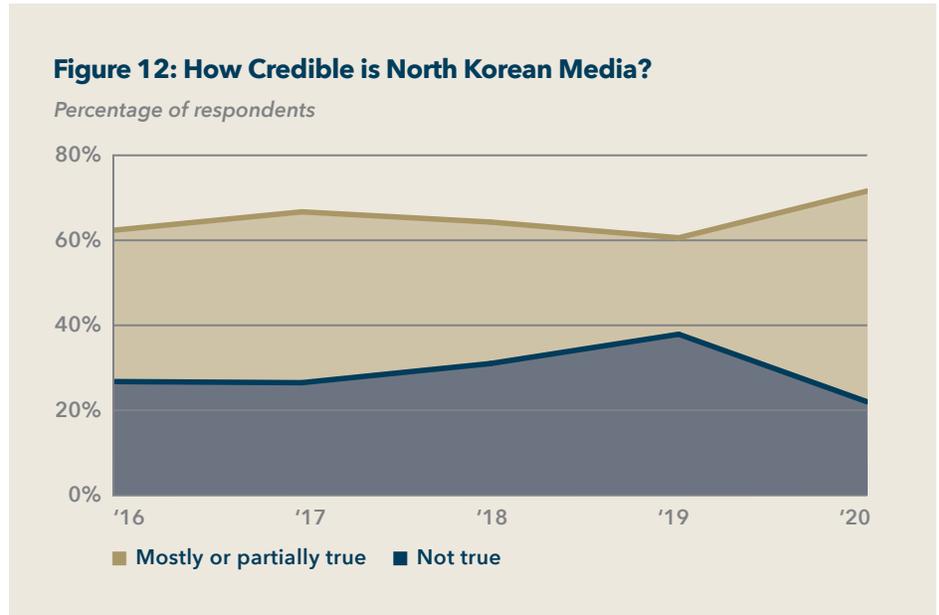
32. Martyn Williams, “Digital Trenches: North Korea’s Information Counter-Offensive” (Washington, DC: Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, 2019), [https://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/Williams\\_Digital\\_Trenches\\_Web\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/Williams_Digital_Trenches_Web_FINAL.pdf).

33. Ken Gause, “North Korean House of Cards: Leadership Dynamics under Kim Jong-un” (Washington, DC: Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, 2015), [https://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/HRNK\\_Gause\\_NKHOC\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/HRNK_Gause_NKHOC_FINAL.pdf).

34. Williams, “Digital Trenches.”

definition of banned foreign media and increase the maximum sentence of hard labor from five years to ten years.<sup>34</sup> In 2016, several people were reportedly executed for consuming and distributing a South Korean television show.<sup>35</sup> Two-thirds of North Korean respondents said they had “personally experienced an inspection by Group 109,” according to a survey conducted by InterMedia of 350 refugees who left the country between 2016 and 2018. According to former US special envoy for North Korea human rights issues Ambassador Robert King, this aggressive clampdown “no doubt increased the fear of foreign media consumption . . . [and discouraged] more casual use of foreign media.”<sup>36</sup> Multiple press reports showed that Group 109 accelerated its crackdown on foreign media in 2019 as part of a broader effort to “guard against anti-Socialist activities.”<sup>37</sup>

Kim Jong Un’s close personal attention to the issue underscores its centrality to his rule. He has personally emphasized the importance of blocking out “anti-socialist” trends and styles that come from foreign media. The prospect of “cultural invasion” has been continually offered as justification for increases in censorship and control. A 2019 article in the Party-run newspaper *Rodong Sinmun* warned that foreign countries are attempting to infuse the country with hostile cultural ideology.<sup>38</sup> As a summary of the article says, “The confrontation with the imperialists in the field of ideology and culture is an acute class struggle and a war without gunfire.”<sup>39</sup> The article quotes Kim Jong Un as saying, “Imperialist powers constantly scheme to harm the peoples of other countries with cultural and ideological attacks, causing the collapse of these nations from the inside so that they can dominate them.” Imperialist nations spread “pernicious”



Source: SNU Survey (2020)

Western ideas through movies, music, and publications to make people spiritually and morally disabled, the author of the article writes.

The Kim government’s offensive and defensive campaign has achieved results. Fewer people are consuming foreign media and doing so less often. Figure 10 makes it clear that North Koreans found it increasingly difficult to access South Korean media between 2015 and 2020. It is quite likely that this trend has continued and even worsened in 2021, with coronavirus pandemic measures resulting in a near-total freeze of cross-border travel.

According to the 2019 UMG survey, 71.5 percent of respondents said that accessing foreign information has become more dangerous since Kim Jong Un came into power. Most people (75 percent of respondents) had heard a story about someone being punished for watching foreign media and 46 percent had heard of people being punished for listening to

foreign radio. Further, 39.5 percent of respondents have personally experienced a crackdown by Group 109, and 44 percent gave a bribe to avoid punishment.

Although foreign media remains popular and sought out, North Koreans tend to be discerning when it comes to learning about the outside world. According to a 2015 survey of 350 North Korean defectors, refugees, and travelers by the Broadcasting Board of Governors,<sup>40</sup> 71 percent of respondents said word of mouth is the top source of information in the country, followed by foreign radio at 11 percent.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, the SNU survey found that most respondents rely on information from neighbors, relatives, and friends (figure 11). In a development that reflects the changing information ecosystem, respondents have become less reliant on foreign media over time. Approximately 25 percent of all survey respondents from 2015 to 2017 said they turned to foreign media to learn about the outside world. Just 14.1 percent of all respondents from

35. Hyemin Son, “North Korean Authorities Arrest Seven Teenagers for Watching South Korean Movies,” *Radio Free Asia*, July 19, 2019, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/nk-sk-movies-109-sangmu-07192019172917.html>.  
36. Robert King, “North Koreans Want External Information, But Kim Jong-Un Seeks to Limit Access,” *Beyond Parallel* (CSIS blog), May 15, 2019, <https://beyondparallel.csis.org/north-koreans-want-external-information-but-kim-jong-un-seeks-to-limit-access>.  
37. Yoon Ah Ha, “North Korea’s Group 109 Ratchets up Crackdowns in Ryanggang Province,” *Daily NK*, June 18, 2019, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-koreas-group-109-ratchets-up-crackdowns-in-ryanggang-province>; Son, “North Korean Authorities.”  
38. *Rodong Sinmun*, “Unseen Contest, Silent War,” KNCA Watch, October 19, 2019, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1572205449-137058496/보이지-않는-대결-소리없는-전쟁/?t=1588256865519>.  
39. KCNA Watch, “Rodong Sinmun on Confrontation with Imperialists in Field of Ideology and Culture,” October 9, 2019, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1572271706-379030975/rodong-sinmun-on-confrontation-with-imperialists-in-field-of-ideology-and-culture/?t=1588256865519>.  
40. Now known as the United States Agency for Global Media, the Broadcasting Board of Governors is “responsible for all U.S. government and government-sponsored non-military international broadcasting.”  
41. Nat Kretchun, Catherine Lee, and Seamus Tuohy, *Compromising Connectivity: Information Dynamics Between State and Society in a Digitizing North Korea* (Intermedia, 2015), <https://seamus-tuohy.com/files/Compromising-Connectivity-Final-Report.pdf>.

2018 to 2020 said the same. This decline predates the pandemic lockdowns, suggesting that the Kim government's foreign media crackdown has effectively restricted supply or changed perceptions about the value of foreign media.

Evaluations of state media improved in 2020. Figure 12 shows that more people believed North Korean media to be "mostly true" or "partially true" in 2020 and that the share of skeptics dropped. Two factors help explain the rise in credibility. First is the declining availability of foreign news and information to

that South Korean media influenced their decision to escape.<sup>44</sup> Additionally, 83 percent of respondents in the 2017 CSIS survey said they found outside goods and information to be of greater impact on their lives than decisions by the North Korean government.<sup>45</sup> Studies conducted on people living in other authoritarian regimes yielded similar findings. For instance, survey research by Eugene Parta suggests that Radio Liberty helped cultivate and spread ideas that "may have played a role in bringing down the Soviet Union."<sup>46</sup> Additionally, University of Birmingham Professor Jonathan Grix

media alone may not be enough to inspire collective action.<sup>49</sup>

Thus far, it has been clearly demonstrated that the government crackdown has been effective in reducing access to foreign information, lessening the dependency on foreign information as a resource for learning about the outside world and increasing assessments of domestic media. Next, it has been shown that the government has also targeted the youth with a campaign to instill loyalty and firm up ideological support for the regime. Finally, it has been demonstrated that for-

foreign media can play a crucial role, with some limitations, in affecting the perceptions of individuals in an authoritarian regime. That foundation set, the next question to ask is why these changes in the information ecosystem seemed to have affected younger people and older people so differently. From 2014 to 2020, the younger generation became less critical of the government's economic manage-

ment and the older generation became more critical. Why did that happen, and what does the information environment have to do with it?

As demonstrated earlier, market experience alone cannot explain why the young cohort became more positive. However, it is nonetheless a crucial piece of the puzzle because it modulates the importance of the information ecosystem. This assertion warrants some explanation. Youth lack the market experience that puts them directly into an adversarial relationship with the authorities, the stakes of which are the very welfare of the household. The overall economic circumstances and the Kim government's attempts at centralization

***Thus far, it has been clearly demonstrated that the government crackdown has been effective in reducing access to foreign information, lessening the dependency on foreign information as a resource for learning about the outside world and increasing assessments of domestic media.***

contradict and undermine the narratives in state propaganda. Second is the government effort to compete against foreign content by upping the quality of its own offerings. This includes signal improvements to radio and the addition of new television channels.<sup>42</sup>

The literature suggests that the availability of outside information can have a powerful effect on individuals in authoritarian regimes, with some limitations. According to surveys conducted by Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland, the consumption of foreign media correlated with more negative feelings about the North Korean government and its intentions.<sup>43</sup> In a 2013 defector survey, 84 percent of respondents said

contends that West German television helped to undermine the legitimacy of the Communist East German government.<sup>47</sup> Researching the effects of foreign media on regime support in China, Jun Xiang and Jay Hmielowski find that internet usage decreased "trust in the Chinese government, which resulted in less support for the regime." However, some caveats and limitations are worth considering. First, it may be that foreign media consumers are a self-selecting group. A study on Chinese internet users reveals that those with more negative views of the government were drawn to foreign media.<sup>48</sup> The potency of foreign media also seems to have limits. For example, research on the 1953 East German uprising suggests that foreign

42. Martyn Williams, "New Life for the Third Network," *38 North*, February 11, 2021, <https://www.38north.org/2021/02/new-life-for-the-third-network/>; "North Korea's Multi-Channel TV Age," *38 North*, December 16, 2020, <https://www.38north.org/2020/12/mwilliams121620/>; *Manila Times*, November 12, 2018, <https://www.manilatimes.net/2018/11/12/news/world/north-korean-people-fall-in-love-with-chinese-tv-drama-star/466443>.

43. Haggard and Noland, *Witness to Transformation*, 112.

44. Woo Young Lee and Jungmin Soo, "Cultural Pollution from the South?" in *North Korea in Transition: Politics, Economy, and Society*, edited by Kyung-Ae Park and Scott Snyder, 195-210 (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013).

45. Cha and DuMond, "No Laughing Matter."

46. Eugene Parta, *Discovering the Hidden Listener* (Washington, DC: Hoover Institution Press, 2007); Jun Xiang and Jay Hmielowski, "Alternative Views and Eroding Support," *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 29, no. 3 (2017): 406-25.

47. Jonathan Grix, *The Role of the Masses in the Collapse of the GDR* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000).

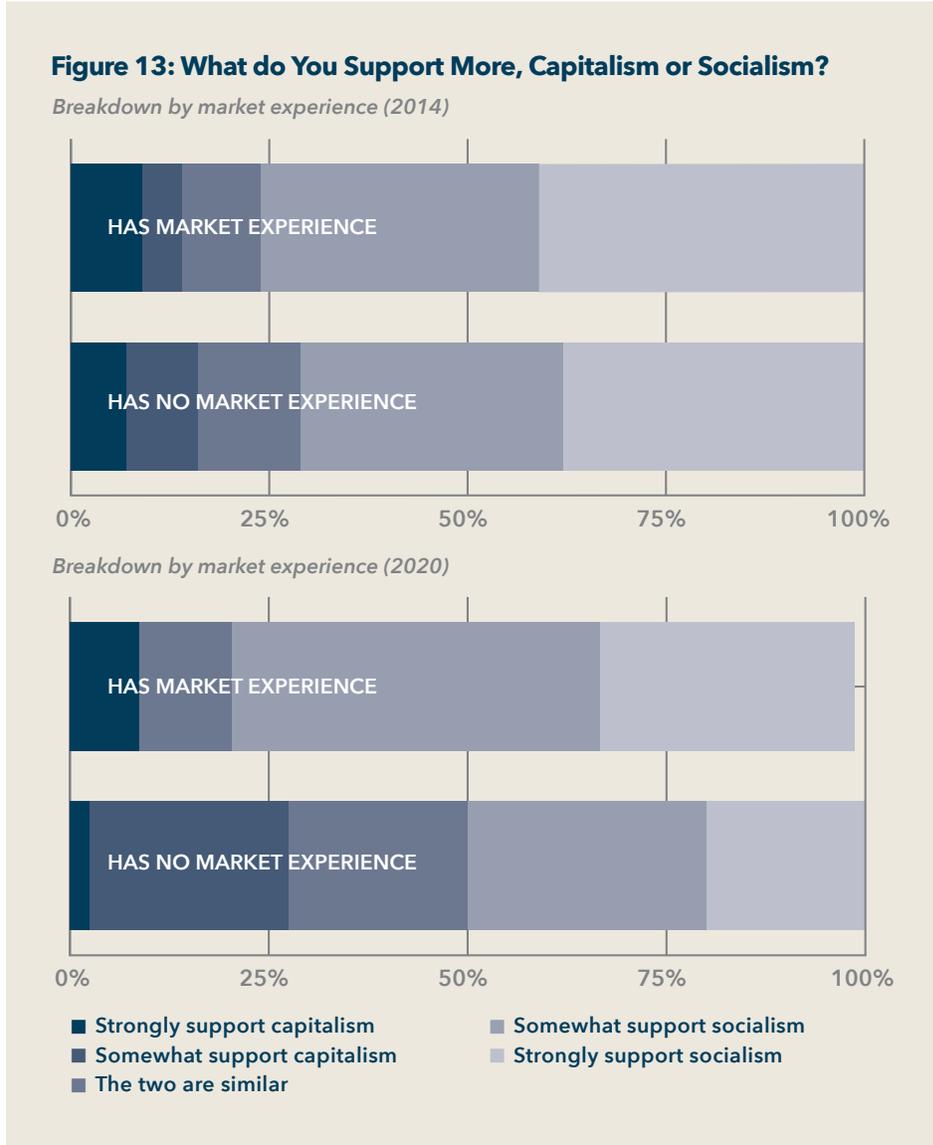
48. Haifeng Huang and Yao-Yen Yeh, "Information from Abroad," *British Journal of Political Science* 49, no. 2 (2019): 611-36.

49. Charles Crabtree, Holger Kern, and Steven Pfaff, "Mass Media and the Diffusion of Collective Action in Authoritarian Regimes: The June 1953 East German Uprising," *International Studies Quarterly* 62, no. 2 (2018): 301-34.

and consolidation were more acutely felt by the older generation, who were forced to deal more directly with the consequences. The young cohort, less engaged in the markets, had a different experience. Their assessment of the leadership's economic management is more acutely affected by changes to the information ecosystem. This explains why the declining availability of foreign information was especially important for youth. The decreased ability to access foreign media made it more difficult for the youth to dispute narratives conveyed by state media, lectures, and education. Refugee testimonials help illustrate this from the perspective of a North Korean. The UMG 2019 study conducted follow-up interviews with respondents. A former soldier in his late twenties who left North Korea in 2018 explained how foreign media serves as a counterweight to government propaganda and indoctrination:

People can only use their own experiences as a reference, so it's hard to think about things in a different light. . . . In North Korea, our senses become dulled by the daily lectures and ideological education we receive. . . . If [North Koreans] learn about real life and understand the factual state of South Korea, it would be helpful. Even if there is a realistic depiction of people earning according to how much they work. . . . They'll start to ask, "Why are we struggling so much?" They'll realize the government is wrong.

If it is true that the information ecosystem has changed the way that views are formed about the economy, we would expect to see that people without direct experience in the markets would have a different view in 2020 than their peers in 2014. In fact, we are beginning to see signs of exactly this dynamic. From 2014 to 2020, direct market experience became a more important predictor of a respondent's likelihood of supporting capitalism. Whereas in 2014 more than 70 percent of respondents with no market experience supported capitalism, only 50 percent did in the 2020 survey (figure 13). In addition, although support for socialism decreased over this time for people with market experience, those without it were more likely to support socialism



Source: SNU Survey (2020)

in 2020 (27.5 percent) versus 2014 (16 percent). Why might this be? The first, and most straightforward, interpretation is that market experience became more important in informing this particular view. However, the fact that those without market experience changed their views to such an extent suggests that another variable was influencing their assessment.

The second, more inferential, interpretation is that changes in the information ecosystem helped push people without market experience to be less supportive of capitalism and more supportive of socialism because those without direct experiences must turn to other resources to inform their assessment. A plausible inference is that the information blockade and youth loyalty campaign have had an impact on youth perceptions. The gov-

ernment successfully influenced youth perceptions by willfully and systematically manipulating the information ecosystem. It blocked access to foreign information, increased the severity of punishments for consuming it, increased the quality of state media, and devoted leader-level attention to the ideological state of the youth. Foreign media is powerful because it provides a comparative context by which to judge the North Korean government's economic management against an international standard. Foreign media can reveal that attractive alternative systems exist, and that ultimately the government must change its priorities and management practices in order to raise the living standards of the people.

This explanation also helps clarify why twenty-somethings are generally more

positive than thirty-somethings. Thirty-year-olds have been affected by the information blockade and ideological campaign. However, they are beginning to acquire market experience, and consequently, their views are beginning to become more critical than their twenty-year-old counterparts, who do not have the same exposure to the markets. Thirty-somethings are in a between stage. It thus makes sense that they rated Kim Jong Un higher than the twenty-somethings but lower than the older cohort and that they perceived more criticism than twenty-somethings but less than the older cohort.

How is it conceivable that the change in the information ecosystem produced perception changes within just five years? Because North Koreans are accustomed to highly stylized and skewed propaganda disseminated in schools and produced by the Propaganda and Agitation Department, they are trained to be skeptical of media. Sudden and singular epiphanies are rare and unlikely. Minds are more often changed by slow, successive, and consistent messages that can be cross-verified through lived experiences and confirmed by word-of-mouth network. Only a steady stream of outside information can break through the authorities' stringent information blockade and ideological control. The credibility of foreign media develops slowly.<sup>50</sup> It takes time to unlearn the intricate and complex narratives propounded by the authorities through school lessons, organizational life, and state media. This explains how, although foreign media can be a quite potent element in the information ecosystem, its reduced availability may have led to an alteration in youth perceptions.

## CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This paper addresses a generational variation in North Korean attitudes about the government's economic management and finds the younger cohort to be more positive. The nonrepresentative nature of

the surveys makes it difficult to draw any definitive conclusions about the causal relationship between the variables. Additional survey research is needed. However, this analysis offers a basis for further investigation, suggesting that the young cohort has become more positive in their views of the leadership's economic management because their lack of market experience makes them vulnerable to changes in the information ecosystem, including a concerted youth loyalty campaign and a reduction in the availability of foreign information. More work is needed to establish a causal link between the information environment and attitudes toward the government's economic management, and investigate the presence of possible intervening variables. Ideally, this research would draw on a wider, more representative population sample. Future surveys might also undertake the following:

1. Isolate the two components of the information ecosystem variable (youth loyalty campaign and reduced access to foreign media) by asking more specific questions about each.
2. More directly investigate the statistical relationship between the independent variables (exposure to foreign media and youth loyalty campaign) and the dependent variable (positive appraisal of the leadership's economic management). It will be necessary to weigh this result against the influence of demographic information such as age, profession, and region, as well as the correlation between the dependent variable and other independent variables such as degree of dependency on the market, impact of a previous economic trauma on one's personal life, extent of exposure to domestic state media, participation in organizational life, and so on.
3. Collect more granular data about foreign media consumption. What is the impact of age, region, profession, and the like on the extent of

exposure to foreign media? Are certain types of media consumption (radio or news programs, for instance) more likely to be associated with critical views of the leadership's economic management?

These additional, granular survey questions could help ascertain the existence of a causal relationship between the independent and dependent variables, as well as explore further lines of inquiry. It would also be beneficial to collect a larger pool of testimonials from a diverse sample of respondents about the impact foreign media had on their views of the government. ■

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