

# 60+ Voices

Reflecting on Everyday Lives  
in North Korea

Revised and Enlarged Edition



Amnesty International is a movement of 10 million people which mobilizes the humanity in everyone and campaigns for change so we can all enjoy our human rights. Our vision is of a world where those in power keep their promises, respect international law and are held to account. We are independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest or religion and are funded mainly by our membership and individual donations. We believe that acting in solidarity and compassion with people everywhere can change our societies for the better.

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## Preface

North Korea's lockdown of its borders - implemented as a response to the Covid-19 pandemic - is persisting into its third year. Even before the pandemic, North Korea was often dubbed the hermit nation, as a reference to its secluded isolationist tendency. As Covid-19 grew into a global pandemic, North Korea distanced itself further away from international society, closing its borders and cutting off connections with the outside world. The heightened border control has led to a steep decrease in the number of escape attempts. Naturally, South Korea saw significantly fewer North Koreans entering the country. What used to be one or two thousand North Koreans entering South Korea between 2001 and 2019, has now dwindled to 229 people in 2020, 63 people in 2021, and 67 people in 2022. There was a slight uplift in the trend in the first half of 2023, when 99 North Koreans arrived in South Korea. However, this is still a low number compared to trends seen prior to Covid-19.

People who have left North Korea possess direct experience with the human rights situation of the country. Their accounts are invaluable in understanding North Korea and the human rights situation therein. Yet, the nature of witness accounts dictates that there will be certain limitations; in that they are bound to reflect individual opinions; that there are discrepancies of personal experience depending on the person's background; and that it is difficult to ascertain the veracity of the statements on-site. Such limitations stand in the way of allowing objective qualifications of the accounts. Given how information from within is extremely inaccessible however, these accounts of lived experience and observations told by people who have left North Korea do bring significant value as they allow us to extrapolate the general human rights scene of the country. It is unfortunate

then that the number of people who, upon leaving North Korea, resettle in South Korea has plummeted – as this raises the hurdle to acquiring updated information related to human rights in North Korea and surveying the status quo.

A small number of oft-cited images dominate our discourse surrounding North Korean human rights. These are images of infants famished to the point their rib cages are made visible, detainees suffering torture and other forms of violence, criminals executed publicly before a large crowd, dissidents enslaved for life at Political Prison Camps, women kidnapped to China by human traffickers only to be arrested and sent back to North Korea, patients dying without treatment, and children covered in dirt and in search of food. Such tropes have been made a repertoire for the past few decades without much change. As a matter of fact, the above descriptions still do reflect some truth of the situation in some areas of North Korea. It is also part of the reason why statements on North Korean human rights are treated as a repetition of the same narrative with nothing new under the sun.

However, one can find that the human rights situation in North Korea has gone through change, albeit slowly, if one were to compare the data collected in the 1990s, the 2000s, 2010s, and the 2020s. Recently, we spotted new human rights issues not seen in North Korea before, or pre-existing human rights violation cases developing into new forms. Then there are cases where the form of violation has persisted but its level of severity has changed. These trends are sometimes overshadowed by the better-known issues from the past and are not made aware to the public or the international community.

Since 2018, Amnesty International Korea (AI Korea)

has conducted a series of in-depth interview sessions every month with interviewees who have left North Korea and have resettled in South Korea. From mid-2019, AI Korea focused on meeting those people who have left North Korea recently (within just a few months to a few years) to try to make sense of the most up-to-date realities of human rights in North Korea. Despite Covid-19 causing a drastic drop in the number of people leaving North Korea and entering South Korea, AI Korea met with new interviewees and continued to hold more sessions. This exercise enabled AI Korea to extrapolate on the realities of human rights experienced by North Korean people before and after the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as the hardships they were facing.

AI Korea believes that these witness accounts, coming from people who have only recently been in North Korea themselves, can deliver the realities of the country and its human rights situation to the general reader with better comprehensiveness and accessibility than any other material. To this end, we have decided to utilise the accounts collected from our nearly 90 interviewees for the past four years. After launching the publication project for these witness accounts, we have selected 61 accounts that we considered reader-friendly towards a general readership.

All interviewees whom we have met have expressed agreement that their accounts may be used in bringing value to AI Korea's works related to North Korean human rights. Each account has undergone alterations and edits in places where we saw that the privacy of our speakers needed to be protected. These actions include using aliases or showing no name at all, as well as cropping out certain passages. Some corrections were made to the

grammar and the tone to be read naturally as Korean language monologues, but the overall context of what was being said was kept unaltered and intact. AI Korea did not add our own perspective, opinion, or analysis on how the accounts should be read. We wanted our readers to understand and imagine what it is like to be in North Korea as well as the human rights situation there by reading these accounts first-hand. We paid special attention so that this book provides an immersive atmosphere where the readers could picture themselves listening to what our speakers have to say, to hear their accounts and empathise.

It could be said that the forms of human rights violations perpetrated by the state are very much expectable given the shape and structure of North Korean society. Much of the prior literature focuses on making vivid descriptions of the vulnerable human rights situation in North Korea by listing down the many cases of violations labelled after each specific topic. This kind of publication is effective in providing a detailed view of the human rights situation in North Korea. However, it tends to highlight only certain aspects of the account that suit the author or the institution behind the publication. The interconnected context that lies within the account often loses colour. Furthermore, the narrated accounts may be chopped to certain pieces that are deemed needed. It is difficult, in this case, for the readers to make the connection between the livelihoods of the interviewees and the human rights violations they have experienced. If readers cannot understand the lives of our interviewees, we cannot expect them to understand their hardships and exercise empathy. More specifically, the root cause of human rights violations in North Korea should be understood in connection with the governing system, the social structure, and the culture. This

is why it is important to understand the livelihoods of North Korean people along with understanding the human rights scene of the country.

In this way, this book is meant to be different from other reports on North Korean human rights and published witness accounts. This book intends to tell the lived experience of our speakers and shed light on everyday human rights issues they have encountered. By doing so, we aim at not only getting the readers to better understand the question of “Why has the human rights problem in North Korea not been resolved after so many decades?”, but also getting them to feel a sense of empathy towards the hardships faced by North Koreans in their daily lives.

This book contains a wealth of spoken accounts pertaining to human rights in North Korea. Some are longstanding issues that are well-known, while others are lesser known although they have existed all along. Then there are new issues that are recent in their appearance. What’s more is that this publication can serve as a sourcebook that provides up-to-date accounts of livelihoods, social structure, and culture, along with inner thoughts that the speakers could not voice while living in North Korea. That is to say, by reading the accounts, we are made to see their encounters with human rights issues in North Korea from the perspective of North Koreans themselves. Moreover, their accounts can help us understand current trends in North Korean society given how it is increasingly difficult to catch up on updated information from North Korea these days.

To be sure, we cannot say that the statements made by the interviewees are a reflection of the full reality of North Korea. Some accounts do contain unverified information or inaccurate wordings. Some accounts even contain what can be said to

be guesswork. However, our expectation is that the readers will sieve through and analyse the accounts contained herein and find clues to extrapolate on the recent realities of human rights in North Korea.

The book that you are holding, titled *60+ Voices*, is a revised and enlarged edition of our earlier book, *50+ Voices*. This current edition contains the stories told by a total of sixty-one individuals. Seven new accounts, some even covering North Korea's efforts in fighting Covid-19, have been added to the existing fifty-four from the previous volume.

There are specific reasons as to why we have titled this book with the number 60 and the plus sign next to it. First, as mentioned above, this book contains the accounts of sixty-one interviewees regarding their lived experience as well as human rights in North Korea. In this regard, the title quite literally means "The Voices of 60-plus Individuals from North Korea." Moreover, the year in which we launched this book project, 2022, happened to be the 61st year of Amnesty International. In commemoration of the sixty-one years, we put together the accounts of sixty-one individuals, followed by a plus sign symbolising AI Korea's continued efforts surrounding our proactive human rights advocacy work. As such, we would like to say that the title *60+ Voices* represents our motion towards improving human rights together with the voices of our 60-plus speakers.

AI Korea would like to see *60+ Voices* become a medium that connects the general public with North Korean human rights issues. Our hope is that *60+ Voices* goes on to spread up-to-date facts on life in North Korea among readers and that they will, in turn, take a greater interest in the topic of human

rights in North Korea. If so, this book will prove to have been an invaluable groundwork for resolving the human rights issues of that country.

Indeed, there are innumerable people in North Korea who are living outside the grid of human rights protection. Unable to make their voices heard, they are in dire need of our attention. We now turn to the readers to ask that you listen to what they have to say. Our wish here is that this book will bring you closer to our shared interest in changing the human rights situation in North Korea.

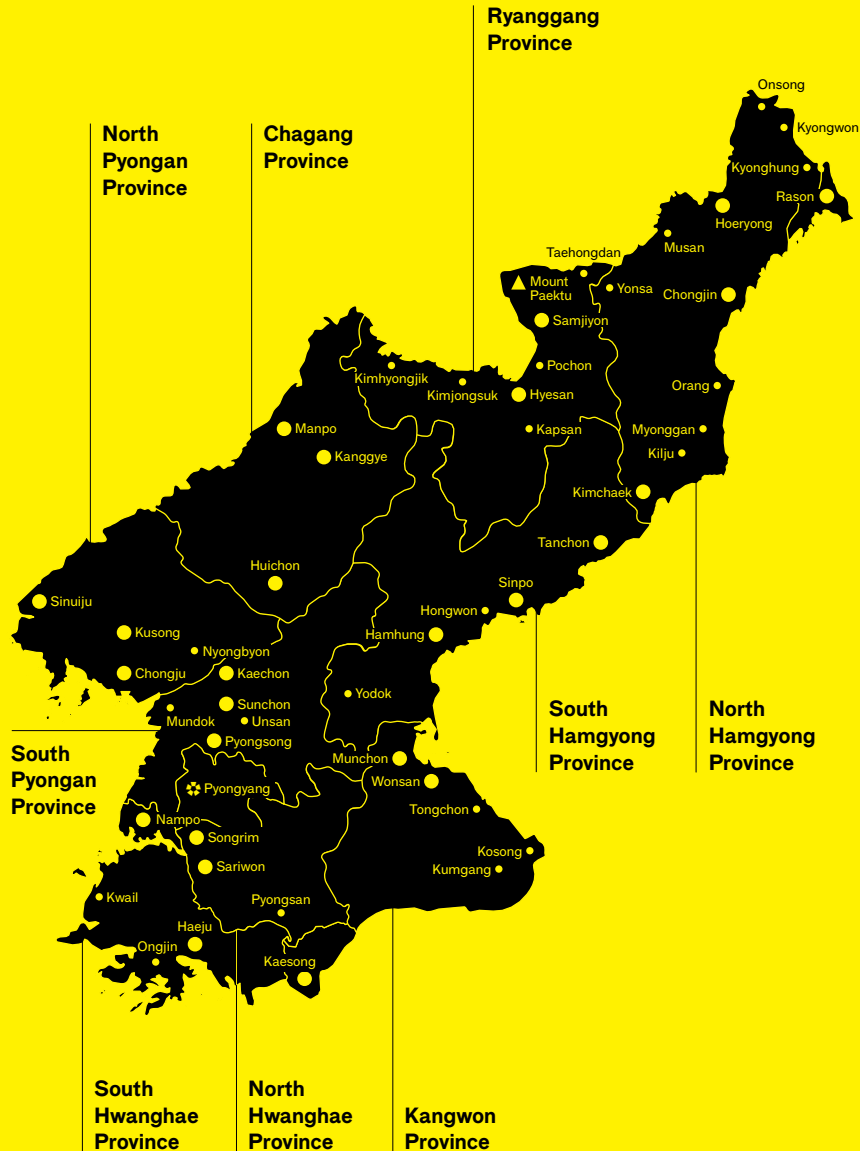
11 October, 2023

Choi Jae-hoon

DPRK Specialist

Amnesty International Korea

## Provinces of North Korea



## Units of Measurement

Domestic Units	International Units
1 <i>pyeong</i>	3.31m <sup>2</sup>
1 <i>li</i>	392.73m
1 <i>jongbo</i>	9917.36m <sup>2</sup>

## Currency Rates<sup>\*</sup>

Foreign Currency	Domestic Currency
1 South Korean won KRW, ₩	7–8KPW
1 Chinese yuan CNY, ¥	1,200– 1,300KPW
1 US dollar USD, \$	8,000– 8,500KPW

<sup>\*</sup> As of the end of June 2023. This is an unofficial estimate referring to the foreign currency price traded in the North Korean market and there may be slight differences depending on the region even during the same period. This currency rate differs considerably from the government's rate.



# Table of Contents

## Chapter 1

---

An Abandoned Education System  
followed by Pre-defined Career Paths

16

## Chapter 2

---

Inhumane Treatment in the Detainment Facilities

78

## Chapter 3

---

Silent Dynamics in a Society that Refuses Change

120

## Chapter 4

---

Unpaid Workers Forced to Live a Double Life

218

## Chapter 5

---

Restrictions in Everyday Life and the Absence of Dissent

334

## Chapter 6

---

The Self-reliant Economy as a Free for All

512

## Appendix 1

---

Recommendations of Amnesty International to North Korea

613

## Appendix 2

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An Overview of the Interviews

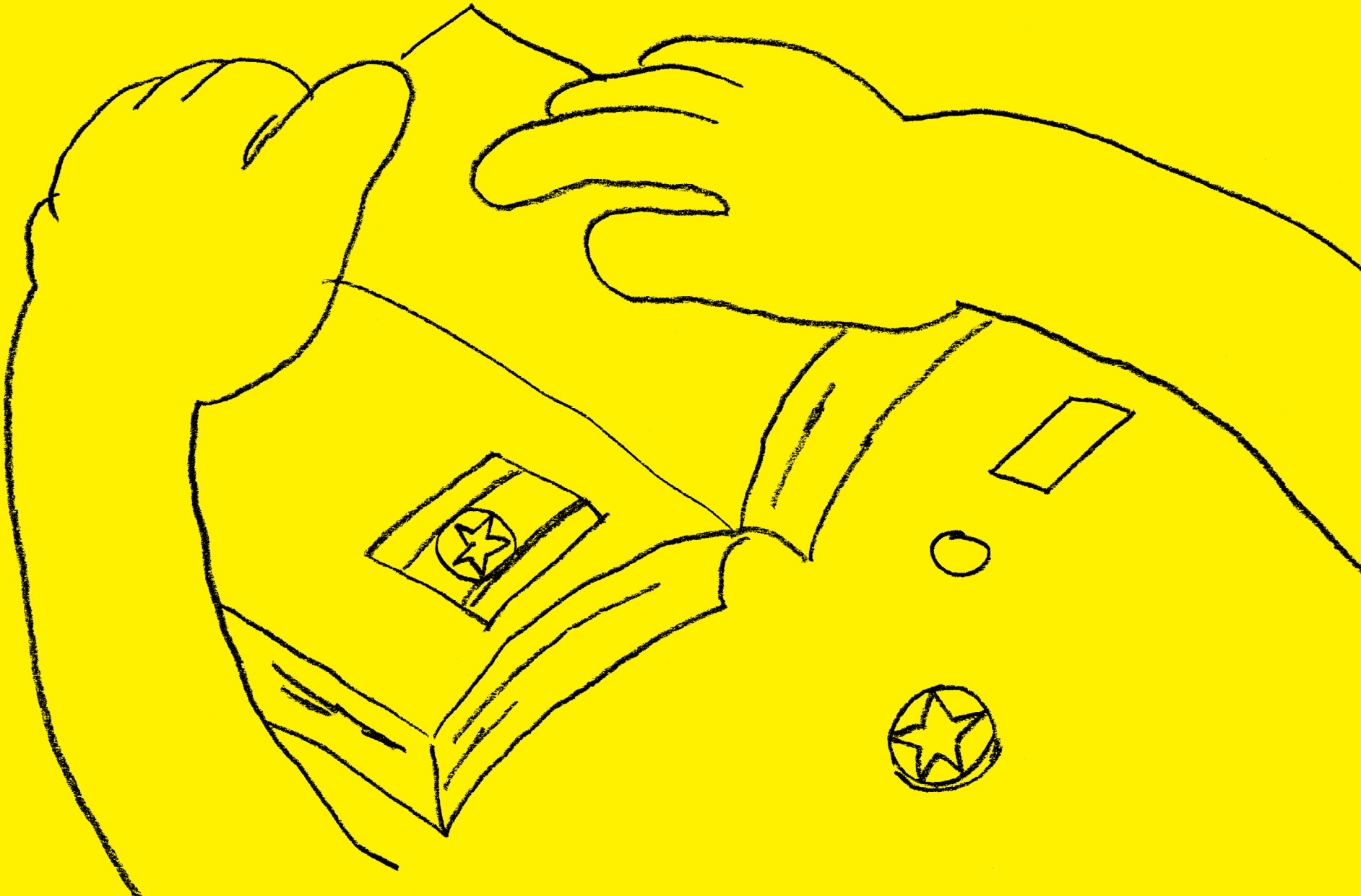
617

# Notice

- All interviewees in this publication gave their consent to the use of information and content for Amnesty International Korea's work.
- All interviewees in this publication use pseudonyms and their personal information may have been modified for the purpose of security.
- All testimonies in this publication describe the most recent situation in North Korea of the year in which the interviewee escaped from the country, unless a specific time period is mentioned.
- This publication contains a collection of interviews with North Koreans who have resettled in South Korea. As such, you will find the interviewees sometimes compare North Korea with South Korea in an attempt to describe the human rights situation in their country of origin.
- The opinions and information provided by interviewees in the publication do not represent views of, nor do they receive endorsement from Amnesty International Korea.

An Abandoned  
Education System

followed by Pre-defined  
Career Paths



1	Kim Mun-sung	Everyday Life of a Teenager	19
2	Lee Jin-hyok	School Life	28
3	Kang Hye-son	Teenagers Facing Work Instead of School	35
4	Son Hwa-yong	How North Korean Youth Think	41
5	Jo Eun-sil	Country Life and City Life	51
6	Jang Yi-seon	Life in College	63
7	Kang Ju-mi	Tuition-free Education and its Realities	71

Hello, my name is  
Kim Mun-sung.  
I'm from North  
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I left North Korea  
in late 2018, and  
reached South Korea  
in the middle of 2019.



Hello, my name is Kim Mun-sung. I am from North Hamgyong Province. I left North Korea in late 2018, and reached South Korea in the middle of 2019.

I only graduated middle school<sup>❶</sup> in North Korea. I didn't go to high school.<sup>❷</sup> North Korean education is mandatory up to high school. You are subject to punishment for not going to school, but the punishment isn't big given you are only a student. It's not so much a punishment since it is a "Life Review Session." At a Life Review Session, one is made to conduct self-criticisms and reflect on one's wrongdoings. As for the punishments, one could be made to clean up the school facility. From what I've been told, it used to be that one was made to return to school after the punishments, but that's not the case anymore. Bribes are so commonplace that you could pay for a high school diploma without actually having to attend high school.

As a matter of fact, bribes are commonplace in schools. If there are 20 students from well-to-do families in a class of 100 students, most of those 20 students will graduate using bribes. Such students do not show up at school because the school curriculum is of low quality. Students will take classes from what is comparable to hagwons or private tutoring in South Korea. There are retired college professors or such retired members that would take students and hold classes at their own houses. This offers a better quality of education.

We learn all subjects including language arts, English, and maths. It is one tutor who teaches all these subjects. That's why a private tutor has to be someone with skill – someone who is proficient in all of the subjects. That's why a retired professor often takes the job. But a private tutor does not make a whole lot of money. The price would be ten kilograms of rice or 50~100

❶ Junior-middle school (*chogeupjunghakgyo*).

❷ Senior-middle school (*gogeupjunghakgyo*).

Chinese yuan. A hundred Chinese yuan used to be a lot of money in North Korea around the time I was leaving the Country. Classes would be held Monday through Saturday. I get to be tutored at the time of my choice and at the duration of my choice. I can start to get tutored in the morning and finish in the evening, and the price would still be the same. Usually, it is the student that visits the tutor at his home. There are multiple students, but questions can be asked 1:1 – so the student to tutor ratio can be considered 1:1. The tutor is present at all times, so you get to ask a question whenever necessary. Learning in this way, a student can see that he is getting better. One could receive tutoring at a young age, but could also continue this into college. But students often move to another region for college, so they usually cannot continue.

Middle schools in North Korea teach you subjects like Korean, English, maths, natural science, socialist ethics, art, PE, basic crafts, music, history, and Korean geography.

Oh, and one important thing. There's also subjects like "The Childhood of the Great Leader Kim Il-sung," "The Childhood of the Great Leader Kim Jong-il," "The Revolutionary Activities of the Great Mother Kim Jong-suk,"<sup>❸</sup> and lastly, "The Childhood of the Great Leader Kim Jong-un."

❸ Kim Il-sung's wife, Kim Jong-il's mother, and Kim Jong-un's grandmother.

These subjects are taught just like the other school subjects - a few hours every week. All of these subjects follow a curriculum. In fact, the same subjects are taught in college too. These are the so-called “common curriculums.” They are taught in primary school as well as in kindergarten (age 5 to 6) and daycare (age 6 months to 4 years). Of course, it’s not some same level of detail, and as you advance into more senior years the content will be more in-depth. There’s physics, chemistry, and biology within natural science. Once in high school, we no longer use the word “natural science,” and the same subject is divided into these three.

If I were to compare students’ academic levels between North and South Korea, I don’t think there is a big gap when it comes to maths. Looking at high school maths, you could say North Korea has it harder. Some of the stuff taught in South Korean high schools is taught in middle schools in North Korea. But South Korea has a much higher level of English curriculum. North Korean teachers do not have good English pronunciation, but I think they have a better skill in teaching the subject. South Korea has better textbooks. I was told that Russian used to be taught in North Korea in the past. But it’s all gone now, in my generation. Everybody learns English now, even in North Korea. But the pronunciations we learn are British, not American. We all have the same textbooks everywhere in North Korea. On average, I think the South Korean curriculum feels harder to catch up on. South Korean students are so hardworking, above anything else.

Let me now tell you about school life in North Korea – based on my experience. Students will leave home at 6 AM or 6:30 to arrive in front of the statue of Kim Jong-suk at the city centre by 7. There, you are made to clean the perimeters of the statue. This is called “servicing the statues” (*dongsangbowi*). All students

are required to show up. North Korea has statues of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il standing in pairs. These are called the “statue pairs” (*ssangsang*). There is also what is called the “Sun Portrait” (*taeyangsang*)<sup>4</sup>. There was a statue of Kim Jong-suk where I lived. Each school has an assigned cleaning area. After the cleaning, we would walk to school in rows.

We would have morning homeroom upon arriving at school. Then we would have reading time until 8 AM. Reading time is for reading a newspaper for youths called “Youth Vanguard” (*chongnyonjonwi*). There is a student who would read the paper out loud for the class – as a member of the school’s reading committee. There are avid followers among students. The leader among them is the committee chair (*danwiwonjang*), who is followed by the vice chair and the committee members. Then there are group committee chairs, class presidents, indoctrination committee chairs, child committee members, academic committee members, and group leaders 1~4. These comprise the school hierarchy.

The 1st period classes start at 8 AM. We usually have class until the 6th or 7th period. Once the classes are over, it’s 2 or 3 PM. Each class is 45 minutes long, and there are 10-minute breaks in between. Some schools may have 15-minute breaks. Lunch time comes after the 4th or 5th period. We didn’t have a fixed lunch schedule. Instead, the school would tell us that it’s lunchtime for us after the 5th period, and we would follow that.

Lunch is an hour long, and is not given at the school. Students will have to run back home to take lunch, or grab something to eat near school. There are no places to grab food inside the school grounds. There is a canteen outside school. It’s not like one of the restaurants you see here in South Korea.

<sup>4</sup> A portrait depicting a bright shining smile.

It's more like a street vendor – except it's not actually out in the streets. I think it's best to say it's a residential house near school that sells food. These canteens sell Chinese food most of the time. They don't serve hot dishes, but dried goods instead. There are houses that have cooked dishes served hot, too. So students will choose which canteen to go for lunch – among the ones selling dried food, selling fizzy drinks, selling bread, and so on.

There's a fundamental difference between bullies in North and South Korea. North Korean bullies are much more behaved compared to South Korean ones. They participate in all the school work, and they don't partake in any serious wrongdoings – at least on the outside. So the teachers don't get to hold them accountable – since they are good students. These students may be smoking behind teachers' backs and not getting caught. At least in my neighbourhood, bullies didn't beat other students or take their money so much. They would stay quiet as long as they weren't provoked. Preying on those who are physically weak and stealing their money does not take place so often. Rather, if a student that is physically strong tries to bully someone that is weaker than him, the other students will gather to fight the bully.

North Korean students have a strong sense of friendship. Let's say I'm best friends with some friends. If my best friend comes back beaten up by someone, I will exact revenge on whoever that is - even if it means risking my life. When the two Koreas are unified, South Korean students shouldn't get into a fight with North Korean students. They are no match. North Korean students have a strong sense of friendship so that they do not decide whether or not to get involved in a fight based on how beneficial the fight is to their own needs. When you meet a fellow student from another school, you don't start by asking

his name. Instead, you ask him, “who is your friend?”, or “who is your leader?” If you hear back, “I'm a friend of KATO”<sup>5</sup>, then the name already speaks volumes. So you tell him “That so?” and try to be on good terms with him. If the two leaders of different neighbourhoods are friends with one another, you might point out that “your leader is friends with my leader” and become friends. Even in such a society, there are still school clowns.

The boys usually head back home to play video games after school. We also play South Korean games (games in the South Korean language). Games are mostly played on a laptop. Almost every household has a laptop these days. Laptops, and not EVD players<sup>6</sup>. They are all imported from China. My friends played South Korean games. Do you know the one called “Dynasty Warriors?” That's actually the only game I've played in the South Korean language. We played games made in the U.S. too. We would also play “GTA” – an American game. Such games with lots of action are popular in North Korea. We watch movies too – American movies and other countries too. Games would be bought on a USB drive. South Korean games, though, were harder to install. The software would be complicated and would require a virtual CD emulator to run it. USB drives are sold at the marketplace and they are all Chinese imports. It is not illegal to use USB drives, if one has it registered. We would copy the software to share among friends. Games were usually not purchased with money. I understand that such things are bought in South Korea, but that's not how we did it in North Korea. In North Korea, friends would give or share a game to another friend out of good faith, instead of buying and selling. In North Korea, a friend wouldn't lend money to another friend. You might as well just give away the money.

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- <sup>5</sup> A nickname referring to the heavy equipment manufactured by KATO Works – a Japanese company known for its cranes and bulldozers.
  - <sup>6</sup> EVD players can play video and music from CDs, DVDs, Blu-rays, USB drives, SD chips. They are manufactured mainly in China, and the North Korean name for them is “Note-tel.”

Foreign games and movies were probably around before I was born.

In the early 2000s, I think they played games on a desktop computer with a fat screen instead of a laptop. Only the rich had one of those back then. But now, ordinary citizens have laptops most of the time. I think about 80% of the households have at least one laptop. Most households have mobile phones too. The only difference is whether they have a more expensive brand or not.

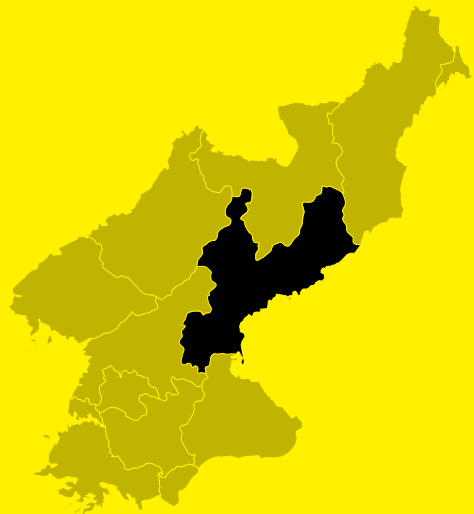
Other than computer games, we would play table tennis a lot. There are many table tennis lounges in North Korea. Some are run by private individuals – although they do so by paying the government a certain share. People in North Korea play volleyball and basketball too. They ride roller-skates. I see that in South Korea, “roller-skates” refer to those with four wheels on the sides, but in North Korea we refer to ones with a single row of wheels on each shoe. These are so-called “inline skates” in South Korean language. We have an indoor lounge for riding roller-skates in North Korea too. It’s very cheap with good infrastructure – in some ways it’s even better than what we have in South Korea. But there aren’t as many of them compared to South Korea. I think I can say it’s better quality but in a fewer number compared to South Korea. Other friends spend time outdoors hanging around with their girlfriends. Karaoke and what not... But those are expensive. You cannot go if you don’t have money. You pay by the hour.

Also, students in North Korea drink alcohol. Beer is considered liquor in South Korea, but that is not the case in North

Korea. In North Korea, beer is beer. It is not liquor. Students can drink beer and they won’t get in trouble for it. Rather, drinking beer is considered a manly thing to do. There’s a tendency to think that beer is a man’s drink. In men’s gatherings, there’s not much to do other than to drink beer and smoke cigarettes. That’s why friends would meet up and head to a beer hall – like the ones we have here in South Korea. We’ll have a pint each and tell each other compliments or console each other about something that’s troubling. One example is when a friend mentions his parents being so hard on him that he wants to leave home. Upon hearing this, the other friend will tell him to leave and stay over at his place. In this way, friends would offer solace for one another.

There are plenty of beer halls in North Korea. They don’t check IDs like they do in South Korea though. There are no legal implications for drinking beer, but the grownups might discourage us from drinking. Students don’t drink so much liquor, but might ask other friends to accompany them to a beerhall on a good day. Beer halls usually have dried pollock or dried anchovies as a side dish. Some of the fancier beer halls serve real food. When I’m with a rich friend, I would go for expensive meals to save face. But if I am with close friends, we might get drinks only. In North Korea, there is a saying that one must learn to drink from grownups and learn to smoke from one’s peers. This is because they want you to start a responsible drinking habit, by learning to behave in front of grownups over drinks. Drinking is taught from father to son, when the father decides “It’s time you learned how to drink.” Students smoke too, but there aren’t so many smokers these days. It’s fashionable not to smoke.

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I left North Korea  
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Hello, my name is Lee Jin-hyok. I'm from South Hamgyong Province. I left North Korea in mid-2018 and came to South Korea.

For me, it took less than a month to reach South Korea via China. You could say I was in South Korea no sooner than I left North Korea. I still have family left in North Korea. I heard that they are still living in fear even now. It is because North Korea is a country that makes you live in a perpetual state of unease.

From where I used to live, regular households did not have a steady supply of electric power. We would get maybe 7 hours on a good day. Usually, the power came on during the night. But still, you could use most appliances that run on electricity. We had refrigerators, washing machines, and the like. But to deal with the power outage, we would have an enormous battery called a "tank battery" connected to a converter to charge itself while the power was on. Then we would rely on the battery until the power came back on again. You need to store the power so that you can use it during the outage. We also used solar panels - batteries charged with solar energy. Solar panels would be set up on the rooftops of houses. It's costly, but they were all purchased by individuals. There are products made in China and those made in North Korea. I remember that North Korean products were of better quality.

There were both types of solar panels at my house, Chinese and North Korean. But the Chinese products broke easily. The quality was miserable. The North Korean products, on the other hand, would charge even on a cloudy day. Still the North Korean product would be much cheaper than the Chinese one. North Koreans prefer domestic products compared to those manufactured in China. Same with rice, same with snacks. Food tastes better than Chinese imports. The reason for importing



Chinese goods is because there is no mass production in North Korea. North Korean products are made in small batches only. They can barely supply the citizens of Pyongyang. That's why regular people buy food and other goods from China.

Once I came to South Korea, I attended regular high school. I still got full grades in maths. Maths taught in South Korean high school wasn't all that difficult. Language Arts was different, because North and South Korea speak differently. History was also taught differently, which was why I was not good at it. I wasn't good at English, maybe because I'm a STEM student. So once I came here, Liberal Arts subjects would stress me out as I couldn't keep up with class. But I could be more confident when it came to STEM subjects on computers and maths.

In North Korea, the kids that learn to work with computers can type a minimum of 600 characters per minute already at age 11 or 12. They are very quick with their hands. They also learn a lot of decryption and hacking. One of the final courses of the school is to write your own code, and they will teach you how to hack too. If you can write code, you can hack code so they would learn that too. I didn't study computers myself, but I know because I had a friend who did. Even the letters on the keyboard are placed differently between North and South Korea. So I reckon that kids who learned computers in North Korea would have to start all over once they come to South Korea. Computers are the most popular subject in North Korea. People will consider you an elite student when you tell them you learn computers at school. Being good at maths is second-best. The first place goes to the students who excel at computers.

Even if you are smart and hard-working at school, it's the state that decides your job.

My friend's brother was good with computers and smart. By the time he graduated, a black-coloured vehicle came to town to pick him up. Maybe it was the Ministry of State Security<sup>①</sup> or the military. Later, we were told through a "public announcement" from school that he was titled a hero as he sacrificed his life in saving other comrades. This means that they cover him up saying he is a dead man and erase all his official records, so that he can be used by the state. People implicitly know that the state recruits people in this manner. Even this kind of assignment is possible after passing a test. If you don't pass the test, you'll be assigned to a regular job.

Most teenagers from North Korea go to an alternative school after coming to South Korea. But I attended a regular high school and graduated. I'm preparing for college, and plan on attending one soon. Adjusting to the new environment wasn't too hard. I'm not picky, and I'm the kind of person who gets along with others really well. My classmates would take me to internet cafes and hang around with me. They were trying to help me get accustomed to South Korea since they knew I was from North Korea. I was in good company. Perhaps this is what makes me say that it's better for students from North Korea to attend regular school rather than an alternative school. It makes me think, "Why come to South Korea if you want to attend an alternative school?" The alternative schools that admit students from North Korea often already have many students from North Korea. But then, if you have the willingness and energy to stay self-motivated, an

① The secret police agency that investigates political crimes against the Kim family and those that relate to matters of national security.

alternative school could suit you much better.

For me it was easy to keep up with subjects like maths or science, even at a regular high school, because I learned those in North Korea. But when I started learning English, the first impression that I got was that it was “hard.” A class taught at a regular high school would keep up with the learning levels of the entire student body, while you can take classes based on your level of understanding at an alternative school. For me, it took 3 to 4 hours of studying English at home after class, when other kids would’ve finished the same amount of schoolwork in 30 minutes. It was hard for me to maintain an average score in my class. My English levels are way below the high level being taught at school. I couldn’t understand the sentences at all since I didn’t know the vocabulary to begin with. If I was picking up from a similar starting point with other South Korean students, I’d only have to pick up what was taught here. But that wasn’t my situation, so I had to do more, and it was hard for me to keep up. I’ve been told that alternative schools allow for you to learn step-by-step according to your own learning level so it doesn’t feel as hard from the beginning. So I think if you’re motivated, it works for you to choose an alternative school. But if you don’t have that kind of motivation, I’d recommend a regular school.

I spent some time at an alternative school because I had some time left until entering college. It took me some time to decide whether I wanted to go to a regular high school or an alternative school. I like maths, so I looked at a maths textbook used in regular high schools in South Korea. In North Korea, you will cover “limits” in high school and then learn “calculus” only once you enter college. I saw from the Korean textbook that you would learn calculus in the 3rd year of high school. So I wanted

to enter a regular high school to learn calculus. Learning it here reminded me of how I was taught similarly back at my North Korean school. So, keeping up with class was not a big issue. But I realised that you had to be good at English here in South Korea, which is different from the North. In South Korea, English is the first priority, and it worries me whether I can manage school work in college.

I was a student when I left Korea. So, I can describe school in North Korea from a student’s perspective. There were kids who couldn’t come to school because they didn’t have enough to eat. Lunch isn’t provided by the schools in North Korea. After finishing your morning classes, you head home to eat lunch. Then you return to school by 2PM for your afternoon classes which finish at 5 PM. Even if you skip school, it’s not like you can work. There are no jobs. In South Korea, you would get paid for work. In North Korea, you don’t necessarily get paid for that. Having a job assigned by the state would be no different from volunteer work. If you’re a student, working for the state is not necessary, but you need to earn money by chopping wood or something. There are lots of kids like that. Given the circumstances, friends from well-to-do families and I used to raise donations of cash, rice, shoes, etc. to bring to those friends who were less fortunate. Maybe those friends were moved by our gesture because they started attending school again. The students themselves would help out their friends in such ways. Maybe that’s why my homeroom teacher was so appreciative of us at graduation, saying that we were the best class he had.

The teachers would give students  
a flogging for skipping classes.

I don't think they were inspiring the students  
in such ways.

I made a friend in school after coming to South Korea, and that friend got ill one day. So I brought fruits on the way to visit his hospital. The other friends took me as very strange and said that friends usually don't do that in South Korea. The friend who was ill at the time told me that it was the first time a friend paid him a sick visit among the many friends he made in his 18 or 19 years of life. After that, the same friend would pay me a sick visit when I was ill. The friend told me that he liked the exchange. Such a tradition persists in North Korea. I lived in South Korea for almost 2 years, and I still don't know who lives next door. But when I was in North Korea, neighbours were like relatives. When something happens, your neighbours will step up to help. We would cook food together or share good news. I think people are too busy with their own lives in South Korea because each person has to work for a living.

Voice  
3

Teenagers Facing Work  
Instead of School

Hello, my name is  
Kang Hye-seon.  
I came from South  
Hwanghae Province,  
left North Korea in  
2011, and reached  
South Korea in the  
same year.



Hi, my name is Kang Hye-seon. I came from South Hwanghae Province, left North Korea in 2011, and reached South Korea in the same year.

I was able to leave North Korea because of my mother who had arrived in South Korea before me, and sent me a broker to help me escape. I didn't think much, as I was coming to South Korea. I simply followed the broker because the broker told me to. I couldn't even tell whether my escape route was passing through China or Thailand. My hometown is actually far away from the Chinese border so the broker initially said no when asked to bring me to South Korea.

No one in my neighbourhood was watching South Korean television shows, at least around the time when I left North Korea. We didn't have such things coming from China either. It was nearly impossible to watch such shows where I lived. The people there didn't even know what South Korean TV shows were. But I happened to have watched one just once by chance. This one time in 2010, I visited a well-to-do family that lived in a neighbouring village near my relatives' house. It was a rich, affluent household now that I think of it. They were close friends with my relatives. I could visit their home, as such visits were common between the two families. When I paid a visit, I saw that they had a disc that looked like a DVD, which they inserted in a machine to show something. I didn't even realise I was being shown a South Korean TV show. I was told that it was a television show from another country. I remember that the family was being very cautious when watching the show. They would turn off the DVD (player) every time they heard anything like a door slam outside. For me, the show gave me a strong impression and I remember the parts I saw to this day. After I came to South

Korea, I searched for the show on the internet based on what I could remember – out of curiosity. Turns out it was *Stairway to Heaven* (*Cheongukui Gyedan*). Ordinary people, including folks in my neighbourhood, did not have access to these shows. This I can say for certain. I don't know how things are now in my neighbourhood, but back then we didn't even know there were South Korean shows. The family that I visited to watch the show for the first time could do so because they had wealth and some political power. Later, though, I was told that the father was sent to a Political Prison Camp (*kwanliso*, also spelled *kwalliso*). It wasn't just Korean television shows, but a bunch of other things that got him in trouble. I was told that the house was demolished.

Likewise, I never had the chance to even hear about South Korea until I escaped in 2011. Radios were rare, and the TVs were black-and-white. This wasn't just the case for my family. In fact, most people watched black-and-white television in my neighbourhood. Rich folks would have TV in colour. I had had zero opportunity to learn about China either. I think people living in the border area between North Korea and China had plenty of access to Chinese or South Korean things. In my inland hometown, however, it was not possible to learn about China let alone other places - as such channels of information were all blocked when I was in North Korea. Hearing from border region residents was not an option either. My neighbourhood was very much isolated. I never used a mobile phone in my life there. People barely had a landline phone at home. Landlines were not for regular households. You needed to have some money to afford it. I saw a phone for the first time at a well-to-do household in the neighbourhood.

I don't think anyone in my hometown had difficulty getting

food. No one was starving to death. We all had food to eat. But kids around my age all had to work. Education is free in North Korea, but children would be sent to work instead of school if the family needed money. In my hometown, children would go work at a coal mine instead of going to school if their families weren't doing so well. You can find a small piece of coal or a chunk of it nearby the mines. Probably these were mined from the mineshaft and then fell out during transportation. Some are pure coal, but some are soiled with dirt. You take the good and the bad, and mix them up to sell at a middling price. So you would pick up whatever you can find there, collect in a bag or a basket, and then sell them to the facility manager at the minery, per bucket. There's a big truck that leaves the minery every day, and they need to meet the quota and fill the truck. That's why the minery would buy coal from children like us. I was around 10 years-old, and I would go pick up coal from the mines with my friends to sell them at a price.

No one made us work at the coal mines. The same goes for me and my friends. Everyone did so on their own accord. I could live without the work, but the other kids needed it to make ends meet.

No one ever stopped us from going to the coal mines, not the grown-ups or our families.

We were in fact encouraged, as it brought spare cash. The grown-ups didn't mind.

The site managers at the minery didn't mind children working there either. They would scold us for reselling the coal dropped off from the trucks. But the fact that we as children were working there was not discouraged. I think people took it for granted that children were working at a dangerous site like a coal mine. Also, the people there don't bother to tell you otherwise since you're not their kids. I didn't have protective gear when I worked at the minery - just a bag, and a pick-axe or something. I didn't have to prepare. I would just go there and start picking.

Most of my peers would work in this manner. Some kids went to school, but a great many didn't go and worked instead. The kids that do go to school are from really well-to-do households. I couldn't go to school myself. I'm not saying that I was ditching classes. I mean I didn't get any schooling. Even if you don't show up, the school doesn't contact your family for this. This is because I wasn't enrolled in the first place.

I would earn about 30,000 North Korean won after working two to three months at the mines. Back then a kilogram of rice would cost slightly more than 2,000 won. But I didn't know how much my money was worth at the time. So I would give all my earnings to the grown-ups of the household. I didn't have a clue about where I should spend the money. I just assumed that the money I made should go to the grown-ups. At the time, I was staying at my relatives' house, so I thought I was paying my share. I must have thought the money belonged to the entire household since we were all living together.

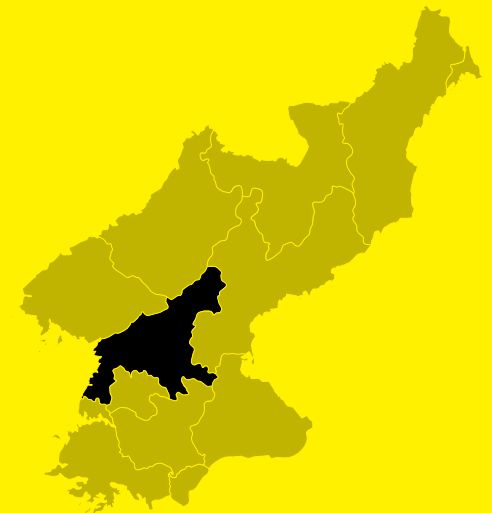
Most of my peers would work at the mines and not much else. Where I lived, it was among the easiest jobs you could get. Even if you did something else, it would be something like helping out your parents who sell vegetables as a trade. While

it was normal for children to go to work instead of school, not once did I hear about “human rights” until I left North Korea. The grown-ups were so busy making a living that they do not care for such things.

Voice  
4

How North Korean Youth Think

Hello, my name is  
Son Hwa-yong.  
I was born in South  
Pyongan Province.  
I was living in  
North Hamgyong  
Province before  
leaving North Korea.



Hello, my name is Son Hwa-yong. I was born in South Pyongan Province. I was living in North Hamgyong Province before leaving North Korea.

I was a high school student when I left North Korea with my mother in 2018. I arrived in South Korea in 2019. In my hometown, there were only two schools – a middle school and a high school – at the town centre excluding the smaller village levels. There are more schools if I include the villages, but I haven't been to those places, so I don't know. The middle school and high school are located apart from one another. We used to have just one building housing all 6 years of students. Now, there are 3 years in middle school and 3 years in high school with separate buildings for the two.

There was a school uniform. In middle school, I was made to wear a red tie and a badge shaped like a torch. This badge is for the Youth Corps, and everyone from second-year primary school wears them. Both boys and girls are made to wear a white shirt and a tie around their neck. The badge with the portraits of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il can be worn when one joins the Youth League.<sup>❶</sup> School uniforms are distributed by the state, but if you don't like how your uniform looks, you can wear a tailored uniform yourself. Uniforms can be order-made or bought from the markets. There are a variety of clothes to be found at the marketplace. Girls like to wear pretty clothes, so they will shop for a white shirt of their choice.

In North Korea, there are teenagers that wear makeup and there are teenagers that do not. In South Korea, people who are not interested in makeup do not wear it. It is the same way in North Korea. Girls that are fashionable would be that way even if they are told not to. In North Korea, female students have to

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❶ The Socialist Patriotic Youth League. The largest workers' organisation in North Korea among the big four. All people from age 14 to 30 are made to join as mandatory members. The full name of the league has changed from "Kimilsungist-Kimjongilist Youth League" to its current name as of April 2021.

cut their hair short or tie their hair in braids. They cannot have their hair loose or get perms. But most students don't follow the rules. They try to look nice, and they would always get caught in inspection. Inspection of clothes and appearances would be done by the leaders of the school's Youth League. You can think of it similar to the Student Council in South Korea. The students inspect other students. Then there is a teacher holding the position of a Youth League committee chair, who would be the instructor for the group. Now that I think of it, it's funny how North Korean kids don't have celebrities to imitate when it comes to looks. Instead of taking hints from celebrities, like in South Korea, I think kids in North Korea just take hints from other fellow kids. Kids these days watch a lot of South Korea TV series, so the boys would try to get a haircut in the South Korean style. Having one's bangs down used to be not a thing in North Korea – because of the inspections. The students are told to appear representable. But boys tend to imitate the South Korean style they saw in the TV series. Boys these days get perms and do a better job in grooming than before. Girls may imitate the *Moranbong Band* group shown on television, but it's hard to say they are imitating any specific person in the group. We don't have that culture in North Korea. I was just trying to look nice. I never thought of myself imitating anyone.

Cosmetics can be purchased from the marketplaces in North Korea. Most are made in China. Cosmetics are cheap and affordable to the point ordinary students can pay for them. Cushion foundations were about 20,000 North Korean won. Cheaper ones would come around 10,000 won. 800 thousand North Korean won is equivalent to 100 dollars – meaning these were ranging from a dollar to two and a half dollars, or 10 to 20

Chinese yuan. North Korean students may ask for allowances from their parents. And some kids just happen to have money on them that I have no idea how they earned. My friends, and myself included, would get allowances from parents but we also had spare cash ourselves, so we would spend from our own wallets.

There are students who don't go to school and earn money instead. My hometown, in particular, had a large number of such students. The parents would usually try to send their kids off to school until middle school. But once they reach high school, the parents might feel that there's not much to learn or that the school only wants to mobilise the students for work assignments. Parents start discouraging their kids from going to school. Especially when it comes to girls, graduating high school means they will have to be conscripted to the military. Parents do make kids drop out from school so as to keep them from getting conscripted. They will be recorded as high school dropouts for the remainder of their lives, but it doesn't have the same level of disabling impact on life as in South Korea. In South Korea, educational credentials are deemed very important. In North Korea, not having a high school diploma is not such a big deal. A student may contribute to the household economy by helping her mother's business. But most dropouts are actually doing nothing. Out of boredom, they might forage mushrooms in the mountains and sell them at a price.

The school would make us take classes before noon and go out to do work in the afternoons. I lived in a farming village, so we would often be mobilised to help out the farms. There are actually two hours of classes in the afternoon, but after those two hours, we would spend the remaining two hours working. This was customary. South Korea has the concept of weekends

where Saturdays and Sundays are off days. In North Korea, you are lucky to have a Sunday off. Saturdays would be all work save for the two-hours of class. Students are most often tasked with farm work. Harvesting potatoes during the autumn harvest, or picking corn. In Springtime, people are so busy planting corn that they don't have enough hands to help out in the rice paddies, so the students would help carry the crates of rice seedlings. High school students would be mobilised for construction work. Middle school students are too weak to help there. I got around doing some of that work in high school.

I think North Korean people in their teens and 20s watch South Korean TV series a lot. But then there are also many in the countryside who don't get to watch. We watched a lot of those shows where I'm from. You could say eight or nine out of ten students would be watching the shows. But one had to be careful. These are categorised as malicious video content that is subject to inspections by the 109 Permanent Committee<sup>2</sup> (*baekgonggusangmu*). Getting caught watching won't subject you to beatings, but the situation differs again on whether you have money or not. Even if caught, a well-to-do family will be released on the spot as long as they pay. But households without money could have their TV confiscated and such. If someone watched too many South Korean television shows but had no bribes to offer, they would be arrested and punished for it.

We watch a lot of Chinese TV shows in North Korea. There's also a lot of Chinese and Indian movies to watch. They come with North Korean subtitles. Some have South Korean subtitles. We sometimes watch South Korean television shows with subtitles too because the language is unfamiliar to North Korean ears. But watching South Korean television and movies never made me

<sup>2</sup> A combined inspection unit consisting of individuals from different law enforcement organisations, such as the Ministry of State Security, the Ministry of Social Security, the Prosecutor's Office, as well as the Workers' Party. The committee is responsible for crackdowns against anti-socialist video content.



want to go to South Korea. I just figured it was a staged account in a movie. Or I would think they are wealthy, and that would be it. It never occurred to me that I wanted to go there and live like that. China and India do not have a hostile relationship with North Korea, so kids would watch their movies and talk about them. But South Korean movies could only be watched with the closest of friends. But watching these foreign films never made any of us think we wanted to go there. We would just say that they were fun to watch. We used to talk about which movies are good and which ones are not fun. You can only tell your closest friends that you think South Korea is a good place to live after watching a South Korean movie. You are not supposed to mention watching those movies if you are not so close.

North Koreans in their teens and 20s are not very interested in politics. No one is serious enough about politics to give it some deep thought.

We tend to think in terms of what we've lived with, when it comes to those topics. I've never seen anyone think things like "Kim Jong-un is a bad person" or "South Korea is a good place to live." To be honest, I haven't had it tough in North Korea. Others, who did have it tough, would simply think it is their misfortune that is leading them to their current difficulties. They never blame the government or Kim Jong-un. In North Korea, Kim Jong-un would be the first person you would see when you turn on the TV. North Koreans will tell each other that the Great Leader is shown on television. People would express their respect for Kim Jong-un

even when with family members. The television broadcasts may show a moment of silence for the previous leaders who have passed away, and the viewers will stand up in the moment of silence, even when nobody is watching. People will observe the three minutes of standing silence even when nobody is around or watching. This has become a custom, an effect of brainwashing.

I only realised things were horribly wrong back in North Korea after coming to South Korea. Human rights is one thing, but that's not all. If there is a murder case in South Korea, it would be reported as a big scandal so that everybody will know about it, and there will be investigations made, right? But I witnessed three such cases in North Korea, and all three cases were considered nothing more than the talk of the town and that was it. Then we would go back to our lives as if nothing had happened. Seeing that, I would feel bad for the deceased.

Such things don't get resolved well in North Korea. One time, it was a money man (*donju*)<sup>③</sup> who got murdered. The suspect happened to be a rich person. Those around him knew he was the murderer, but the state didn't take him into custody or anything. They just let it slide, saying that there is no conclusive evidence. Then there is a school alumnus of mine who lived in the countryside. He was killed by a friend of his who stabbed him multiple times because the two of them got in a fight. His funeral was attended by many fellow students including myself, but that was it. People would say little more than how it's a shame that he died at such a young age. There were no investigations or punishments, or anything. In South Korea, such incidents get reported on the news and become nation-wide scandals. In North Korea, murder cases are not considered news. As I became aware of such things, I started wondering how much corruption could

③ The new rich in North Korea, who lead a variety of profit-making businesses and have amassed large capital.

be hiding in plain sight. Accidents and crime cases are rarely mentioned in North Korean television. The only deaths that do get reported would be the death of the Great Leader or other such individuals, to which we see footage of citizens lamenting after the death.

If there is a case of lynching in my neighbourhood, there's nothing I can do about it. Report? Nobody reports in North Korea. They just resolve matters at a personal level. It's faster and more efficient that way. Even when the police do show up, they want to brush matters under the rug as quietly as possible. Also, they are bent on creating a profit out of it, so they don't do a good job at resolving the issue. If two households get in a fight, they will try to come to terms among themselves instead of going so far as to report the case to the police authorities. This is normal in North Korea. South Koreans have a saying for the slightest inconvenience which goes, "Let's hear what the law has to say." North Koreans try to make concessions from both sides so that they can return to harmony, or sever all ties with the other side if they intend never to see each other again.

You could opt for a trial if you really wanted to. There is the court of law and everything. But I don't know who actually settles matters at court. The elites appear to do so from time to time. Also, my mother's generation may have heard about lawyers, but I sure haven't. They don't teach us those things even in school. They teach all sorts of stuff but never about lawyers. They only teach us what's in the curriculum. In the curriculum, there's more than just language arts, English, maths, science, and history as they have here in South Korea. There are subjects like revolutionary activities of Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il, Kim Jong-un, Kim Jong-suk.

I believe that there is a difference between how North Koreans in their teens and twenties view their country compared to how people in their 30s, 40s, and 50s view it.

In the old days, they used to have a hardcore mentality to "Protect the Great Leader with Death." I'm sure it must have been even more so for people above their 50s.

But the teenagers these days simply do not have that kind of thinking anymore. They just live for the benefit of themselves only.

Everyone in North Korea can be said to be like that, but teenagers more so. Some people in South Korea suggest that there could be a revolution in North Korea due to unresolved discontent within. But I don't think that's ever going to happen. Everyone in North Korea is made to think that things are meant to be the way they are. More importantly, North Koreans believe that the Kim family are wonderful people. I personally didn't like Kim Jong-il, but I liked Kim Jong-un in comparison. It's a matter of aesthetics, I think? Kim Il-sung has a kick-ass portrait and he is told to have won our country back from the Japanese as a founder of North Korea. People think of him very highly for that. While there are slight changes over the generations, Kim Jong-un's sudden appearance made people exclaim that he looks just like the Great

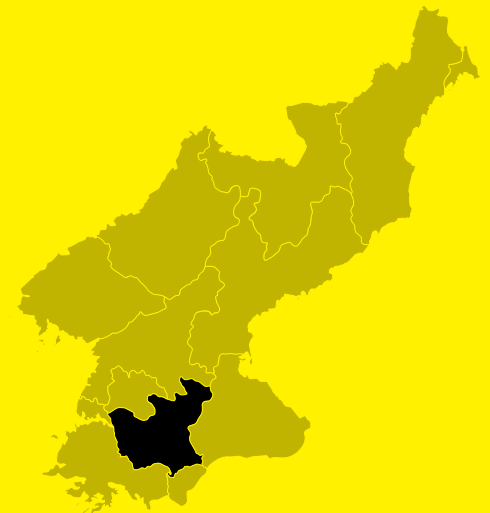
Leader, Kim Il-sung, and they started liking Kim Jong-un after that. But do you think a rebellion is likely to happen? I don't think it is possible to stand up against the government in an open revolt in North Korea.

When I talk about my experience in North Korea, the elderly in South Korea tend to say "We used to be like that in the old days." I like that moment because I feel like I am vibing with the older generation. I have good memories in North Korea, and the life experience I had in North Korea helps me a lot in South Korea too. If I were to think about the difference between South and North Korea, I think South Koreans care about human rights a lot while North Koreans are very ignorant about human rights. I have, of course, heard of human rights in North Korea. Even so, when I hear of people going to prison and Political Prison Camps, I used to think that the person got what he deserved for his bad deeds. I never got to think about the person's human rights. Seeing how South Koreans address a wide variety of human rights issues, I felt happy. The disabled people, in particular, must have been neglected more than other people. If the state does not look after them, they have no choice but to be marginalised. In South Korea, there is a policy to look after the disabled, and I think it's a wonderful thing.

Voice  
5

Country Life and City Life

Hello, my name is  
Jo Eun-sil.  
I was born in North  
Hwanghae Province.  
I left North Korea  
in early 2019 and  
reached South Korea  
in the middle of the  
same year.



Hello, my name is Jo Eun-sil. I was born in North Hwanghae Province. I left North Korea in early 2019 and reached South Korea in the middle of the same year.

I was born in North Hwanghae Province, but I was living in North Hamgyong Province before leaving. I moved to North Hamgyong Province in the late 2000s. My hometown in North Hwanghae Province was a farming village. We had a lot of potatoes and corn. I lived in a very rural town with wild boars and wild rabbits roaming free.

I made a journey straight to South Korea upon leaving North Korea. I stayed in China for about a week, and then moved across Laos and Thailand to get to South Korea. I spent the longest time at a refugee centre in Thailand. I felt that the strictest border control took place at the border between North Korea and China.

I just hiked across some mountains when moving into Laos from China, and I took a boat across a small river to get into Thailand from Laos. I travelled on foot when crossing the mountains. I had to cross two mountains, where one was a Chinese mountain and the other was a Laotian mountain. I travelled at night. I wasn't travelling alone throughout the journey. I was with others as well as our broker. Upon reaching Laos, I was greeted with another guide. I think we had designated rendezvous points in that manner – except the guide didn't seem to be connected to the Laotian police. It was just a civilian who helped us in Laos.

Then by the time we reached Thailand, we were told that we shouldn't get caught by the border guards there. So we ran towards some civilian houses for I don't know how long. We reached those houses and started calling for the "police" to come

and get us. Soon enough, the police car arrived at where we were. I think it was the local police. Those police officers escorted us all the way to Bangkok. I was told that if we get caught at the Thai border, we would be sent back to the country prior to the arrest as this is an incident that took place at the border. If I am unlucky to get caught by the border guards, I would be sent back to Laos. Laos is on good terms with North Korea, so they may send us back to North Korea. The risk is not over until we have reached the civilian houses after reaching Thailand.

The Thai police and officials treated us well with a nice attitude – starting with the escort offered by the police force. They were very welcoming. I met a Thai person for the first time in my life. The river-crossing between Laos and Thailand is done solely by North Koreans – without the help of a broker. It's the broker's job to get us to that river. We made the crossing and reached the houses to start asking for the police. The police arrived and they were happy to greet me – shouting "Korea!" Turns out there were so many North Koreans before us who made it over to Thailand in a like manner. That's how they knew who we were. Among the police officers, there was one person who was very fond of Koreans. She offered to give us kimchi and cabbage soup. We were treated so much better once we reached Thailand.

Looking back to my days at the refugee centre in Thailand, I think the toughest part was about food – it was so foreign. They would serve us hotpot with all sorts of vegetables cooked in a large pot – like how they would serve soup for prisoners. So that was a bit... But other than the food and the climate, things weren't so bad.

I was too young when I was living in North Hwanghae

Province, so I didn't know much about South Korean TV series and stuff. One thing I do remember, though, is that our TV once caught the signal for South Korean television as my father was trying to adjust the aerial. I remember my family shutting the windows and pulling down the curtains so that we could watch it in silence. This must have been back in 2005 or 2006, since I was so young. I knew it was a South Korean broadcast as I saw it on television – the speech patterns were all so different. I'm sure it's no longer possible to get South Korean TV signals these days, because North Korea tends to place strong restrictions over such things. For instance, Chinese mobile phones would be able to pick up signals quite nicely in the border region, so quite a few people would be able to use phones from home. But these days, I was told that making phone calls to China is much harder because of the many signal jammer devices installed.

I moved from North Hwanghae Province to North Hamgyong Province when I was in 1st grade of high school. The dialect was different there – it must have been similar to a person from Seoul moving to Busan. When I moved to North Hamgyong Province, everyone sounded angry and ready to pick a fight. As you travel by train, you can slowly hear the accents changing from South Hwanghae Province. In school, I had difficulty getting along with others. Regionalism exists in North Korea. People from Hwanghae Provinces are mocked for being from “*Tanghae*” Province. This is because the speech patterns of people from Hwanghae tends to be slow (“*tang*”) – hence it is a source of mockery.

I used to live in the rural countryside of North Hwanghae Province and then moved to the city in North Hamgyong Province. There was a recognizable gap in the standard of living.

Being a student myself, I also felt this gap in education. I was among those top performing students in my class when I went to a school in the countryside. We use the expression top tier (*choeudung*) in North Korea. Then I moved to a city school to resume my education, and I was placed at the lowest of my class. That's how large the gap is between urban and rural schools. In the rural school, we would have classes on computers – except there are no computers. We are simply lectured by the text. They will read out to us that pressing the start key shows us a certain screen, but I couldn't picture that in my head at all. Urban schools had computers and a much better educational infrastructure than the countryside.

If I remember correctly, computer classes were taught from a young age – probably 3rd or 4th year primary school in North Hwanghae Province. I've only learned about computers by text, so I couldn't really picture how it all worked inside my head. There was one PC at school, which was nothing more than an empty shell of a computer. The issues with power supply kept us from using it. So we only got to see its outer frame. Then, coming to the urban region of North Hamgyong Province, I saw how everyone used laptops, smartphones, and mobile phones. I used to call my friends back in North Hwanghae Province using my mobile phone after I became an adult. I suppose that, even in the countryside, individuals carry mobile phones to say the least – if not laptops.

Students were made to work after class in both schools – it was the same in North Hwanghae Province as it was in North Hamgyong Province.

If my memory serves, we had a total of six periods in middle school and high school – four periods in the morning and two in the afternoon. It would be around 3~4 PM once afternoon classes were over. That's when we would head out to help with the farm work. I lived in a farming village in North Hwanghae Province, so we would be sent to the farms most of the time. When I was in North Hamgyong Province, I lived in the city which was some distance away from the farms, so instead we were made to water the lawn or clean up the perimeter of the statue of Kim Il-sung. That was the difference. Road construction work was always there for us to do.

When I was still in primary school in North Hwanghae Province, we would always be made to work at the farms after school.

Now that I think of it, it was a poppy farm for opium.

They were planting ingredients for opium. But being so young, we didn't know what that was and simply followed orders. We harvested a lot of poppy seeds. Children would harvest the round-shaped seeds and sometimes eat the powders which had a nutty flavour. I remember kids falling drowsy as a result of that.

The poppy farms are run by the state. It was a collective farm. There used to be a lot of poppy flowers blooming on the

roadside on the way to school. I can't remember the name of the farm though. Anyways, there were many such poppy farms where I lived. There were ginseng farms and many other farms that produced medicinal ingredients. I don't know about the exact size and number of these farms. I was too young when I lived there, so I would simply follow directions to harvest poppy seeds. We would be accompanied by schoolteachers. I believe we had to meet a certain number of students per class.

But this was hard labour to be assigned to children, actually. I think South Korean children won't even be able to imagine what it's like. We would head out once the classes are over, and work in a subcontracting system. That is to say, each student has to finish a certain number of rows. We would be done by nightfall. I think the work took about two or three hours, to say the least.

Looking back to my days in North Korea, the most horrific experience I can remember was when I was made to carry dried manure by hand for about 12 hours at a farm when I was in college.

There were no gloves and a lot of the students came unprepared, but we were told to do it by hand. Then there was carrying lumber down from the mountains, which was too tiresome for us. When college students are assigned to work, we would be assigned to somewhere close to campus during the week, but always somewhere much further away on the weekends. Since we were grownups, we would bike a few hours to the assigned location where we would work as a group for

a few hours. Weekends in North Korea only means Sundays. Saturdays are for Life Review Sessions, and it is not a holiday. That's why weekends were tougher than the weekdays when living in North Korea. We gather at dawn on Sundays. We are told, for instance, to meet in front of the train station at a certain hour with our bicycles and earthenware pots. Students without bicycles should ride along with another. I used to live in the campus dormitory so there would usually be some distance to cover. A lot of the female students in North Korean colleges would be "straight out of high school" (*jikbalsaeng*), while the male students would be much older men who had finished ten years of military service. I used to ask the male students "Can I ride in the back seat?" and ride along. They were supportive in such ways.

The people who cannot serve in the military are people with unfortunate backgrounds (*todae*). Those who come from a less-than-reputable family lineage are not qualified to serve. Nowadays, there are many that choose not to serve. But usually, it's common for someone to join the military upon graduating from high school so that they can become a Workers' Party member. This is because one can attain party membership quicker if he has served, compared to those who have not served.

Individuals without Workers' Party membership in North Korea are recognized as having some problematic elements in the family ancestry.

They will face hurdles in promotions at work, for instance.

In some ways, becoming a party member is like proving that you are a capable man – in South Korean standards. If you are not a party member, there is going to be some discrimination against you at a social level. You are limited in the jobs you can be assigned to. The concept of occupation is different between North and South Korea. In North Korea, an individual is assigned to a job by the state. For instance, someone without party membership cannot become a manager or a director of a workplace, so they won't get promoted. To avoid such discrimination, people try to serve to become party members themselves.

Military service was not mandatory initially, but I believe it turned into a mandatory system from my brother's generation or so. Men serve for ten years, and now, women serve six years as well. I think it was around 2016 or 2017 when the change happened. My brother also got the draft document from the Military Mobilization office. It took some work to get him exempted. Nowadays, I believe it's mandatory for both men and women.

I lived in the countryside when I was in North Hwanghae Province, so I didn't know so much about public executions. I don't think public executions were held so frequently. But after I moved to North Hamgyong Province, I heard about a 70-year-old lady who was executed for being superstitious. This was around 2017 or 2018. I've never witnessed an execution myself, but I know that they would gather up people at a place called the "Susong River" (*susongchon*) in Chongjin. They would summon all college students and corporate workers from the region to hold a rally and perform the execution. I don't remember how many there were, but there was a huge crowd. I was there for the execution too, but I only watched to the point where they pronounced,

“You are executed in the name of the people,” and nothing more than that. While I didn’t see for myself, I was told that execution happened at gunpoint. Participating in public execution rallies is mandatory. There is a fixed number of people assigned from your school for instance, to show up at an execution to be held somewhere at some time. The requirement is for grownups and students alike. I don’t know about primary school students, but students from middle and high school were required to watch for educational purposes. The state wants adolescents to watch people die.

Superstition in North Korea could mean believing in an Abrahamic God... In North Korea Kim Il-sung is referred to as the sun and his family is spoken of in similar ways. That’s why believing in God can be considered a superstition. In South Korea, shamanistic folk rituals are considered superstitious, while in North Korea Protestantism and Catholicism are considered superstitious. I’m not sure what religion the old lady was a believer of.

I heard a lot about Political Prison Camps while in North Korea. There were a lot of rumours too. I was told that they will make you start work there as soon as you wake up in the morning. As soon as you get there, you are stripped of your citizenship ID. You are no longer a human being at that point. I’ve heard so many stories like this that I brought some poison and razor blades with me when leaving North Korea, thinking that I’d rather kill myself than to be caught and sent to a Political Prison Camp. I thought that I’d be better off dead than to be sent to a Political Prison Camp. This is the perspective that North Koreans take, because you never see anyone who made it out alive. Entire families disappear in a day.

<sup>1</sup> Also referred to as a Correctional Labour Camp. It is a prison where convicted criminals serve life-time or limited term reform through labour sentences (1 to 15 years).

I didn’t have anyone that I knew that was sent to a Political Prison Camp. If they were, I wouldn’t be able to see them ever again. Then there were quite a lot of people who were banished to faraway places for lesser crimes.

I didn’t see anyone being sent to a Political Prison Camp firsthand, but if I hear that someone’s house was demolished in my neighbourhood, I assume that they must have been sent to a Political Prison Camp.

I don’t know why, for what crime, but just like that – they are gone.

I don’t know if this one is a Political Prison Camp or a Reform through Labour Camp<sup>2</sup> (*rodongkyohwaso*), but there is a Reform through Labour Camp in Chongjin, North Hamgyong Province. It’s located close to the city of Chongjin, so I knew people who were sent to the Reform through Labour Camp there. There was a friend of mine who had a brother who killed a family member by mistake after getting drunk. That person was sent to the Susong Reform through Labour Camp<sup>2</sup>, I was told. My friend made visits to the facility to meet her brother, and she found out that interestingly 70~80% of the inmates were there for political crimes or for watching “Corrupt Footage” – South Korean TV series or other video content. In effect, there were more people

<sup>2</sup> Susong Reform through Labour Camp for Political Prisoners no. 25 located in Chongjin, North Hamgyong Province. Since its characteristics are closer to a Political Prison Camp, rather than a Reform through Labour Camp, it is managed by the Ministry of State Security.

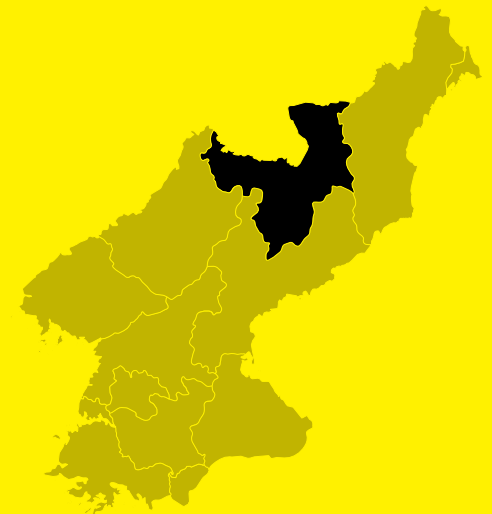


who were there for footage and stuff than for murder. Those are categorised as political crimes for sure. I don't know if the murders and the political criminals share the same prison area, though. Anyways, that's what my friend told me from her visit and said that we should be careful when watching TV series and stuff. You do get to visit inmates at Susong. That might be because it is like a regular Reform through Labour Camp. Although sentences differ for every inmate, Susong Reform through Labour Camp is not one of those places that people cannot make it out alive.

Voice  
6

Life in College

Hello, my name is  
Jang Yi-seon.  
My hometown is in  
Ryanggang Province.  
I left in 2016 and  
came to South Korea  
in the same year.



Hello, my name is Jang Yi-seon. My hometown is in Ryanggang Province. I left in 2016 and came to South Korea in the same year.

My mother came to South Korea before I did. A few years before I escaped, my mother was working in China with a friend trying to make money. When the Chinese police came for inspection, my mother ran away and decided to come to South Korea instead of returning to North Korea.

I was doing well in North Korea both before and after my mother left the country, so I had no intent to leave. But ever since my mother left, the Ministry of State Security started spying on my family. My mother would give me a phone call every now and then through a broker. One time, the Ministry's wiretap device recorded my entire phone conversation with my mother. I don't know how the device works exactly, but I've been told that it can capture all nearby signal frequencies. After that, the Ministry would repeatedly visit my home, take me away for interrogation, and send me back. They knew my mother was in South Korea. They knew I was receiving money from her. But that didn't seem to be a big problem. Instead, it would be a bigger problem if my mother or others who reached South Korea like her tried to get family members to join them. That's why the Ministry of State Security kept an eye on me, my brother, and my father.

Every time we were summoned by the Ministry, they asked for money.

So we had to bribe them. The Ministry seemed to be asking for money because they knew I was getting cash from South

Korea. This was too much for me to bear. One day, I was returning from one such interrogation session from the Ministry, and I came up with the thought of leaving everything behind. So I started packing once I reached home to leave North Korea for good. Fortunately, I could get help from a broker, and that's how I came here to South Korea.

When people who escaped from North Korea tell their account to South Koreans, sometimes the response would be nonchalant, making light of the matter. Perhaps it's because it is so hard to imagine what it's like. When you are detained at the Ministry of State Security, the police station, or other detention facilities, you get far more than just a beating. You are treated like an animal. A human being is not treated as one. I'm sure South Koreans would be shocked if they saw what happens there firsthand.

I dropped out of college in North Korea. I stayed at home mostly since I gave up college. I'm not very out-going, and so I felt perhaps running a market stall wasn't for me. So I never tried starting a business at the marketplace. My mother from Korea would send us money, and so my father and I had enough to live.

The high school that I graduated from had about 30 students per class. All schools are co-ed in North Korea. The male students are conscripted for military service once they graduate high school, so none of them went to college. As for female students, 3 or 4 out of 20 would go to college. In South Korea, I saw that the students study very hard to go to college. Students in North Korea also study hard but nothing like South Korea. It's partly because you can go to college easily if your family is rich.

You can bribe your way into college. Officially they will tell you that college entrance is based on your grades, but in

reality, they will take your upbringing and background into consideration. By grades, I mean the graduation exam at your high school and the entrance exam at the college you applied for. High school graduation exam is similar to CSAT in South Korea, except you don't have a designated name for it like "CSAT." I think we just called it "Preparatory Exam for College Admission." So the test scores will give you an indication of which schools you can apply for. Once you apply for a school, you take the entrance exam there. If you pass the test you're admitted to the school. But usually, kids from powerful families would apply to good schools like medical school and get admitted.

My father was a member of a collective farm.  
You can consider him to be a farmer  
by South Korean standards.

In North Korea there is a saying that goes,  
"The farm members' children have to inherit the job and  
continue working at the farm."  
It's a similar situation with coal miners,  
whose children inherit the same job.

My father didn't want me to be a farm member. He wanted to get me to college, even if it meant financial burden for the family. For a daughter of a farm worker to become a teacher is a step up in the class structure. You are going from "farm member" to "working class." That's why farm members who can

afford it will try to send their children to college. As a high school graduate, I would have been stuck with life at the farm just like my father had I not entered college. There is no freedom to choose your own profession in North Korea. Of course, the children of working-class parents will get to choose their job within limits. But this is not the case for farm members' children. It's a given that the children of farm members will become farm members themselves. To be sure, when I say people from working-class families get to choose their profession, I do not mean that they have freedom of choice like in South Korea. In South Korea, you can aspire to have the job you want. But this is not the case for North Korea.

In North Korea today,  
you need to bribe Party<sup>❶</sup> cadres  
to get the job you want.

You will need a lot of money because you're not bribing one or two individuals, but a whole line-up of party staff. You need to bribe police officers if you want to work at a market stall because crackdowns are ever frequent. I believe there is a regulation that says, "those under 30 years of age are prohibited from conducting business at a marketplace." If you're young and you are running a business, the police officers will chase you down and require you to pay a so-called "fine."

College in North Korea is a 4-year system just like in South Korea. I personally don't have fond memories from college. I see that college students here in South Korea spend a lot of time

❶ Workers' Party of Korea. It is the ruling party of North Korea. The party holds absolute control over the country's political, economic, military and cultural aspects. In North Korea, it is called the "Party."

studying. I don't remember doing that in college. The first class starts at 8:30, and if you have 3 classes that day you would actually be told to go out and work on a state-assigned job after your first class. I would rarely be able to take all of my classes for the day. I would be assigned to road maintenance work when I should have been taking classes. I was told that freshmen orientations are a thing in South Korea, where you could meet your fellow classmates before the school semester starts. We don't have that culture in North Korea. You get a letter of admission showing that you were accepted. School starts on 1 April. So that's your first day of school.

I went to a teachers' college. I was being trained to become a primary school teacher. Most of the students in my college were female. We had different majors in primary school education, PE education, and kindergarten education. The first two belong in the same college program, while the kindergarten education majors would be in a 2-year program. After graduating they would become kindergarten teachers. It was comparatively easy to enter a kindergarten education major, but the pay is not that different. I majored in primary school education. We had 9 class groups per year. Each group would have about 25 students. It's all females in the primary school education major. There were some male students majoring in PE education. It's not the case that men can't apply. There's a strong expectation that primary school teachers should be women. That's why men rarely apply for teachers' colleges.

A teacher would be paid about 3,000 won a month in North Korea. This amount will not get you 1 kg of rice. It is miserably low pay. In South Korea, people get paid for the work you do. In North Korea, work does not guarantee payment. So people don't

work hard and are not willing. Only through opening a business can you make money. That's why many North Koreans do business at the markets. I think South Koreans here work much harder than North Koreans, but it's still hard to make a living in South Korea. I mean it's not easy to get rich compared to the hard work they put in.

For a teacher to get married and make a living, it's impossible to rely only on the pay you receive from the state. So teachers would usually receive money from the students' parents. You're extorting your own students so to say. I don't know how it is in South Korea. In North Korea, married couples tend not to have more than one child these days. They think two is too many. So parents tend to focus on raising their only child, and visibly so. As a result, they try to show gratitude to the teachers of their child's school - with money. So that's what teachers live off of.

The power supply situation is not good in North Korea, so laptops were not used for studying either at school or at home. There were many people who had laptops where I lived. They were expensive but common. I, on the other hand, did not have a PC. Electricity used at home is obtained from solar panels. Most people would use mobile phones despite the general lack of electricity. There is no culture of hanging out after school as in South Korea. If I did hang out with friends, we would go shopping. There was a market near my college. We'd walk around the marketplace, look at clothes and stuff. That's how I spent time with my friends - maybe it was a girl thing. Then we would go to a restaurant to get something to eat.

My college also had many students coming from other regions. Those students stayed in the dorm. Dormitory life has lots of restrictions. You have to follow rules and can't act on your

own. If headcount is at 6PM, you can't leave the building after that time. You also have to wake up early to partake in morning exercise. You can say it's similar to the military. So students try to avoid living in the dormitory. Then there are students who have their own place of accommodation. I couldn't commute from home, so I got a place of my own once I started college. You pay monthly rent just like in South Korea. It's similar to houses that accommodate students here in South Korea. You would stay together with the landlord and share meals. The monthly rent is about 300~400 Chinese yuan, covering firewood and electricity use.

I would seldom have a day-off on a Sunday when there were classes. There was a plot of land that is school property.

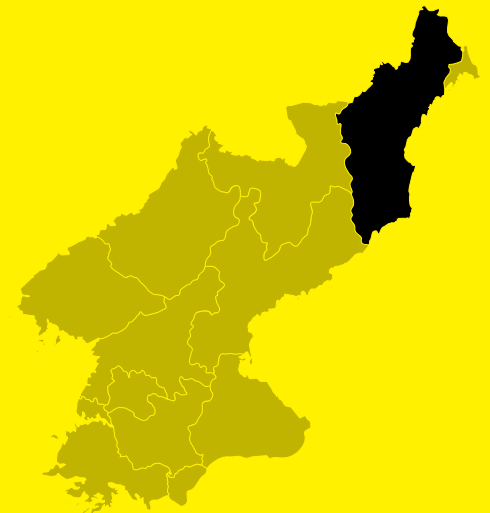
We would be sent there to grow crops and do other farm work. The school tells us that the harvest will be distributed to the students, but that almost never happens. The students at the dorm had to bring in their own food and cook by themselves. The school would give you some food, but not enough.

College is free in North Korea. Even if the tuition is free, there are other areas where money gets spent. You have to pay the professors, and only then you'd be given a decent grade. So college is for kids who come from a family with some money. Without money, you cannot manage college education. So in reality, it's not for everyone.

Voice  
7

Tuition-free Education and  
its Realities

Hello, my name is  
Kang Ju-mi.  
My hometown is  
in North  
Hamgyong Province.  
I left North Korea in  
late 2019 and reached  
South Korea not  
long after that.



Hello, my name is Kang Ju-mi. My hometown is in North Hamgyong Province. I left North Korea in late 2019 and reached South Korea not long after that. I left North Korea right before the Covid-19 outbreak. I don't know so much about the people who left the country after I did. Maybe there are some, but I'm pretty sure I was among the last.

My decision to leave North Korea was because I could not see a future there.

There was no light ahead. I was a college student in North Korea. After graduation, I needed to get a job and get married, but it would have been the kind of job that doesn't pay me any salary. I figured I had to go to South Korea because otherwise I would be stuck in a dead-end job with no pay - when instead I could be pursuing my academic career which I enjoyed. To eat well and live well one needs to become a party cadre, but the lives of cadres were also getting tough, so I knew I had to leave.

I was a college student when I left North Korea. When applying for college or selecting your major, money and other influences do take part - aside from your grades. There's a lot of corruption to be sure, but there are also a lot of students who make it to college without all that. There weren't that many around me who made it to college through such illegal means. They were all from difficult backgrounds. So while I can't say 100%, illegal routes do exist.

There were very few female students in college - maybe 10%. The rest were all male. Even so, women were not being

discriminated against or barred from applying to a school or a major. Perhaps that is the case for some fields, but that wasn't my experience. That is not to say that I got to choose wherever I wanted to go. We take a test at graduation, and only a few students from the top can apply to the universities of their choosing. Also, your school can designate you to take a college admission test held at a different location. Women were not discouraged from applying. There is, however, discrimination against women in society at large. In hiring professors, for instance, it used to be the case that graduate schools would not let women in. The reason is that female students get carried away with marriage and child-rearing and cannot get research done. The state feels that it is not worth the effort for women to be allowed in academia. Women are also rarely selected for study-abroad programs. The universities will have their brightest students sent to China or India to study abroad, and women are usually not selected. They also don't take female students when setting up things like engineering classes for advanced students. I guess the state feels that investing in women's education has less ROI than investing in men's education.

North Korean schools are not funded by private foundations. In a socialist country, school maintenance is meant to be covered entirely by state funding. But this is not what happens in reality because the state is poor. A simple example in universities would be the TVs or beam projectors in classrooms, which are funded out of students' pockets. Not only that but if the school needs a new building, they would collect money from students as state funding is not enough. So there are a lot of unofficial payments that need to be made, and many students simply give up college education because of this. Of course, the school does not kick

someone out for not making those payments, but there's peer pressure. There are more situations like this than I can describe in words.

Education used to be free.

Everything was like that in my parent's generation.

Education is still technically free nowadays.

For example, you can still go to school without making the payments required by the school. But the situation varies depending on the region and on the school. My college was among the better-funded ones. Even so, it was hard to stay in that school without your parents' support. There's no tuition or anything.

However, there is money to be paid in the form of public goodwill while I am enrolled as a student in college.

The cost that goes into creating an educational environment tends to be covered by student funding.

So students are under a lot of financial pressure. I did think of this as odd, but since there are no other ways to get through

college, I used to blame it on the system – rather than feeling I was being slighted. When I say it's the system, I wasn't limiting it to the educational system. I thought it was the country's overall economic system that's gone wrong, which then impacts the educational sector in a negative manner. That's what I thought. I think there were other students with antagonistic sentiments. But since we were so deeply entrenched in North Korean propaganda, the students cannot reflect on society from a critical angle or process it as such. Instead, we think hard about what we can do to survive under such hostile conditions. And so, no one comes up with the idea to change society for the better, but they tend to think they are stuck with that fate. There is a strong sentiment that if you don't survive in this society, you will surely die.

Some people do have internet access in Pyongyang.

This is because they need internet access to interact with the outside world. I don't know so much about anyone who has internet access other than the university professors. The reason they get internet access is because they need access to SCI papers and other such research materials. They need to read, do research, and post in renowned academic journals. There are facilities for internet access inside universities. One needs to go through the proper protocol for internet access, even if you are a professor. Once online, you can only access things related to your research. Internet access always leaves a trail of which sites you were on. It's not so much that a privileged few get to use the internet,

but people with a distinct purpose can access the internet. Professors do use the internet from time to time. While I don't know so much about this, it's a well-known story that intelligence agencies use the internet. There are many education programs that teach computer programs in North Korea, and they train a lot of hackers too. Coding education is well structured. You can access the South Korean internet from such places for sure. I was an undergrad, so I was made to memorise the textbook by rote. I might need to search for academic papers very rarely for assignments and stuff. Even then, I wouldn't be searching on the internet, but through government-produced electronic text files from the library. Those articles don't include new ones, only older ones from 5 to 6 years ago.

Aside from whether the human rights situation has gotten better during the Kim Jong-un regime, I would say that the situation in North Korea is worsening for real.

The situation is tightening more and more.

There have been more restrictions on the people since Kim Jong-un came into power. Because Kim Jong-un did not come prepared with a stable political platform, he must have been on the edge regarding the fate of his regime. Whether the people are brainwashed to serve him loyally is another sensitive point

in hand, so they tend to spread propaganda more than before. South Korean TV shows are more strictly prohibited. I think they are more sensitive and unforgiving towards the influx of South Korean culture influencing people's thoughts since these are related to the future of the regime and its stability. I can't compare with Kim Jong-Il's regime as I was too young at the time.

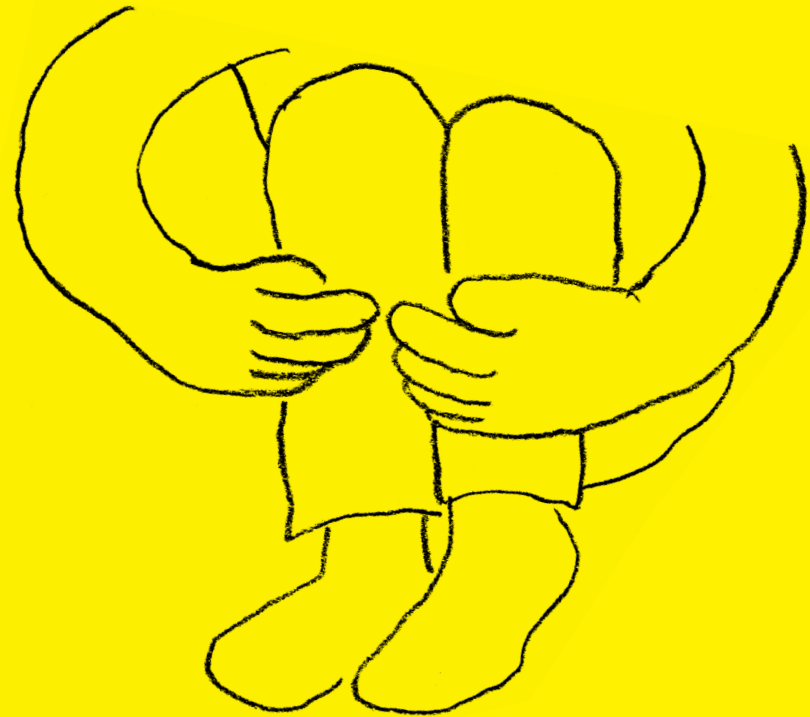
Some people from North Korea say that North Korea is preferable if one wishes to live carefree, but I don't know about that. North Korean society is not normal. That's not to say that South Korean society is perfect, but it's better than life in North Korea. While you can't say South Korean society has reached 100% fairness, North Korean society does not hold fairness as a norm, as it is not a democracy but an autocracy. Basic things like getting paid for work are not taken for granted. Even if you are a party cadre, you cannot make a living with honest work and an honest salary. Honesty won't let you survive in those lands. That's why I escaped. I was lucky.



Inhumane Treatment



in the Detainment  
Facilities

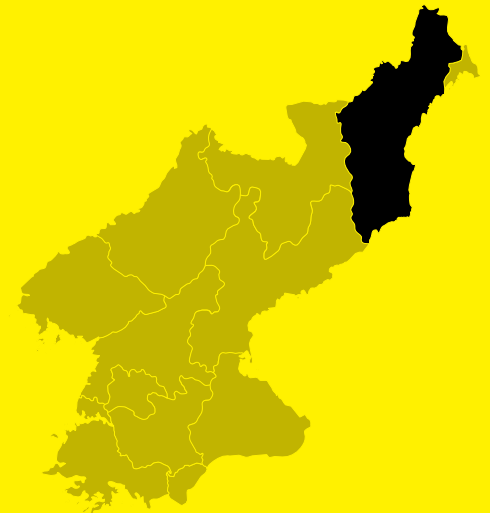


8	Lee Ju-yeong	Repatriated and Sent to a Reform through Labour Camp	81
9	Lee Oh-sun	Detention Centres	90
10	Jo Hyeon-mi	Things I Saw, Heard, and Felt at a Detainment Facilities	100

Voice  
8

Repatriated and Sent to a Reform  
through Labour Camp

Hello, my name is  
Lee Ju-yeong.  
I was born in  
North Hamgyong  
Province.  
But I lived mostly in  
Ryanggang Province.



Hello, my name is Lee Ju-yeong. I was born in North Hamgyong Province. But I lived mostly in Ryanggang Province.

I left North Korea and entered China in 2018, but then I had to stay there for a few months as I failed to meet my point of contact to get me into South Korea. I only entered South Korea in 2019. I hope I can help more people in North Korea by sharing what I know.

When I was leaving North Korea, I had to pay about 500 Chinese yuan to the person guiding me all the way to the river border. Then there was another person who took me across the river, and I had to pay 10 thousand yuan. I was told that these days they ask for up to 10 million KRW, which is about 50 to 60 thousand Chinese yuan. What happens is that the people who can get you across the river will stop you right there at the border guard posts. They will split the money with the guards. You wouldn't need that kind of money if it's just you and the border guards.

No matter how tight North Korea shuts down its borders, North Koreans can manage their way into China. The problem I think is that the lockdown in China now makes it impossible for these people to reach South Korea.

There was tightened border control in North Korea back when I was leaving too.

Still, they couldn't stop people from leaving. I was caught several times in China and was sent back. But here I am in South Korea.

Most people would have given up. But I just couldn't. My children had made it into South Korea before me, so I knew I had to go even if it meant dying on the way. As for me, I stayed for some time in China, learned to speak some Chinese, and even got sent back a few times. All this gave me the courage to escape. But it would be difficult for people who try for the first time, even if they have the heart. Things only get tougher in China.

That's why there are so few people coming to South Korea these days. I was told recently (early 2022) that there are North Koreans who are waiting for their chance in China. It wasn't like I could come straight to South Korea from China, even if that's what I intended to do. You had to stay somewhere in China and assess the situation on-site before making your next move. Even as you are hiding together in one place, it's still not safe there. So you have to constantly be on the move. I was told that people got caught while in their hideouts. It's the Chinese police that come after them. Actually, it's safe as long as you follow what your broker tells you to do. But you cannot expect 10 or more people there to be of the same mind, right? There are young people. There are old people... And you naturally get curious about the outside. Having left North Korea and being out in the world for the first time, they can't just sit tight as they're told. Older people may be able to stay indoors, but not youngsters. One or two people's carelessness can reveal your hideout. I heard that a whole group got arrested in this way. Once caught, the Chinese police will interrogate you. You will be sent back to North Korea unless there is some other reason for you to stay.

I was arrested three times by the Chinese police. Once arrested, I would be detained for about 3 days for interrogation. Now that I think of it, there was no beating by the Chinese police.

They say that you may get beaten if you are a man. But it didn't happen to me, perhaps because I was a woman. After the police station, we were sent to another border patrol station where I was detained for about a week. Turns out the soldiers at the border guard posts will beat you a lot. Women were also beaten, but more brutally so in the case of men. Even as they are beating you, they don't target the visibly exposed parts. They are told not to, apparently because of human rights reasons. So they will hurt you where it's not so exposed. They will often hit you on the back of your head, your back, or kick you in the legs. I was beaten during interrogation at the border guard post. I couldn't walk for two months because of the leg injury I got from getting kicked from hard leather shoes. This happens all the time. North Koreans, especially men, are beaten a lot. Women are beaten when they (border guards) think that our story is not truthful. It's usually a one-week detainment, but if you can't explain or prove your activities in China, I was told you could be detained for months. Same with the Chinese police. They won't let you go so easily if you cannot explain yourself.

People are then repatriated to North Korea through Customs. It's where the goods are traded between two countries. It's also the Ministry of State Security that manages Customs. Once we are received by Customs, then the people from the Ministry will take us. All repatriated individuals are interrogated by the Ministry. They check whether I am a political dissident or a South Korean spy; and whether I am on a mission. You need to pass this test. I was interrogated by the Ministry for 20 days or so. But the Ministry usually doesn't hold interrogations for so long. People who have made attempts to flee to South Korea get interrogated for about 3 days and that's it. It's 3 days because

there's nothing more to prove than the fact that they were headed to South Korea. These people are then sent to Political Prison Camps. I don't know if trials are held in the process. I was told by the people under interrogation that they will be sent to the camps because that's where they are meant to be sent. Then it's one of the prison camps that sends someone to take them in. I didn't know exactly because I was there in my prison cell. But it seemed that the people who walk out of the Ministry would either be sent to the prison camps or be sentenced to life. I was told that people who are sent to prison camps don't come out alive. But for me, as someone who was being interrogated for a bit longer, they took the time to assess whether all the things I had told them checked out; and whether I had no relationship with South Korea. If I were found to be telling the truth, I could leave. If the interrogation results show that I was not connected to South Korea, they would hand me over to the police station.

I think there is a huge number of people detained in the municipal detention centre (*kuryujang*) of the Ministry of State Security, although I don't know so much about the Ministry. What I can say is that I saw about 200 people in the waiting room when I first got to the municipal police station. And I was told that the detention centre had another 200 people inside. The waiting room is a place for people waiting for their interrogation while in custody. The waiting room is different from the detention centre in that they give you some freedom. You can lie down if you want. You can talk.

Detention centres are where you are held during interrogation.

Once you're in, you are made to sit next to one another 50 centimetres apart. You are not to move, not to breathe loudly, not to sneeze, and not to turn your eyes.

There are about six to seven people, maybe ten. There can be up to twenty people at most. The detention centre is where they decide where you will go next, either to a Labour Training Camp<sup>1</sup> (*rodongdanryonda*) or a Reform through Labour Camp. So that's how I saw 200 people in the waiting room before the interrogation at the detention centre. If your family pays money, you could get a lower sentence like being sentenced to reform through short-term labour (*rodongdanryonhyeong*). I had relatives that I reached out to for help. But they couldn't offer any help since they were not doing so well themselves. After about 10 days, I was told that I had to attend a preliminary hearing. After the hearing, I went through a court trial and was sentenced to jail. So that's how I got a 3-year sentence of reform through labour (*rodongkyohwahyeong*) at a Reform through Labour Camp.

I was sent to Kaechon Reform through Labour Camp no. 1 in South Pyongan Province. There were about one thousand females held there. Men and women had separate quarters. While separated, the two quarters were rather close by. I worked at the cookhouse. I was in charge of making meals and rationing. I would visit the camp for male inmates once a month to get rice and stuff, but I can't tell how many there were. I was forbidden from talking to the men, even if I saw one.

<sup>1</sup> A local detention facility where those committed misdemeanours are confined with short-term labour (6 months to 1 year).

Every time someone died in the female quarters, they would send people from the male quarters to pick up the body.

There were women who would die from weakness or disease. In my three years there, I saw about 10 people dying.

And there were many more that died in the male quarters. It was usually the men who would take away the dead bodies. Two or three times a month, I might pass through the route where you could catch a glimpse of the male quarters, and every time I saw the men taking bodies to the crematory. The gate to the crematory can be accessed only after crossing the main gate, and both men and women would use the main gate, as there's only one. I was told that inmates would sometimes die fighting among themselves. I was also told that the prison guards will beat the male inmates. There is no beating in the female quarters. They will punish you through food. If you are difficult to manage, they make you do physical labour. They punish you by giving you little to eat and a harder workload. I never saw anyone get beaten in the women's quarters. Anyhow, there's a morgue behind the cookhouse at the women's quarters. It's a small dugout where you would place the bodies. Men can't come all the way here as it is in the women's quarters. That's why it was up to us, the cookhouse workers, to take out the bodies and bring them to a place where men were allowed. As the men take the bodies away, you can see the crematory further up from the women's quarters. You can see

black smoke coming up from burning the bodies.

At a Reform through Labour Camp, work hours start at 7 AM and finish at 6 PM. Regardless of this, the inmates work sleepless during the night. In order not to starve for not finishing their tasks, people work all night. Before I left the Reform through Labour Camp for good, I was actually expelled from the cookhouse and had to work for a few months in a group that manufactured goods. The cookhouse is a very difficult place to be admitted in. Not anyone can work there. So most often it's for people who have money and power and good standing in society. It's because you handle food. In the Reform through Labour Camp, it's all about survival. People die without food, so it's advantageous to work close to the pantry if you want to live. I didn't have good connections or patrons, but somehow ended up at the cookhouse by luck. Older inmates are usually not assigned to cookhouse duty, but I was sent there regardless of my old age to oversee the work.

A few months before I left the camp, Kim Jong-un sent down a new directive that ordered inmates who escaped North Korea to be assigned to the hardest tasks. That's how I was expelled from the cookhouse. Even before that, criminals who attempted to escape the country were referred to as traitors and were excluded from pardons granted at major holidays. Murders can be pardoned, but not escape attempts. That's how it is. If you do a good job there, your sentence could be reduced. That's how my sentence was reduced, and so I could leave the camp.

Anyhow, I was made to work on grafting after I was barred from cookhouse duty, but I couldn't get my day's quota done even after two days' work. At first, I thought it was because I was new to the job and I wasn't experienced. Turns out others were

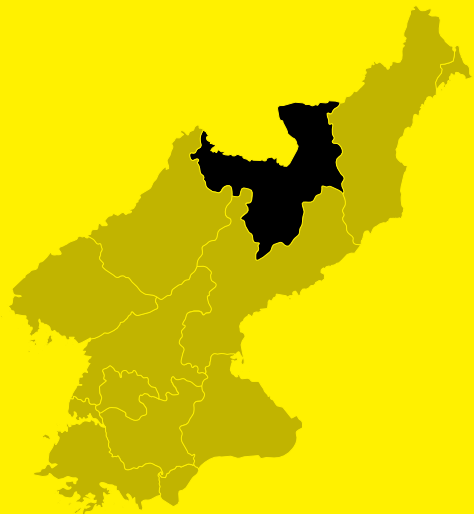
not getting their task completed in time either. For grafting, you had to get three thousand per day. I could only finish about one thousand in the given time. So, people would give up sleeping at night. At Correction Centres, the officers go around on night patrols. One inmate would keep a lookout to see if there was a patrol coming, and the other person would get work done during that time. Less than half of us got work done on time. The rest of us had to catch up during nighttime in secret. You would get fewer rations for not getting work done. So people would give up sleeping at night to get work done.

Back when I was living in North Korea, I stayed far away from violating the law. Even after entering China, I never thought I may face a prison sentence for this. But once I was locked in an actual prison, it felt like I couldn't make it out alive. I thought, "gosh, I didn't realise my country (North Korea) had such a hellish place!"

I used to see people who did time in prison with a judgmental eye. I used to think they must have all committed some heinous crime.

But during my time in prison, I did not find a single person like that. They were all just trying to survive, make a living, and provide for their families – criminals only in name. Those were the people you would meet in a North Korean prison.

Hello, my name is  
Lee Oh-sun.  
I was born in  
Ryongyang Province.  
I left North Korea in  
the middle of 2019  
and reached South  
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Hello, my name is Lee Oh-sun. I was born in Ryongyang Province. I left North Korea in the middle of 2019 and reached South Korea in late 2019.

The border control on the North Korean side has gotten tighter than before. A broker I know got arrested recently. Access into North Korea is being blocked. I think Covid-19 is being used as an excuse to stop people from crossing the border or taking inside information to the outside.

By the time I was leaving North Korea, smugglers and money brokers would be interrogated by the Ministry of State Security before being released. I was punished once in 2018. I had to go through the Ministry of State Security before being released. Around the time I was leaving North Korea, one change that took place was that perpetrators would be interrogated by the Ministry first and then handed over to the police station. In other words, it used to be the case that one could walk free once the interrogation was complete at the Ministry. But now, one has to be interrogated first by the Ministry and second by the police. This means double the bribe, as bribing the Ministry alone would be sufficient for one's release, but now two institutions have to be bribed.

At the Ministry, one is not sent to a Reform through Labour Camp unless it is a very serious crime. Reform by the Ministry is, in other words, a life sentence. Since there are so many smugglers and brokers in number, it is difficult to send all of them to a Political Prison Camp or a Reform through Labour Camp. That's why the Ministry used to take bribes from the perpetrators, and send them away for a reform program instead. Now, the Ministry cannot turn people to Reform, and instead hands them over to the police. The Ministry does take some bribe in the process before

handing the person to the police. That only makes things more disadvantageous when people like me get caught. Before, I only had to bribe one entity, but now because of the hand-over from the Ministry to the police, I have to bribe the police too as well as receive a reform through short-term labour sentence without exception. A Labour Training Camp is where you are made to work under forced conditions. It is structured in a way that money is spent redundantly.

I was held in the detention centre under the Ryanggang Province Ministry of State Security. North Korea does not have organised human rights protection, but there are some considerations of human rights made out of formality. But even then, the beatings depend on the crime, and on how much the person is willing to confess. I met a woman while detained by the Ministry. She was reported by someone while trying to illegally cross the border. She would push back on some of the charges, as she couldn't admit to everything she's done. Seeing this, a State Security officer put on leather gloves and started beating her badly.

There is a medical officer inside the Ministry. I was never injured. An injured person does not get treated outside detention, but the medical officer will make the rounds to see if anyone is unwell. Previously, they didn't even offer treatment to the detainees, and now they are making some effort for show. By the time I made it out of detention, my neighbours asked me whether I had been beaten, as they've all heard rumours about how they beat the detainees. I used to joke that I confessed everything I knew before it got to the beatings. I think it does depend on how the person responds. I was told that in the detaining facility for runaway women who have been repatriated

from China, they still beat women with wooden sticks. Such a person might believe that she can keep silent about the things she did over in China. But the Ministry has so much intel that they even have photographs of their Chinese husbands. There are women in China, working under the Ministry. That's where the intel is coming from. Repatriated women tend to lie, thinking that the Ministry cannot possibly know. But they are beaten very badly as a result. There was another woman who was detained in the same cell as I was. She was caught trying to make it to China. She was beaten by a State Security officer at a provincial holding facility (*jipkyolso*) - to the point where she went deaf.

One cannot protest to the Ministry about getting injured from the beatings - because they are a criminal.

The beatings do seem unfair. That's why everyone ends up deciding to leave North Korea.

Although we were criminals, I don't think of it as a crime. It would be a crime to steal, for instance. What have we done wrong in our daily lives? We are arrested and sentenced to punishments for making phone calls to South Korea and to China. Wouldn't it be an embarrassment and dishonour for us to be detained at such a place? It feels so unfair once you are detained in such a facility and treated the same way as real lowlife criminals. That's how you



get people to think, “I cannot live in this society.” The code of law is what’s making people like us treated no better than rubbish.

There are lawyers to be sure,  
out of formality.

The lawyer will side up with the government,  
the judge and the prosecutor – not us.

When I was in the Ministry’s detainment facility, the girl in the same cell seemed to think that the lawyer was on our side. Then she went to court to see that both the lawyer and the prosecutor would denounce her with harsh language. She was so surprised that when she came back to the cell, she would lash out at her handler saying that the lawyer should take our side. It was her first time in such a facility so she didn’t know. I remember laughing at her, telling her we are criminals. There’s no way the lawyer will take our side. The lawyer never takes our side. It’s just a gesture. One cannot personally inquire about a lawyer’s services. The lawyer does visit you while you are in detainment. He is supposed to learn about the case, but he just listens half-heartedly and leaves. It is impossible to imagine hiring a lawyer or getting someone to stand as your witness. The situation is so different that you cannot even imagine something like that. In North Korea, lawyers are thought to be just another law enforcement officer.

The death penalty inside a detainment facility is not executed by gun. I heard the prison guards talking at the police department. They used the term “to take someone out” – They

were beating people to death. I mean, it’s a death sentence and they beat you to death. There are prison guards who are experts in taking people out. They are made drunk with alcohol before beating someone to death – one cannot do it with a sober mind. The dead body is dragged away and buried in the ground. But this is what happens inside the police station, not the Ministry of State Security. I don’t know how they do it in the Ministry, but they seemed to send people away to Political Prison Camps.

I didn’t have friends and neighbours who have been sent to a Political Prison Camp any time recently. I was going through the pre-trial at the provincial-level Ministry, when I got to know a bunch of women from other neighbourhoods detained there with me. They were sent to a Political Prison Camp after the trials. This was in early 2017. If you are sent to a Political Prison Camp, it means your crime was political in nature. You’ve done something related to South Korea. This has become more normalised nowadays that people get released for it. But back then, it was a time when cash transactions between South Korea were frowned at. I quietly asked those people what business they had, and they told me they would fulfil errands requested from someone in South Korea. Taking a photograph of a specific location, for instance. I don’t know which Political Prison Camp these people were sent to.

I do not know how many Political Prison Camps there are, and where they are located. What I do know for sure is that they exist. When a person is sent to a Political Prison Camp, his family members are not notified of his whereabouts. While detained, someone made me a request as she was being sent to a Political Prison Camp. Everyone knew at that point that I was to be released and to be heading home in no time. So that’s why

she made a request for me to tell her family back home about her situation. I told her I will. But then, I had to write a pledge before leaving the Ministry. This is an oath to be written when one is released from Ministry or police detainment. The pledge says that informing my family or others about what I learned inside the facility would mean yet another detainment for me. They were prohibiting me from saying anything. That's where I got cold feet. So I ended up not being able to send word to her family. Her family does not know that a family member has been sent to a Political Prison Camp, or what became of her. The state does not let you know. In particular, if someone is detained by the Ministry, they never want you to know.

Once you are detained by the Ministry, you are detached from your family. No visits are allowed. Even if they kill you with some made-up crime charges, it is not known to those outside. When it's a police station that is detaining a person, inside secrets can be spilled out by bribing a guard for instance. There are informants placed inside and outside, and there are law enforcement officers who can connect from the outside too. But when it's the Ministry, they could kill someone in their detainment facility and nobody would know. That said, I did not see beatings or torture while I was detained. I'm sure it was happening to the men that were detained. I once heard a man scream on the first floor – perhaps from the beatings. But I have never seen anything myself.

I think the human rights situation in North Korea got worse with Kim Jong-un coming to power.

I think so, because the level of punishment went up.

People like myself did not get to enjoy the full range of human rights in the first place. The more they come up with different levels of punishments, our human rights will be even more violated. The sentences only get more complicated. Also, there are these construction projects happening even though the state treasury is empty. The funding for these projects come from the pockets of individuals who can barely secure one meal a day. The People's Unit Leader is the one to collect money for those occasions, and he will collect from those households who barely manage to eat once a day. The District Offices require the People's Unit Leaders to meet a quota for the money collection. Even then, a Unit Leader would require more from the people and keep some money for himself, because only under such an excuse would he be able to have something for himself. A People's Unit consists of thirty households. If the thirty households pay 1,000 North Korean won each, the Unit Leader does not give all of it to his superiors. He has to claim his share from these occasions, so he is more ruthless in extorting money from the households. Only then would he be left with some profit. No one thinks this is being done for the party anymore. Everyone is sick of it.

South Koreans get to protest when they are discontent, and that's a wonderful thing. North Koreans, on the other hand, have to live under constant surveillance of the People's Unit Leader and the informants. The surveillance network is all there. There is the exposed surveillance network, and there are covert operators who spy on people without knowing. Even within the

surveillance network, there is open surveillance and then there is covert surveillance undertaken by the Ministry of State Security and other agencies. They have spies among the people, and we don't know who they are. So I could say the wrong things, and it would mean trouble... One cannot trust anyone anywhere. If one wants to start a protest, she will have to share that plan with other people and start organising. But one cannot, as there is no mutual trust, and you never know who could be a spy. People don't dare think of such things. Spies are located in the workplace, in the People's Unit, and in all such places. That's why there cannot be open conversation even between husband and wife. A married couple who fight a lot may report on one another. So, it's best not to talk about the government - even to your spouse. Brothers and sisters have inseparable blood ties, but a married couple is not connected by blood.

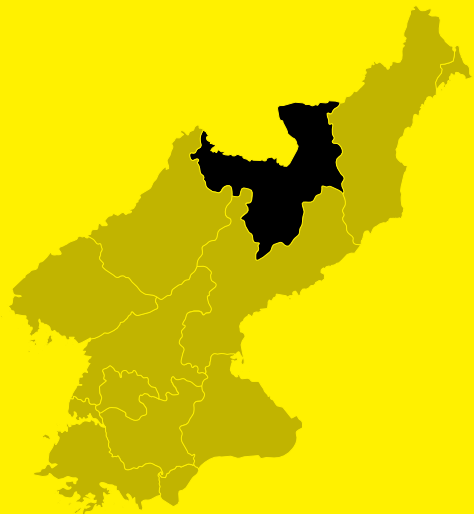
One could use a Chinese mobile phone near the Chinese border to make a phone call to South Korea. Now the signals are so jammed that this is no longer possible in most areas. Even places where phone calls can be made jam-free are now exposed - high mountains for instance. State Security officers disguised as farmers or woodmen are standing by with signal detectors hidden under their clothing. Some people do get caught off guard. An officer extorts lots of money when they catch someone red-handed. Right around the time I was leaving for South Korea, the price to pay was 10,000 Chinese yuan when you are caught trying to make a phone call to South Korea, and 5,000 yuan when the phone call was for China. That payment will guarantee safety. I'm sure this won't work anymore because of the strengthened inspections. 10,000 yuan is a tremendous amount of money in North Korea. An officer may keep an eye on a one-

time perpetrator, to extort more money whenever he can. Still, it's lucky enough if one does not get arrested for making those phone calls. Money will guarantee safety. Without money, one has no choice but to be detained by the authorities every single time. That's why one can't even afford a life of crime if one has no money in the first place. North Korea is much more capitalist than South Korea. It is a dog-eat-dog world. North Koreans say that they live in a prison without bars. That's why lots of people have been wanting to come to South Korea recently. Crossing the Chinese border is the most difficult step.

To be honest, people want to leave North Korea through whatever means - even if it means human trafficking.

They would rather escape through such a method. That's how hard it is to live there. It is because we think "anywhere is better than here, even if I were to be sold to another place."

Hello, my name is  
Jo Hyeon-mi.  
I was born in  
Ryanggang Province.  
I crossed the Yalu  
(Amrok) River  
in mid-2018, and  
arrived in South  
Korea in early 2019.



Hello, my name is Jo Hyeon-mi. I was born in Ryanggang Province. I crossed the Yalu (Amrok) River in mid-2018, and arrived in South Korea in early 2019.

I was a cash broker before leaving North Korea. I was a middleman delivering money sent from North Koreans who have settled South Korea to their family back in North Korea. I went to prison once for being a broker. After being released, I would still take up broker work from time to time. I can tell you all about it in full detail without holding anything back.

I wasn't in the cash broker business for a long time. I was only doing it for about six months before I got caught. After that, I spent about a year in prison. I was released in the mid-2010s, and didn't engage in any work for the next year because I needed time to recover. After that, I just took small requests from people that are close acquaintances. Before being sent to prison, I would bring a person from another region to the border area myself. What I mean by this is that I bring a person close to the border to arrange a phone call with someone in South Korea – who gave me nothing but an address in the faraway region of Nampo, for instance. If the person in South Korea wants to send money, then I would hand over the money. I would deduct a certain portion of the money received as I handed over the cash. Some people are afraid to carry all the Chinese banknotes all the way home. Then, I would pick up the cash and hop on a train to deliver it to somewhere closer to their house. I knew all the police officers, you see. So this was the business I had, and I got caught while doing it. Anyhow, I did both the cash transfer business and the phone call arrangement business. This, which is referred to as “arranging family reunions” is a crime in North Korea.

Residents of the border region, such as myself, have a hard time getting a travel permit (*yeohaengjeungmyeongseo*) issued.

So I would ask the client requesting a phone call to get a permit allowing them to travel to somewhere in North Hamgyong Province instead, so that I can travel to the place and bring her over to my border region in Ryanggang Province by train. From there on, I knew all the train conductors and the police. When asked about my companion, I would tell them that's my cousin and we are travelling to buy something together. Of course, there was a bribe to be paid, with money, every single time. Bribes would need to be paid going both ways. I would give 50,000 North Korean won for bribes. It's 50,000 per person – paid separately coming and going. I didn't engage in this business so often. I did it for three people. I managed, with a level of ease, for all three. Then I got caught.

There were lots of people asking for cash transfers. A guy that I worked with had his wife and kids in South Korea already. His wife in South Korea would connect other North Koreans who have settled in South Korea to help with her husband's business. The wife would take requests from those who wanted to find their family in North Korea to help them escape, or wanted to wire cash to them. She would hand these requests over to her husband who would take a certain percentage of the cash as commission fee. The families back in North Korea would be receiving about 60% of the original sum. That is to say, if someone were to send a million South Korea won, 400 thousand would fall in the hands of the brokers standing in the middle. Brokers most

often bribe people in the Ministry of State Security to get their business going. But I jumped into the business without planning ahead, so I never gave bribes to those people at the Ministry – even as I was good friends with them. I had an accomplice who started the business in the mid-1990s during the Arduous March and continued for about 20 years. I believe there were no laws for punishing cash brokers until that time. Because of the absence of laws, I believe the brokers were simply expelled from college or humiliated in front of a crowd, and that was it. Anyways, he was a veteran in the business, so I started working alongside him too. There are many people who engage in that kind of business, although I can't specify how many.

While the borders have closed since Covid-19, the cash continues to flow.

Last year (2020), even amidst the Covid-19 restrictions, we could still make contact with those inside the country – myself and all the others who have escaped from North Korea.

My family tells me that North Korea has become a difficult place to live. So I sent them some money, telling them to get food. South Koreans tend to say that cash transfers have become impossible since the border lockdowns due to Covid-19. That is not true at all. While the lockdowns are in place, we still get to send everything including video footage. The situation is okay. I hear

this a lot in South Korea, but the brokers who are willing to take the job are still in business – although they might not be able to do so publicly as they did in the past. Of course, the commission rates have gone up from what used to be 20~40% to what is now 40~50%. Wouldn't you agree that this is hard-earned money? It's risking your skin in the business. With the commission rates going up, I have no choice but to tell my family to stay strong and start sending them less. Even then, I thought nobody was actually making their way out of North Korea, but I met someone who came directly from North Korea to South Korea just last year (2020). I was surprised myself. I asked how she could make her way out of North Korea under such circumstances, and was told that there are still a few people who manage to do so. She also joined a group of people making the escape. I asked if she knows if there are still more people escaping, and she told me there are. She didn't have family in South Korea, but she employed the help of a broker – no questions asked. It was a risky attempt.

I was caught by the Ministry of State Security for being a cash broker. I was held in the Ministry's detention centre for several weeks for interrogation. The interrogation at the Ministry is to tell if the crime is related to the South Korean intelligence agency or just regular crime. I was found to be a regular criminal and was handed to the Ministry of Social Security<sup>❶</sup>. While I was handed to the police station, my business partner was sent straight to a Political Prison Camp for having many years of business experience. I don't know which Prison Camp it was. North Koreans also say "Political Prison Camp" (*jongchibomsuyongso*) to refer to the *kwanliso* by the way. I don't know when exactly the word first came into use. Anyhow, we do call these *kwanliso* as Political Prison Camps these days – the

❶ The ordinary police agency.

two names are interchangeable. Originally, they were referred to as *kwanliso*.

I was sentenced to 1 year in a Labour Training Camp. I was given the sentence, went through trial at the municipal Ministry of Social Security, and wrote an appeal to the court. The appeal is processed by the provincial court. They will read the appeal, and if there's something that's made unfair to me, they will decide what can be done about it. There was a case where an appeal went as far up as the Central Court, and the judge there said Training Camp sentences are not appropriate for people attempting to flee to South Korea. Ever since then, a reform through labour sentence became the norm. So, I went through another trial process, and got a sentence of a year of reform through labour. It was supposed to be a one-year sentence at a Training Camp, but was now rendered to a one-year sentence at a Reform through Labour Camp. A Training Camp sentence, also referred to as a reform through "short-term" labour sentence, wouldn't make me lose my Party membership card nor my social ID. It is simply hard labour that is meant to cleanse me of my sins. A reform through labour sentence is different. They will retract my party membership, my ID, my everything. I am deprived of all rights as a citizen for the period of the sentence. I was handed over to the pre-trial department in the Ministry of Social Security. At that point, it had been a year since I was arrested and detained. I had already been sentenced to one year of reform through labour a month before, and if I were to be sent to a Reform through Labour Camp, I would have to go through another 20 days of bootcamp. With this in mind, the court found no need to send me to a Reform through Labour camp any longer, so I didn't go after all. Instead, I spent my entire sentence detained in the municipal

Ministry of Social Security. In other words, while I was sentenced to one-year of reform through labour I already filled my one year in detainment by that point, so I was released without actually going to a Reform through Labour Camp.

The Ministry of State Security arrests people when they have clear evidence. They do not arrest people whimsically. Only when there is a clear set of evidence and witnesses would the Ministry go ahead and arrest someone. When I was arrested and detained by the authorities, my business partner who was caught before me wrote about me in his confession. He and I had only worked on three cases together during a span of 6 months. He wrote a truthful account of what had happened, so when I was sent to detainment the assigned State Security Officer showed me the confession that my former partner had written. I read it through and saw that it was a truthful account. He listed down how the two of us worked together in those 6 months, going so far as to record the hours. I admitted to the confession 100%. That's how I was not beaten once. Why? It is because I had admitted everything that was already confessed by another person before me. The Ministry is in a position where they arrest people knowing what crimes they've committed, but still there are people who argue they did not do anything wrong or try to lie about what had happened. Then the Ministry will beat them hard. I had numerous individuals alongside me, who had been beaten during interrogation. Those people are pretending they don't know what the interrogators are talking about – even when the Ministry holds all the evidence. They cannot do otherwise, because it's the only way they have a chance at living. But that would get you a great many beatings from the State Security officers.

The State Security officers will beat you with the leather belt they are wearing in the interrogation chamber at the Ministry. They might swing it like a whip, or wrap the belt around their fist for punching.

They wrap the leather belt around their fist, and they make sure it is the metal clasp that comes up front instead of the leather part – so they can punch you with the metal. Female prisoners are often beaten in this way. Male prisoners would be beaten mercilessly with bare fists. Also, male inmates may be made to push his hand out of the prison bars (or hold the bars with his hands) and then receive a hard slap on the wrist with an iron rod. If an inmate lets go of the bars during the beatings, the officer will come in behind the bars to beat the living soul out of him. You are not to express pain during the beatings. You have to play dead while it goes on. The beatings will leave bruises and injuries. They don't watch where they are hurting you when they are doing this.

They will beat you like an animal. They will beat the living soul out of you, telling you that a criminal must pay for their crimes.

Once in the Ministry, men and women are detained separately. A prison cell is less than 2 *pyeong*<sup>2</sup> wide. A single cell would house 11 to 12 people. It had a toilet too. Inside a cell, we

<sup>2</sup> A *pyeong* is approximately 3.3 m<sup>2</sup>.

would sit in rows of three, and create three or four sparse rows. The person in the front row sits maybe 50 cm away from the bars. The toilet is partitioned by a low wall, so as to keep it out of sight. But others could see you using the toilet if they stood up. There is no heating or cooling inside a detainment facility. The air gets heated only by human temperature, and there is no stove heating or electric heating. One usually sits still in the given row since there are many others in the same cell. There is a place mat given to each inmate, and we sit on the mats. The floor is concrete.

To live a life of crime is  
to live worse than dogs and pigs.

Once you are in the facility, that's all you can say.  
You wonder why you are being treated  
worse than animals.  
Treated worse than animals – that's how you feel there.

A detainment facility has a medical officer. But the medical officer doesn't look at your symptoms even if you are sick. They have no medicine at the Ministry of State Security. The Ministry of Social Security only hands over the medicine brought in by one's family members. I was told that the Ministry of State Security will do the same in their detainment facilities – because you don't want anyone to die. At the Ministry of State Security detainment facility, inmates are monitored by the prison guards instead of the State Security officers. Prison Guards also work

under the Ministry. They are lower-ranking than a State Security officer. A Prison Guard is an enlisted member. Prison Guards are enlisted ranks in both the Social Security Ministry and the State Security Ministry. But now that I think of it, the Prison Guards at the State Security Ministry did have a star on his insignia (meaning he is a lieutenant). The Prison Guards wear uniform in the Ministry of State Security.

Cursing is prevalent, since they treat us as subhuman like dogs and pigs. I admitted to all my crimes, and maybe it had to do with the fact that the officer assigned my interrogation was younger than others – so I don't recall hearing words like “you bitch.” But I saw officers saying such things to other detainees. They shower them with curses. The other inmates that were detained with me would get severe beatings and curses. According to someone who had been detained once before, there used to be beatings. But I never experienced any of it myself while I was there. As long as I was telling them the truth, I didn't feel I was being violated of my human rights inside the detainment facility of the Ministry of State Security. I confessed all of the crimes that I was aware of, and nothing happened to me. I wasn't cursed at or beaten. But I saw detainees who would pretend they didn't see the evidence presented right in front of their eyes, and they would get beaten badly. I asked them why they were taking so many beatings, and one told me that she didn't know who told them, but the interrogators already knew everything. But if she were to admit to it, her crime would have been larger. So she told me she had no choice but to play it stubbornly, and her persistence had led to the beatings.

There were twelve women in the detainment facility of the municipal Ministry of State Security. There was a slightly greater



number of men. There were a total of three cells. One was used as a female cell, while the other two were male cells when I was there. But then, the Ministry felt that they didn't have enough detainment space, so they built another detainment facility underneath the existing facility. In 2014, the detainment facility was at the top. But according to someone who was detained in 2016, the detainment facility was located on a lower floor. Then there are basement floors too. I was told that the new facility was very cold. That person had been detained by the Ministry three times. It had moved to a new building and had gotten bigger. So it means more people are getting arrested by the Ministry of State Security. There are lots of people working as brokers in my hometown. The Ministry keeps arresting them – hence the large number of inmates. That's how the word came out that there will be a new detainment facility for the Ministry to be built. I did not get to see the inside of the new facility.

Meals served at the Ministry are baked corn served on a dish the size of my palm. It's just grains of corn deep baked. It's unhusked dried corn that's been soaked in water. Beans are baked separately and served together in the same dish. No cobs of the corn – just the grains. They will give salted cabbage – washed and served raw. Everyone ate corn in an aluminium rice bowl, and cabbage in another bowl. The carbs only fill about half the bowl, and they are not sparing when it comes to serving the cabbages either. There is a separate auntie who cooks for us. The Prison Guards' meals are also cooked by these people. When I was in the municipal detention centre of the Ministry of Social Security, there were about 120 people, men and women. The Prison Guards would carry the meal in a big bucket from the cookhouse. We would also have *siraegi* soup served in a bucket for every prison

cell. Then we would share it among inmates. But then, there were inmates who would cook their own *melas* when it had been decided that they were to be sent to another prison such as a Reform through Labour Camp. The Ministry of Social Security gave us meals mixed with powdered corn flour.

There are no visits allowed in the Ministry of State Security. The Municipal Social Security Ministry, on the other hand, does allow for visits. Once a week, the family members will come visit. But they don't get to meet the inmate in person. They just give the Prison Guards whatever they want to hand over to the inmate with names attached. The Prison Guard will distribute the goods on the weekends. This is called "gift visits." But visits are not allowed in the Ministry of State Security. Making phone calls to those outside the detainment facility is not allowed in both Ministries. You are not allowed to see your family members' faces either. You can see them at the pre-trials.

Life at the detainment facility under the Municipal Ministry of Social Security is pretty much like life at the detainment facility under the Ministry of State Security. At least at the Ministry of Social Security, we could get "food at visits" every week. This is the food that family members send us. Every Sunday is "food at visit" day. There is this thing called "*sokdojeongaru*" which is powdered corn flour that can be mixed with water for food. The powdered corn would have sugar and other condiments in it, and the family members send those to detainees. But one cannot receive more than three kilograms at a time. So you can say we receive three kilograms worth of these each week. When hungry, you mix the baked corn they give at the detainment facility together with the food sent from the family and eat it. There were lots of kids repatriated from China starting from around mid-

2015. These kids didn't have family. The law in North Korea says that detainees dying in a Ministry of Social Security facility is the Ministry's fault. So the other detainees were told to share their food at visits with the orphaned kids. Each cell has a cell leader. It was the responsibility of the cell leader to collect all food inside the cell and distribute a fistful to each person for each of the three meals daily.

There are beatings and other unjust treatments inside the Ministry of Social Security too. There are rules inside a Ministry of Social Security facility. Wake up at 6 AM and fold up the sleeping blankets. Even the blankets are not provisioned by the Ministry but sent in by family. We would sit on them from 6 AM in a crossed-legged position – head crouched at 90-degree angle. We are made to sit still like that until 10 PM at night. Both fists must be placed above our knees. Think about sitting still all day like that. It's not easy. It's not for just one day but every day. At the Municipal Ministry of State Security, the Prison Guard takes shifts every two hours. They walk up and down from cell no. 1 to cell no. 7. We used to switch leg positions when we sensed the Prison Guards had passed before us. Knowing this behaviour, the Prison Guard used to require us to have our right leg up, at all times – so that if he sees anyone who has the left leg up, he will call the person out and beat them.

The Prison Guards are ruthless. Male inmates have their hair shaved, but the women have hair – so what the guards would do is to grab a woman behind bars by her hair and bash her head against the iron bars. They will grab men by their ears and curse at them for shifting the leg position. The Prison Guard will call me out for stretching my neck even a little bit, or even a light stir – only to use beatings. Detainees are made to wear slippers

when leaving the prison cell for pre-trials. Each Prison Guard has a different way of applying the beatings, some will slap their slippers against my face. Another guard may tell the detainee to push their hand out of the iron bars and use a whip to slap their wrist. This leaves striped bruises on one's skin. It's more than just the bruises, the skin would swell up where the beatings were done. They apply ruthless beatings to the point where blood vessels will surface on the skin where the beatings were done. Also, sitting still all day long is tiresome work. Remember that this starts at 6 AM and continues until 10 PM. We are allowed to sit in a circle only during the three mealtimes. Other than the mealtimes, we are made to sit in the aforementioned position non-stop. That's what drives a man crazy. It's easy to doze off in summer after lunchtime. They will beat you again for nodding off.

This was the Municipal Ministry of Social Security. The Provincial Police Division is again different. It is a higher-level institution. The Provincial Police Division houses felons who have committed bigger crimes. But there was no hard labour while detained at the Municipal Ministry of Social Security. Labour is only once you are in prison to serve your sentence. Once you have gone through the trial and received your sentence, you will be made to work in reform through labour. They also give you a daily quota. Failure to meet the quota will deprive you of food and sleep and will result in beatings. They treat people as less than human there as well.

The law is written in a fair manner.

But the enforcers of the same law will take bribes to apply the law in a way they see fit.

The judge, lawyer, prosecutor, pre-trial panellists of the Ministry of State Security and the Ministry of Social Security are all law enforcement officers in charge of dealing with crime. Pre-trial takes two months. One panellist is in charge of multiple cases, so they will call you once every few days. That's when you get to call your family for food visits. I get to eat with my family. At the pre-trials, I can see my family's faces. If the family pays some money to the panellist, he might write a nicer account for you. That's how you get a lighter sentence. It's all about what the panellist writes with his pen and paper. The law is fair, but the enforcers of the law are corrupt. The pre-trial panellists will make a mountain out of a molehill if there's nothing in it for him to benefit from, and vice versa. It's the same way with the judge, the prosecutor, and the lawyers. They will apply a lighter sentence if there's money to be received. There was a woman who committed exactly the same crime as I did. She got out with a six-month sentence at a Labour Training Camp. Her family gave a few thousand yuan to the pre-trial panellist, and she got a lighter sentence as a result of that. She got the lighter sentence at pre-trials, and she also managed to buy out the prosecutor, the lawyer, and the judge after that. I was told that they paid 500 yuan each. That's how my sentence was raised from a Labour Training Camp sentence to a reform through labour for one year, while she only got six-months in a Labour Training Camp.

It is not easy to get legal assistance from a lawyer unless

you bribe him. The lawyer is assigned by the state, and the lawyer asks to see you before the trial. He will tell you that you are to be put on trial on which date, and to appeal to him if you believe you are unjustly accused. He also asks you whether you have a lawyer of choice, since you do get to choose a different lawyer for your case. He will ask you, "I am your assigned lawyer, do you have someone else that you would like to defend you at court?" But this was my first time, as I've never violated any laws before. So I didn't know any lawyers. So I told him that I don't know anyone, and asked him to defend me instead. Thereafter he started going over my case, asking me whether I was unjustly accused of anything.

I haven't seen a public execution since 2002 where the Defence Security Command shot eleven people to death. That was a big event. I saw it myself. They shot them in the head, and you could see their skulls exploding. After that, there were still more people who were caught by the inspection of the Ministry of State Security and the Defence Security Command, but they say they stopped having public executions. I asked them why not, and they told me that South Korean media broadcasts would talk about "North Koreans murdering each other." I haven't seen a public execution since then.

Then, in 2015 I overheard a conversation by the inmates while detained at the Municipal Social Security Ministry detention centre. They also told me that public executions were gone.

I asked them out of curiosity what they were doing to execute those who received a death sentence. There was an inmate I knew who was arrested for human trafficking in 2014 and sentenced to death in 2015. She was sent over to the Provincial-level Ministry of State Security just three days after the trial sentence. Once sentenced to death, she became half-dead herself. When she left the cell on her way to the court, she was walking fine. But she returned carried on the back of someone as she had fainted. It wasn't the beatings. It was the mental shock from the death sentence – the knowledge that she would die. She had collapsed in the cell like that, not able to sit up. The Prison Guards told us to lay her down, perhaps because of her sentence. I was told that such inmates are sent to the Provincial-level Police Division to be detained for three months – after which they are silently called out. That's when a policeman uses an iron club to take her down. I was so shocked to hear this.

In other words, there are no more public executions. There are public trials and public humiliations, but no more public executions. Now, executions take place by using iron clubs. Inmates who have been detained for over a year have a good grasp of what crime qualifies for what punishments. When a new person comes in, they ask what her crime was. Then they will assess the sentence themselves – telling them how many years of what sentence. When they call a detainee for an execution, they pretend it's just a normal interrogation. A cell has the bars to the front and a door to the back. That's where they have a big padlock on. You would hear the padlock clasp open, and you are called out by your number. When an inmate has been summoned but you don't hear her coming back, the other inmates know that there was an execution last night in one of the cells. Calling out an

inmate at night is typically for executions.

Ever since 2020, North Korea must have become an increasingly difficult place to live since moving about inside and outside the country has become difficult. But even if this situation were to last, I don't think it would lead to starvations or anything like that. There are still ways to get by. The reason I say this is because people have already gone through difficult times during the Arduous March once. The remaining population has learned how to survive.

Around the time of the currency reform in 2009, hundreds of tons of Chinese rice would come over through the “friendship bridge” in Hyesan, Ryanggang Province. The rice was distributed all across the country. At one point after the currency reform, we started seeing less of Chinese rice and more of North Korean rice in distribution. I didn't eat any Chinese rice until I left North Korea. North Korean rice is grown organically. It is sticky and has a good flavour. Chinese rice is not. It's not as sticky perhaps because it was grown with chemicals. Almost everyone in my neighbourhood ate North Korean rice. No one ate Chinese rice. Corn and beans were not even part of staple food. Those were eaten by the poorest people in the countryside. By the time I left the country in 2018, everybody ate only North Korean rice – not Chinese rice. Chinese rice was for restaurants. There's so much rice that it would bloat and rot, ordinary people were all eating North Korean rice. That means the country is producing rice to meet the demand.

Indica rice was not grown in North Korea previously.  
But recently they do.

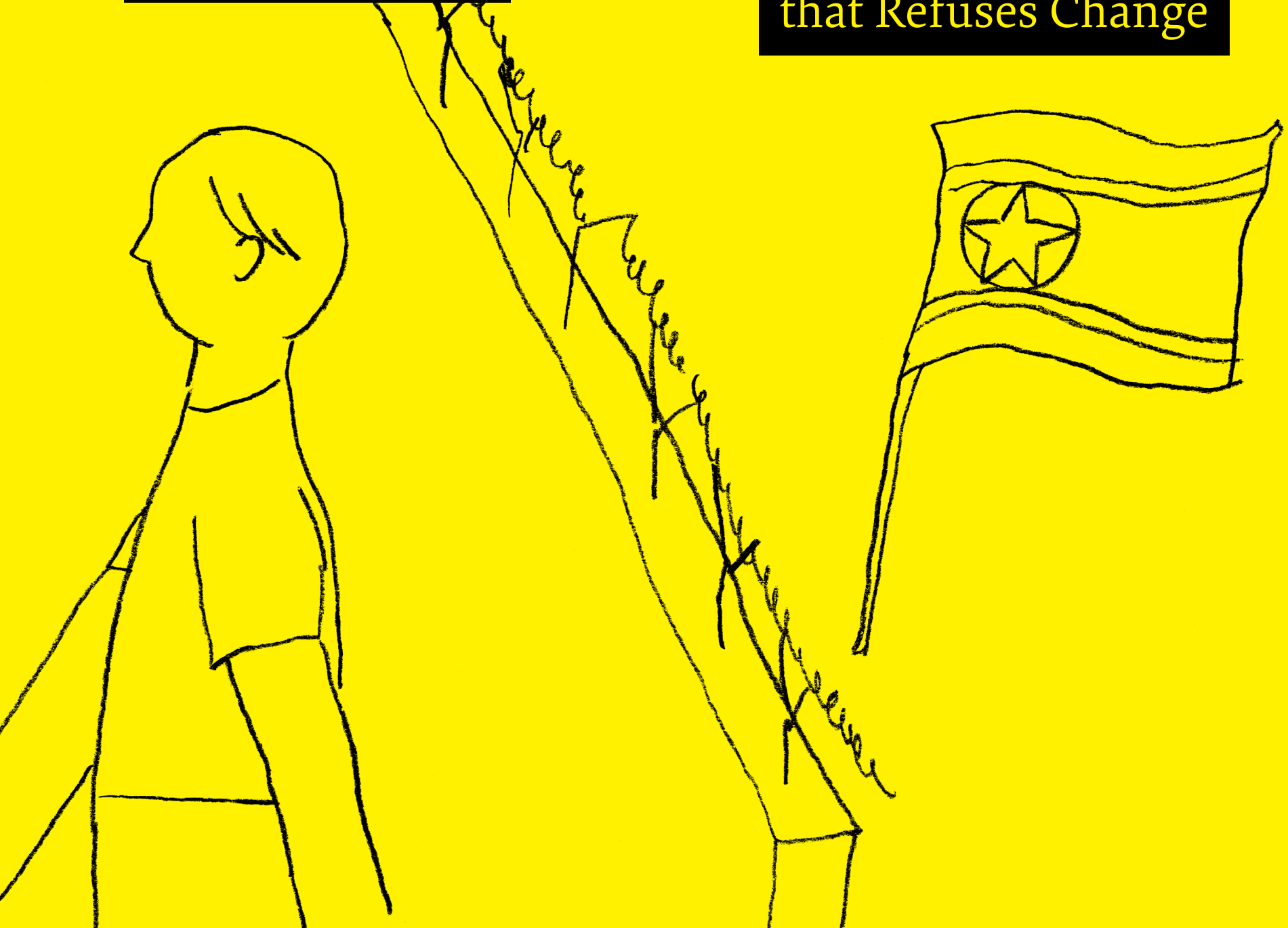
Why? Because there are larger crop yields. Indica rice produces larger crop yields. Instead of the lack of stickiness, the price is slightly cheaper. So poor people will eat Indica rice for food. Ryanggang Province also has a lot of potatoes. We would eat a combination of potatoes and Indica rice. Potatoes are rationed in the autumn. A few hundred kilograms are given out to those who have a job. Even if one asks not to be rationed with potatoes in the coming autumn, the workplace will bring truckloads of potatoes to ration them. Potatoes are cheap. There are small potatoes and large potatoes all rationed out to stockpile 200~300 kg at home. Some households with many mouths to feed have up to 700 kg of potatoes. Potatoes can come in a variety of different meals. It's to the point we ask impoverished neighbours to take the potatoes from our workplace instead of us. There are many households with a stockpile of potatoes in autumn.

There are also talks about how we should provide food aid to North Korea, and I think it's a good idea. Even if all the rice is taken by the cadres, they will sell the leftover rice, won't they? That way, ordinary people can buy rice at a cheaper price. Even if the rice is meant to be bought for a price, people can at least afford it at a lower price. I am always grateful to hear about plans to give aid to North Korea, including rice. I think it's a good idea. I have my child and my siblings back in North Korea, you see. The cadres won't be able to take 3~4 kg of rice from a kilogram of rice. There is a limit to what they can do. The aid will go to the cadres as rationed, and leftover food will be out for sale. When aid rice is released in the marketplace, rice prices go down significantly. This is good news for rice buyers. I am very grateful for the suggestion, and I agree with the plan. My child and siblings have it less hard in North Korea because I send them money from

South Korea. But there are still many people who are struggling in North Korea. I feel happy to think that those people will get to buy a kilogram of rice at a cheaper price. So, I agree with the food aid plan in earnest.

Silent Dynamics

in a Society  
that Refuses Change



11	Jo Suk-hyeon	Nursing Education and Medicine	123
12	Jeong Eun-suk	Housing in North Korea	132
13	Jeong Yong-ho	New Life Ahead	139
14	Kim Jong-ho	Life at Kangwon Province	148
15	Jang Chol-hun	Mobile Phones in North Korea	156
16	Lee Mi-sun	Joint Ventures and the Local Economy	167
17	Go Song-eun	Wiring Money to North Korea	173
18	Jo Jin-hwan	Migrant Workers in China	181
19	Park Hyon-ju	Marriage, Divorce, and Parenting	192
20	Lim Eun-hwa	Some Thoughts on How to Approach North Korea	202
21	Kim Jin-seon	Commissioned Manufacture	210

Hello, my name is Jo Suk-hyeon. I left my hometown in Ryanggang Province in early 2019, and reached South Korea after a few months through China and Thailand.



Hello, my name is Jo Suk-hyeon. I left my hometown in Ryanggang Province in early 2019, and reached South Korea after a few months through China and Thailand.

I spent some time attending a county nursing academy after graduating high school. Then I came to South Korea. You need to volunteer to join a nursing school. Nursing schools are not easy to get into. Everyone wants to go. But grades don't matter that much. By the time we graduate school, the Ministry of Labour takes our roster to assign us to different places. If you bribe the Ministry, you can get accepted to a nursing academy. We used to call it simply a "nursing school" around the time I got in. You had to pay a bribe of about 300 Chinese yuan at that time. That was normal. You need to bribe one way or another to get in.

Each year had a different student headcount. Mine tended to have more people. It's one batch of students each year. The school used to be a two-year program, but it became a one-year program recently. That means a year of education will make you a nurse. School starts in May and ends in April. Graduation exams used to be a thing, but I've heard that such exams are no longer being taken. I believe they've replaced it with an audition. Students with good grades are picked for an audition of some sort. In reality, everyone gets to be a nurse upon graduation. I believe that you can get any job at a county hospital once the program is over because there's always room for more nurses. Township-level clinics are small and need only one or two nurses. If they have nurses there, you can't find a place until one of them gets married or quits working. You have to wait your turn. While waiting, you will occupy yourself with some other work such as helping out your family's farming or running a business by yourself. Instead of getting the government to assign you somewhere, one has to

"do her part." That is to say, you have to give bribes to get a job. Only after pulling some strings or giving money can you get the assignment you want.

There are two big books you learn from in the nursing academy. One was titled "Overview of Nursing Science" and I can't remember what the other one was called. The first book taught us about bone structures and theoretical stuff. The second book was about practical applications such as how to use a syringe. We also learned different subjects such as paediatrics, gynaecology, surgery, and internal medicine. We learned Latin too. Also, we learned Revolutionary History. There were subjects called, "History of the Revolutionary Activities of the Great Leader Kim Il-sung", "History of the Revolutionary Activities of the Great Leader Kim Jong-il – Kim Jong-un" and such. There was a textbook on Kim Jong-suk too back in middle school. I don't know what to say when it comes to the quality of education... I think there were three 90-minute classes in the morning and one in the afternoon. I don't remember very well. School starts at 8 AM. After taking 3 classes, you go home at 1 PM to eat lunch. You come back by 3 PM to take afternoon classes. Classes would be held Monday through Saturday.

School wasn't only about taking classes.  
The school would also assign chores to the students.

We would often go out to work on train tracks and road repairs. But chores aren't unique to nursing school. It's a continuation of the different schools I attended when I was



younger. In my nursing school, we did some construction work for an underground hospital by the mountains. We would spend a lot of time carrying mortar. We didn't dig straight down from the mountain to build a hospital. Rather, we carved out a part of the slope to build a hospital there and cover it with dirt so that the hospital won't be visible from the outside. It seemed like a hospital for wartime. We would be sent two to three times a week when construction was busy. You don't get paid for the work at all. In fact, you will have to pay a fine for skipping work. The teacher from the nursing school would come with us to monitor our work. Class usually ended at around 4 or 5 PM, but as I remember, we always had work to do after class such as pulling out weeds at the school ground. There were days where we would have no classes but were sent out to work. Those days, we had to take our lunch boxes wherever we were assigned to work.

There was no safety equipment when working, although they never made us do the digging.

We were mostly tasked with carrying the mortar. We would each take a handbarrow from home and carry mortar with it. It was July when we worked on that hospital construction. The weather was so hot that the kids would get heat fatigue. The students had to bring their own equipment. It wasn't just the students. Even the doctors of the hospital came out to work together. We would carry the ingredients for mortar and the doctors would use a shovel to mix them up. Just because they

were doctors doesn't mean that they only look after the patients. They would be tasked with the same work. Also, there is a class called "agricultural support" in North Korea. In rice planting season, we would go out to the paddies and plant the rice buds. We would spend about half a month working at a farming village, eating off our own rations and sleeping in the village.

Once you become a nurse, you can continue to work after marriage. It's your choice. But I don't think many chose to continue their nursing career after marriage. In North Korea, you are required to be in a job once you finish school. Being a nurse is better than some of the other professions, so you have it easy until marriage. Once married, a woman can choose to support her household and participate in the Women's Union.<sup>❶</sup> That is to say, you get to live as a housewife and only partake in the Women's Union activities. Most of my colleagues chose to stop being a nurse after getting married. By the way, nurses in North Korea are all women. I've never seen a male nurse. I was surprised to hear about male nurses after coming to South Korea. As for doctors, there are more male doctors, but we also do have a lot of women doctors too.

The country hospital was a sizable institution with 50~60 personnel including the nurses. Even so, we didn't have a stable power supply. It was better than some of the other buildings, though. When there was a power outage, we had to ask the substation for power supply. Hospitals would be supported right away upon making the call. We had to call the substation every time the power went out.

There was one county hospital and many smaller clinics where I lived. In principle, you were supposed to visit the clinic to get treatment firsthand, and only patients that could not be

❶ Socialist Women's Union of Korea. One of the four major workers' organisations of North Korea, as well as one of its social organisations. It follows the guidelines of the Workers' Party of Korea. Its participation is centred around women.

treated at a clinic will be issued a “request form” to visit a county hospital. But this is all just formalities. The reality is that people who live near the hospital will go to the hospital, and people who live near a clinic would go to a clinic. These days, however, patients won’t get decent treatment even if they visit a hospital. The hospitals don’t have medication, which means the patients have to buy the medicine themselves. And people don’t visit the hospital unless they are very sick. They can buy medicine in town, so they will self-diagnose and buy medicine by themselves. North Koreans are accustomed to buying their own medicine, so they know what their symptoms are for most ordinary illnesses. You could say they are street-smart in the field of medicine, I suppose. South Koreans tend to listen to what the doctor says and do as they are told. On the contrary, most North Koreans will have some medical knowledge, although this is more of a folk tradition rather than scientific knowledge.

Most of the medications that people buy come from China. There’s not only Chinese medicine, but also medicine from Germany, Russia, and Japan. Medicine made in Japan or Germany tends to be expensive. These are usually imported via customs. Even so, it is the ordinary people that take care of the expenditure and base work required to bring the medicine into the country. The state does not have that kind of money, and it is the merchants and wholesalers that import medicine from China into North Korea. They hand it over to retailers to distribute the medicine throughout the country. This cannot be said to be smuggling per se. You could in fact say that these medicines are coming through an official channel. My sense is that there is more of it coming through official channels than through smuggling when it comes to medicine. In North Korea,

some types of smuggling by individuals are approved by the state while others are off-limits. If you ban all smuggling, especially medicine, it will get in the way of treating patients. So that’s why the state officially permits some medication to be imported in this way.

Medicine is purchased  
at a private household rather than at the marketplace.

You could buy medicine at a marketplace, except there are not many stalls that sell medicine. There are households that sell medicine as a trade. That’s where you go to buy, at a person’s home. There was a pharmacy in my hometown, but even that was not state-owned.<sup>2</sup> It was a privately owned business. I don’t think people had a preference between a pharmacy and a private household. They would go to whichever was closer. The price of medicines did not differ much. They were priced roughly the same. I don’t think there was a gap in the quality either. It was rare to see people dying from too much medicine, or from taking it too often. I think it was because the quality of the medicine was okay whether people got it from a pharmacy or from someone’s home.

You don’t get paid for working as a nurse. There is a monthly stipend of two thousand North Korean won, but that doesn’t get you anything. That’s probably worth only a few hundred South Korean won. You could get a pack of playing cards with two thousand won in North Korea. People use a mix of Chinese and North Korean currency. Because of this mixed usage, people are

<sup>2</sup> Pharmacies used to be state-owned. Privately-owned pharmacies, with the approval of the government, first appeared in the 2010s.

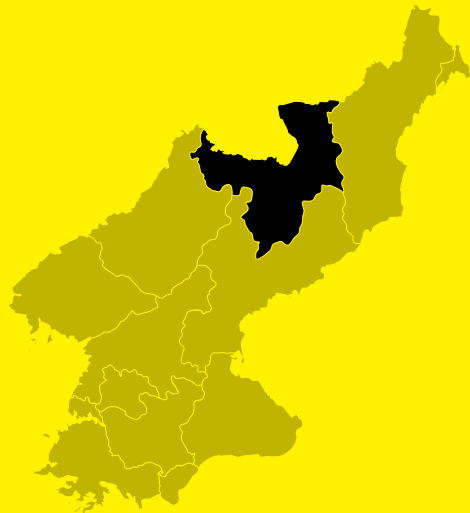
aware of what the exchange rates are. Exchange rates undergo constant change, but people are accustomed to such things so they calculate money based on the exchange rates of the moment. Chinese currency may have been used slightly more in my hometown now that I think of it... I can't say one type of currency was more prevalent than the other. Chinese banknotes have higher monetary value, so we use Chinese money for big expenditures. Small purchases would be made with North Korean currency. You'd have to bring a thick bundle of banknotes if you wanted to buy something expensive with North Korean currency, but one banknote will do if you're using Chinese currency.

The biggest difference I saw once coming to South Korea was that there was religious freedom and that you can get paid for work.

Then there's one other thing that I found strange - that politicians would refer to the president by name and speak badly of him. At first, I felt that it was too much. It seemed so unorderly and lawless to see people speaking carelessly about the head of state, and how the different political parties fight one another. But now I think that North Korea had no progress because the country lacked all of this. There is no word for "competition" in North Korea, which is why we cannot make progress. Here, everything is competitive, so there is a lot of progress. I think it's good to have competitions. I believe competition brings progress to people. These are some of the things I felt for the first time,

only after coming to South Korea. I am about to start college, and I'm nervous about whether I can keep up since I must be way behind all South Korean students.

Hello, my name is  
Jeong Eun-suk.  
I lived in Ryanggang  
Province until  
I left North Korea in  
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I reached South  
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Hello, my name is Jeong Eun-suk. I lived in Ryanggang Province until I left North Korea in late 2018. I reached South Korea in 2019.

Would you like me to tell you about housing in North Korea? North Koreans have a word for regular houses, called “ground houses” (*ddangjip*). These houses usually consist of just four walls and a roof. The main entrance is through the kitchen. The kitchen and the living room are only separated by a window. It’s a single-room structure where the kitchen and the living space are divided by a window. Some houses are large, and some are small. Some houses have an additional bedroom. If it’s a four-member family, you would all live and sleep in the same room. One room usually has enough space for four people to sleep. You don’t get to have your own room like in South Korea. The children will live in the same room as the parents until they get married. This is what an ordinary family unit looks like in North Korea.

North Korean kitchens look different from South Korean ones. There is a traditional *gama* oven with a furnace underneath where you light the fire. There are about three furnaces – with a pantry next to them. You place a plank to cover the furnace so that one can walk over it like floor space when the furnace is not lit. Wood is used to light up the fire. A chimney connected to the fireplace would allow smoke to flow outside. The kitchen area and the living area are divided by a window, a glass-pane door, or a sliding door. But it counts as a connected space. The window is used to serve food over to the living area and to retrieve the dishes.

Firewood is used in  
ground houses and flats too.

People living in flats have to carry wood all the way up the stairs.

Some flats use gas or electricity. I was told so recently.

In summer, at least, gas stoves are used because the weather is too hot. But in winter, firewood is used in the kitchen to warm the house and to cook a meal, because electric heating is not available. The point of lighting the fire is to keep the temperature warm indoors. I was told that flats recently have had hot water circulating under the floor cover to keep the house warm. But this kind of technology is for newly-built flats. Houses built some time ago will use furnace heating to warm the floor.

I used to hang out with my friends at home, often when my parents were not there. In North Korea, we don't really have a place for young people to go dating. A couple may hold hands for a moment, at an undisturbed quiet location, far from the crowd. It's very awkward for a couple to be seen holding hands outdoors. There is a lack of freedom for people to date. You could be reprimanded by others if you are seen holding hands on the streetside. It's not the state that regulates that kind of behaviour, but if students were seen holding hands like that, the Youth League would reprimand and punish them with the Youth Instructor. It's okay for college students to be dating, but public displays of affection will get others to stare at you. Dating is not part of the normal scenery in North Korea yet.

Both ground houses and flat rooms are traded between individuals using cash. There are those who own many houses; one where they live, and other houses where they let others live in for rent. The rent is a monthly fee. For regular houses, the rent is between 100 and 150 Chinese Yuan. People think housing is free in North Korea because it's a communist country. But that is not true. Houses are usually bought and sold by private individuals. If a newlywed couple needs to find a place to live, away from the parents, they will buy a place from an individual. In order to buy a house, you need to first see if there's anyone who has houses for sale. Those who wish to move into a bigger or smaller house can trade houses with someone who wants yours, and pay an additional surcharge. Although house prices differ by location, 9,000 to 12,000 yuan will get you a small place in the city centre of Hyesan city, Ryanggang Province. If the house is further away from the marketplace (which is the city centre), even a large house would only cost about 10,000 yuan. 10,000 yuan is an immense amount of money in North Korea. It may be possible for an ordinary individual to make 10,000 yuan in a short period of time if her business is booming. But for someone who starts off poor and has no seed money. Although it's not easy to compare North and South Korea, I think it's harder to get housing in South Korea as house prices are much more expensive. Most households in North Korea have houses under their names. There are of course North Koreans that live in rented housing, just like in South Korea. But that's for households with a very difficult economic situation. These are families that used to live in a bigger house but had to move to a smaller one because they needed the extra cash. Then they move to an even smaller one to make another cash payment and finally end up selling their house.

The state does build lots of flats, but those are sold to residents at a price. They are not distributed for free.

I don't know if houses were given free of charge in the past.

I can't say how things were before I was born.

What I can say is that they are not free now.

Public transportation is not widespread in North Korea, so most people travel by foot. Some take a taxi. You can't call a taxi with a phone. In North Korea, there are standard locations for taxis waiting. People will go there and take the taxi of their choosing. So, if you live in the suburbs, there are no taxis for you. Those people will ride a bike to the city centre. This is why a lot of people ride bikes if they live further away from the city centre.

I would say that a 30-minute walking distance from the city centre counts as a long distance. The distance will matter a lot in house pricing. Houses closer to the market, that is the centre, are expensive even if they are small. My hometown was not all that large, and it was divided into districts (*dong*). The districts are close-by and can be travelled by foot. Each district would take about 10 to 15 minutes of walking distance. Virtually, they are all within walking distance. Then there are so-called "service cars," which refer to a car along with the driver that could be rented for a day if I want to visit somewhere or have luggage to move. It's a combination of the two words "service" and "car." The cars are not sedans, but slightly bigger. In North Korea, the most prevalent type of vehicle is the so-called "long van." Long vans

usually refer to cars with sliding doors for the back seats. People use service cars whenever they have the need. Service cars are self-hired businesses, meaning that the car owner will drive the goods and people himself.

Living in Ryanggang Province, I've been to other places like Pochon and Taechon. I did not need a travel permit to get there – probably because it's within the same province. You can reach there either by car or on foot. However, you will need a travel permit if you are travelling to another province. There are military guard posts on the road connecting to another region that will search your car for any suspicious objects before letting you through. People ride trucks and service cars to move to other regions. Travelling from Ryanggang Province to Pyongyang will usually take 2 days. You need to get a lot of paperwork done before you go. It's not likely for you to be able to go to Pyongyang if you are financially unstable. I never felt jealous watching Pyongyang and all its splendours on television. Having been brainwashed, North Koreans simply think Pyongyang must appear representable as it is where Kim Jong-un is, and since it is the capital.

While living in North Korea, I did think that the everyday surveillance was uncomfortable and ridiculous.

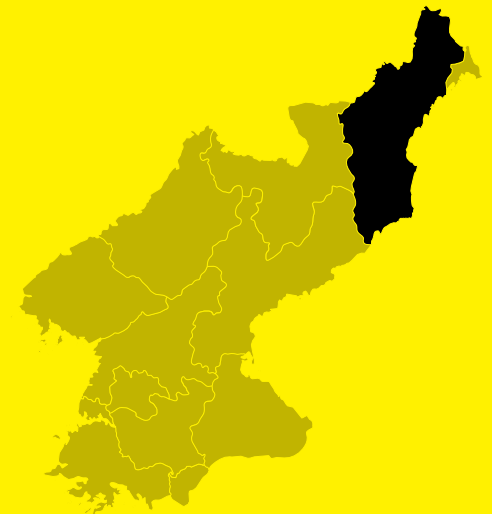
I had family members that left for South Korea before I did. Perhaps because of this, my home would be visited by State Security Agents and the Neighbourhood Unit Leader whenever

my mother would leave home for a short while to visit another region. They keep an eye on who is moving where. Going through this, I thought “None of us are planning to leave for South Korea. How come we are watched all the time and made to report on our whereabouts?” The situation had the reverse effect of making us think of coming to South Korea. There was a State Security Agency at a factory near our home. You could see our house from there. An agent would walk outside to watch over our house from the front of the office. I saw this happen several times. I naturally grew disgruntled as this continued to happen.

Voice  
13

New Life Ahead

Hello, my name is  
Jeong Yong-ho.  
North Hamgyong  
Province is  
my hometown.  
I left North Korea  
in late 2017, and  
arrived in South  
Korea in early 2018.



Hello, my name is Jeong Yong-ho. North Hamgyong Province is my hometown. I left North Korea in late 2017, and arrived in South Korea in early 2018.

It was right around the time I graduated from school when I left North Korea. All my friends were drafted to the military, except me. My parents arranged it so that I didn't have to go. It was possible to skip the draft if you paid bribes – at least when I was there. I think about 40% get drafted to the military and 60% don't. Where I lived, we used to pay bribes in dollars. I had to pay about 500 dollars, which is a huge amount by North Korean standards.

In my school, there were lots of kids who would work while being a student. A lot of the time, they would be helping out their parents' work - making briquettes out of coal dust, making firewood, and chopping wood to sell. Coal briquettes are called "holed briquettes" (*gumeongtan*) in North Korea. You need the ingredients to make briquettes. First, you need sawdust and coal ashes. These ingredients would be purchased by an individual who would then use the necessary tools to produce the goods. Private households produce these briquettes at home to make a profit.

Even during classes,  
the school will make you work  
on assignments.

You would take classes in the morning,  
and get sent away to work in the afternoon.

We would be told to pick out weeds in the fields and paddies, or to come back with scrap metal. Or, we would be made to help out at a construction site. You go to school six days a week, and four out of six you will have to go work on an assigned task. It was a state-owned farm that we were made to work on. We would do the weeding there. Scrap metal collection is a system that requires each household to donate waste metal at home. If you couldn't meet the requirement, you will have to make a substitution with something else. Substitutions would take the form of cash. It was a mandatory donation. They have a weight quota of a certain number of kilograms set for each person. Failure to meet the quota would mean substitution by cash. You can think of it as similar to taxation from a South Korean standpoint. Firewood used to be all acquired by hand before, but my generation paid for it. There weren't kids who would bother to go chop wood. Also, there are no trees to begin with. Anyways, the students were made to do a lot of school chores besides supporting farm work. Weeding and cleaning on the playground, for instance, and picking up litter. Or, if a wall came down students would have to work on cementing the bricks and putting the wall back up. Such instances were frequent.

A school day would consist of seven class periods, but there was only one class in the afternoon. So we would have to spend the rest of the afternoon working on our assignments. Five to six classes were before noon, and a one-hour lunchtime was in the middle. Lunch is mostly eaten at home. Some kids would bring lunch boxes from home if they lived far away. There are no canteens inside the school grounds. You could find one outside, but most students wouldn't eat there, as it's too expensive and they cannot afford to pay. You could pay about 200 Chinese yuan



to be exempted from the afternoon assignments like weeding and chopping wood. The teacher would let you go home. 200 yuan would exempt you from a month's worth of assignments.

Around the time we graduated, my generation could be said to have been less loyal to the state compared to the previous generations. But it's a different story if you're working for the state like in the military. I used to tell my friends "What's the point of serving in the military?", "It all comes down to my personal well-being." But turns out there are perks once you join the military. I suppose it's because working as a group is very important in North Korean society. You're in a group from a very young age until you get old. Being in a group does influence your ideas and thoughts. I think mass uprisings could happen in North Korea, I just don't know when. It takes a tiny spark to get people to rally. The question is who is going to start the fire. That tiny spark is yet to come in North Korea, so that's why there are no uprisings. People are self-conscious of one another. And the establishment is too powerful for anything to take place. I think there could be some change if more stories like that of Jang Song-thaek's execution are made public.<sup>①</sup>

There was a saying in North Korea that a child takes on the traits of his parents. My parents told me many things that allowed me to think critically about the party and the 3rd generation succession. My great-grandfather was a landlord and that got my family labelled negatively. So my grandfather could not go to college or serve in the military. My father was barred from fulfilling his talent because of this upbringing. My parents would tell me these things that they couldn't discuss openly in front of others. That's how I knew.

My father would listen to the radio very often. He listened

① Jang Song-thaek, married to Kim Jong-un's paternal aunt, was seen as effectively second in power in the North Korean regime until he was purged by Kim Jong-un in December 2013.

to South Korean broadcasts, and would tell us about Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-un. I believe he still listened to the radio even recently. He had one of those radios with cassette players that were imported from abroad. By the way, cassette tape recorders are contraband in North Korea. My father, he listened to radio broadcasts using the device and would relay them to us. I don't know the name of the broadcasts he listened to. It was just him and his radio. I just thought, "he's listening to the radio again." He probably listens to them even now – more so than before. But I can't say that there were others listening to the radio like that. It was just my father, and I don't know about the others. We didn't talk about these things with neighbours – about outside information and whatnot.

North Koreans do not romanticise South Korean society all that much. They get that South Korea is a good place to live, and a land of opportunities. But we don't dream of going there all that much. It differs by region too. If you live near the Chinese border in Hyesan of Ryanggang Province or Musan of North Hamgyong Province, you may think that South Korea is just a border-crossing away. But since you have a compulsion to live in North Korea, it's hard to make that leap of faith. So even if people watched South Korean TV series, they would simply envy the lifestyle. They won't necessarily be motivated to leave for South Korea. My friends didn't know that a country called the "Republic of Korea" existed. They knew "South Korea" from watching the TV series but they didn't know it was synonymous with the "Republic of Korea." It's because the country is referred to as South Korea most of the time, and not the Republic of Korea. So, we didn't know about the South Korean flag, and we didn't know that the country was called the Republic of Korea. We would

recognize the name South Korea but not the Republic of Korea. I was among them. And even if someone told me it was called the Republic of Korea, I still wouldn't recognize the national flag. I only knew about the national flag after coming to South Korea.

Now, I recognize South Korea as my home country. But I do get a sense of nostalgia when I see the North Korean flag. It reminds me of my childhood days. It's frightening, but it reminds me of my hometown. Looking at the South Korean flag gives me new hope.

But I still feel awkward about South Korea being my home country. It's a different world.

Back in my hometown, I was surrounded with feelings like friendship and affection from my parents. It was a lot of fun in my hometown. Here in South Korea, we don't seem to have too much of that. It's cool-headed and rational, and I feel the compulsion that I need to believe in myself only. I think a lot about how "I must make it through." I think I've become more mature here in South Korea. In North Korea, you could open yourself up towards others. Here in South Korea, you're not allowed to open yourself up with anyone, but I think a lot about how I must move forward no matter what.

I feel that life is much more humane in South Korea. Looking at North Korea from here, I feel that life wasn't humane there. But if I were to go back to North Korea and start looking at life in South Korea, I think I might ask "Why do they all live

like that?" Some people do go back to North Korea after spending some time in South Korea. I understand them in some aspects. They miss life in North Korea more than they want to live in South Korea. It's the people they miss. They tend to miss the affection from friends, parents, and family. We don't have that in South Korea. So, no matter how much money you make, or how affluent you get to live, you head back to North Korea because you miss the affection, the people. Of course, back in North Korea, you have to put up with severe government intervention, not to mention the difficult life. But I guess they miss people more than that. North Koreans prefer to have that in our lives. So if the North and the South do reunite, I don't think any North Korean would want to stay in South Korea. I think they'll all head back North. I think there are plenty of people who would do so.

None of the North Koreans living in South Korea tell me that they enjoy life here. They all compare the quality of human interaction between the North and the South. Many talk about how "friends" mean different things between North and South Korea, for instance. I had many friends in North Korea who knew me well. I don't think there are close friends here. Friends here are for hanging out, and for hanging out only. As a result, I have no friends that I can open myself up to. Others from North Korea think similarly. And when you ask them, they tell me that they miss North Korea and would like to go back.

I think it's more so because North Korean life requires EQ (emotional intelligence) while South Korea requires one to be intelligent in terms of IQ.

That is to say, you can get through without knowing a lot in North Korea. If someone is starving, I break bread with him. That's how you start a friendship. But now that I am no longer in that world of emotional intelligence, I see that people here are so much smarter than me but they won't give me warmth. So I learned that I need to get smarter to survive here in South Korea. Everyone seems to focus on what my credentials are, what kind of workplace I prefer, and what I want to do for a living. People from North Korea, myself included, are not accustomed to this way of living. So it makes me feel nostalgic for a world with warmth and emotional intelligence. I think about this even more so these days, because there's plenty of alone time because of Covid-19. Without any friends by my side, I sometimes think "What's the point of living this way?"

I socialise mostly with people from North Korea. They also prefer gatherings among people from North Korea. It's hard to find things in common when I am with South Korean friends. I am often left wondering, "what is that supposed to mean?" But with peers and fellow townsmen from North Korea, I can find common things to talk about. That's why a lot of people will tell you that hanging out with other people from North Korea is more fun than hanging out with South Koreans. Of course, one needs to make South Korean friends in order to live here, but people from North Korea have a tendency to hang out with others from

North Korea more and more. I think it's a shame.

It would be nice if the South Korean government or the communities offered classes or programs that allow us to learn different social norms and perspectives here in South Korea, so that people from North Korea could adapt better.

Content for North Koreans is geared towards reunification issues, for instance. But I'd say it's better to have a program that lets us learn how a South Korean thinks, or what their thought process is. People from North Korea should have opportunities to learn such things, but the programs offered so far do not help us form common bonds. It's harder to find commonalities when you're talking about reunification only. Don't get me wrong. Reunification is important. But what's more important is that North Koreans struggle to understand South Koreans. They come from a world of emotional intelligence. But now they find themselves in a world of IQ intelligence. They struggle to find common bonds. This way, we'll end up living separate lives. "You do you, as we do ourselves." Because such patterns are on the rise, we should take the time to think about how people from North Korea can come to mingle with South Koreans. If these programs can be offered to even a handful of people, they will get to know that "these are instances where the two people can bond." So that when reunification becomes a reality, we can perform synergy based on that.

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I tried selling fruits, vegetables, metals, and herbs. I tried a little bit of everything, but I never stuck to one trade. It was seasonal. In North Korea, there are professional merchants who open a store or sell their goods at the marketplace, just like in South Korea. There are grocers who truck wholesale products from other provinces or the countryside to sell in the city. For example, harvested products can be trucked to a city that doesn't have those products. The retailers in the city will sell those to merchants from another place at a small margin, and those merchants will do the same. I didn't know how to drive when I was in North Korea. So, I paid drivers and car owners some cash. They would haul the goods for a transportation fee. Running a business like this will surely give you enough to get by, but not enough to make a fortune.

Corporate jobs will not get you any money. Some nice institutions or corporations - such as legal institutions or enforcement institutions where you get to enforce control over society - would let you earn barely enough to eat. By legal institutions I mean party branches; provincial Workers' Party branch, the county party branch, and the municipal Workers' Party branch. Also, there are the Ministry of Social Security, the Ministry of State Security and the Prosecutor's Office. These jobs will allow you to feed your family. But if we say regular corporate jobs, we mean jobs that make you pay money from the family. Hence, there are a lot of people who only have job titles at corporations but have real jobs on the side. Lots of people work like this. Where I come from, 99% of households would make a living by running businesses of their own. Even so, the corporations do

operate. In North Korea, it is common for the men to be working at a regular job, and the women to be running a business. It could be said that women's earnings make men's workplaces run. This is why I say most households run their own business – almost all households except for those at legal institutions.

Since 2020, borders were locked down and movements of people were controlled more severely. Goods from China, such as manufactured goods and electronics are not distributed well. But domestic produce such as agricultural goods is not dependent on China. Some say that the food crisis is bad in North Korea. But North Koreans went through the Arduous March back in the 1990s. The people have developed mental resilience since then. Before that, there was no self-reliance, we would be reliant on what the state offered. But people have become self-reliant since the Arduous March. It's normal to have a whole year's worth of food stashed up.

North Koreans are now capable of living on their own even when the state cannot ration food and the international situation is hostile.

Now it is quite impossible to expect a crisis like the Arduous March. Things have improved in North Korea. How should I put it? You could say that North Korea is slow in catching up with global fashion trends, but food provision has improved significantly.

I recently got to hear about the price of goods in Kangwon

Province. They tell me prices have risen multiple folds in my hometown. Before Covid-19, a kilogram of rice would cost four to five thousand North Korean won. Now it is around six thousand. A can of cooking oil used to be around twelve or thirteen thousand won, but is now at forty thousand. I just heard this a few days ago (mid-November 2021). It's not just my hometown but prices have risen all across the country. Chinese currency exchange rates at the border regions used to be around thirteen thousand North Korean won for one hundred Chinese yuan. Now it is only fifty-eight thousand won for the same amount. So the value of North Korean currency over Chinese currency has gone up, but that means that prices are going up as well. It must have gotten tougher to live in Kangwon Province since prices went up there as well. Ten thousand won would get you two kilograms of rice. Now you only get one kilogram. So it's like saying you could buy two kilograms of rice for a day's pay of ten thousand won. Now that money won't get you enough to eat. They need to make an average of twenty to thirty thousand won daily to make ends meet, which is not the case. So, I think it's harder to make a living there.

I am not sure how much ten thousand North Korean won would be in South Korean money. North Koreans only calculate based on US dollars or Chinese yuan, so I'm not sure. When I was in North Korea, one dollar would be about eight thousand North Korean won. So that would mean ten thousand North Korean won is equal to 1,400 South Korean won. Still, we frequently used domestic currency in my hometown. Foreign currency is for safekeeping at home. If I need some money I would take the foreign currency and exchange it for domestic currency for actual use.

Kangwon Province is a rice-producing province. I used to eat rice mixed with other grains until the 2000s but since then I didn't have to eat mixed grains<sup>❶</sup> until I came to South Korea. I don't know if this is the case only for my hometown which is known for easy living within North Korea. North Koreans mainly consume rice produced domestically. Chinese rice is used by restaurants and peddling merchants who trade rice in bulk. Chinese rice is cheaper and easier to amass in bulk, but not as nutritious as North Korean rice. North Korean rice tastes better too.

There were a lot of South Korean TV shows where I lived too.

People in Kangwon Province would get these from Pyongyang, not directly from the borders.

People who have been overseas could smuggle some in their return. Or folks connected to foreign countries would bring them in. There are no other ways to bring in South Korean shows. North Korea is a strict society. It is difficult for ordinary people to bring in such shows themselves and distribute them. You need to have a position, political power, or economic wealth to do such things. Ordinary merchants who work for a living cannot afford to import such things. If caught, they cannot slip away. A lot of it comes through China at the border regions. The people there visit China as easily as visiting their hometown. But down south, it is

❶ Traditionally, rice was the preferred grain of choice for Koreans. North Korea has had lower rice yields compared to South Korea, due to sustained economic difficulty leading to a lack of fertilisers, pesticides, and agricultural machinery. As a result, rice in North Korea tends to be expensive when compared to other alternative crops such as corn, potato, and bean.

further away from the Chinese border, so while you may get some things from the border but not so actively. That's why Kangwon Province would get these goods from Pyongyang.

Watching South Korean TV shows will no doubt get you in trouble.

But people watch the shows because they are curious. In reverse effect, we think "How come we're told not to watch these shows?" Then there's the thing about the South Korean language. The lines that you hear from the show are different from the North Korean dialect that we use among ourselves. So we find it entertaining – the accent and everything. I don't know what a South Korean would make of the North Korean language the first time they hear it, but we North Koreans find South Korean speech entertaining. So, we're curious. It's the same words and the same language but in a different accent. At first, it's difficult to understand what's being said, but then you start to understand more of it. So that kind of curiosity makes you want to keep on watching. With South Korean shows, even if the ending is dull or ridiculous, the actresses are pretty and so is the lifestyle... Anyways, it's those aspects that make you curious. It's the same with young people and old people – more so with kids.

This is not to say that most North Koreans have watched South Korean shows by now. People with intel, who are interested, or curious will watch the shows, or if they have a friend that has access to these shows will get to watch in association with him. You need to be interested to watch the shows. If not, you won't

South Koreans, nowadays, choose to eat rice with mixed grains such as barley, wheat, and beans for health reasons. On the other hand, North Koreans eat mixed grains to save food costs instead of their preferred rice.

even start to watch. These days, they store these shows in USBs or SD memory cards. Up North, like in Ryanggang Province, they commonly use EVD players. But down south like in Kangwon Province, we use mobile phones, tablets, or computers. Mobile phones, tablets, and PCs were not popularised in my hometown, but we did have one for each household for educational purposes for children.

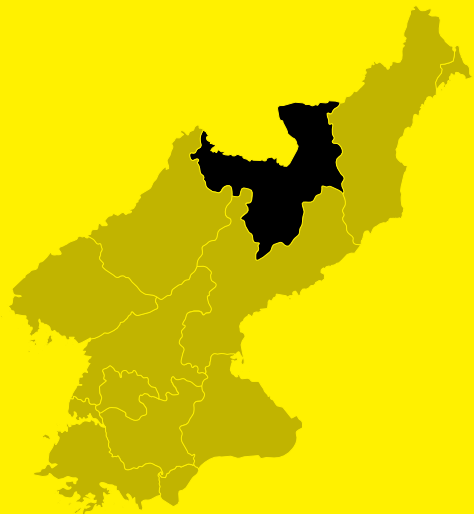
The mobile phones that are used in North Korea nowadays are smartphones. I don't think they were manufactured in North Korea. As far as I know, they're made in China. It's all made of Chinese parts if you open one up. I did a lot of mobile phone repair work when I was in North Korea. Some were broken, but others were stolen as there's a lot of theft in North Korea. Or you could find someone's lost phone, and as we don't have advanced telecommunications to find the original owner, you have it repaired and swap the CPU to use it yourself. I think the mobile phones were brought in from China, then reassembled to run on North Korean software, and resold at the market. But North Korea has blocked all internet access. So North Korean mobile phones won't pick up WIFI. But now that I think of it, there was 3G. I used 3G there. What's called "Kang Song NET" is 3G service. There's also another one called "Koryolink" which is contracted out to a foreign company. Koryolink mobile phone numbers start with the digits 191, and Kang Song NET numbers start with 195. I had both services, Koryolink and Kang Song NET.

The Internet is blocked even when serviced by a foreign company. They say in some places in Pyongyang you can access the internet, but I wouldn't know. If internet access is provided to North Korea, they wouldn't be able to block all of it, so maybe reassembled mobile phones, especially those distributed in the

country, would technically be able to have internet access per se. But the software won't allow it. It's not something you can switch on by yourself. Even if you use some advanced software to browse the internet, you'd be caught by the surveillance of electric frequencies. So you wouldn't be able to use the internet even if you could.

There's an expectation that outside information will lead to change in the North Korean human rights situation once the information finds its way in. But I don't think such change will ever take place. I have to be honest that ordinary North Koreans, farmers and workers, are satisfied to have enough to eat and live an easy life. This is the case other than for the few who are powerful. They have not seen much of anything, and so they lack imaginative thinking. You need to be able to see it, in order to start thinking about it. But since people are prevented from accessing such things in the first place, it lies beyond their imagination. Even if they did see it, I think it's unlikely that the people will have the capacity to make a change or fight for democracy. First of all, you need a leader to lead the movement. North Korea is a surveillance society. One out of every three people is a snitch for the Ministry of State Security or the Ministry of Social Security. You cannot bypass the system. If I had a conversation with someone today, by tomorrow others would know what was said in that conversation. You have to watch your words in North Korea. I was told South Korea was like that until the 1970s. You can consider North Korea to be similar.

Hello, my name is  
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I left North Korea  
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Hello, my name is Jang Chol-hun. I left North Korea in 2018 and entered South Korea in the same year. My hometown is in Ryanggang Province.

I was a soldier before I left North Korea. I left the country before my 10 years of service. While numerous inferior conditions exist in the North Korean military nowadays, I think there are diverse attempts made at training and other related areas. The part about food is related to abuse and corruption. These were serious problems from the past. Also, I think the situation differs a lot between garrisons. A large garrison, such as a regiment, would have a better chance at getting supplies. But independent garrison units in the hilly, rural areas face lots of problems in getting supplies.

Independent garrisons need to plough their own farms or something to sustain themselves.

Distributed supplies are never enough to get by. It is not the state that provides grains to these garrisons. The troops will visit the farming village themselves to collect the grains. Some garrisons will have modes of transportation. Many others have none. So let's say you went to the village to collect grains and now you need to head back to base, but you have no car. You could borrow a car. You can borrow a car from a corporation, but they won't let you borrow it for free. You need to pay them. Also, fuel can be expensive, but you need to buy fuel. If you don't have cash with you, you're going to have to sell some of the grains to get



those things. This process costs quite a lot of grain. As a result, the soldiers end up receiving a smaller portion. They are always hungry. Most garrisons are in a similar situation. So an ordinary soldier wouldn't be able to eat his fill, even as he is serving. I served for about 8 years, and I was hungry all throughout. One cannot survive on government rations alone, so one has to buy food from a commissary at one's own cost.

There are some predictions being made about another Arduous March situation in North Korea due to food shortages. I don't think that is possible. Kim Jong-un did say recently (mid-2021) that he will "wage another Arduous March" or something of that sort. Well, the first time the Arduous March took place in the 1990s North Korea was relying to a large degree on aid from communist countries in Eastern Europe. When the aid got cut off, the government didn't know what to do. It stopped distributing supplies to citizens all of a sudden. Until then, people made a living out of what the state offered them. Government rations came on time, and so people would work for the government in earnest. All of a sudden that was gone, and now people have no food, no possessions, no savings. This is why there were so many dying from starvation. Things got difficult.

But now all that is gone. People do not care what the government is up to. There are no people dependent on rations. Since people learned how to self-sustain through the Arduous March in the past, such a disaster won't repeat itself even if we were to enter into yet another Arduous March, I think.

The "Reactionary Thought and Culture Denunciation Law"<sup>❶</sup> was passed in December last year (2020). But people who watched South Korean TV shows were punished even before the law. This was part of a continuous effort. The government made a lot of

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❶ Also referred to as the "Reactionary Ideology and Culture Rejection Act."

announcements about not watching such things and told us how severe the punishment would be. They monitor the people and punish them as examples. But it's frankly impossible for people to stop watching these shows. They are curious. They are inquisitive. So we would watch often – among soldiers too. There are soldiers who got caught and went to prison. We watched South Korean TV shows in the garrison.

Soldiers are not supposed to use mobile phones. Same goes for officers. But it wouldn't make sense to not use mobile phones at all, right? We would use phones in secret. The officers would use them in almost plain sight, and hide them only when their superiors come to check on them. Within each garrison, it's usually the officers that police the use of mobile phones by the troops. But still, some soldiers will use phones in secret, although these count for maybe 1% of the entire force. My garrison had two to three thousand soldiers stationed there. Only a few dozen soldiers had mobile phones. There are soldiers that have been serving for a long time and soldiers who are assigned to individual duties. These soldiers would mostly use mobile phones. A soldier that went out to become a guard-post leader would use a mobile phone if he could since there's no one above the guard-post leader. They would install some software on their phone and download movies or TV series to watch in secret.

Mobile phones in North Korea are smartphones too. But you can't download South Korean apps. I brought my North Korean mobile phone to South Korea. I was curious. But it doesn't work. I was told that maybe I could get some signal frequency if I go to the seaside near Goseong<sup>❷</sup>. I tried, but I couldn't get any signal from North Korea. The communications system used in the North is so different from what's used in the South, so it doesn't

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❷ Goseong County is in the northernmost corner of South Korea's east coast. It is located adjacent to the armistice line, as it borders North Korea to its North. Goseong (Gangwon Province) and its North Korean equivalent Kosong (Kangwon Province) used to be a single region but have been divided into two since the Korean Armistice Agreement in 1953.

work. Bluetooth doesn't work. Nothing. Nope.

In South Korea, there are telecommunications companies like SKT, KT and LG U+. In North Korea, there are two such telecommunications companies. They are called “Kang Song NET” and “Koryolink.” They don't provide WIFI, 5G, or LTE services like in South Korea. They only have one service. So there is no rate plan. In South Korea, you can have different rate plans depending on whether you want limited or unlimited service. It doesn't work that way in North Korea.

I used Kang Song NET, which starts with different digits than with Koryolink. Kang Song NET numbers start with 195 and Koryolink numbers start with 191. In South Korea, mobile numbers start with 010, right? My phone number back in North Korea started with 195, and I had to pay about 950 North Korean won for the usage. We have limited data plans too, but it's nothing like the data used in South Korea. In South Korea, data plans are for browsing the internet or using social media. We don't have that in North Korea, so there's no concept of data usage to begin with. The data plans in North Korea are for phone calls and text messages. Those are what you are paying for. We do have a separate intranet that operates only within North Korea. You can access the newspaper, TV broadcasts, and the like. You have to pay extra to access such things. A monthly plan package would include, for instance, 200 minutes of phone calls and up to 20 text messages for the 950 won charge. There is a character limit on text messaging. It's 70 characters by default and you lose two messages each for going above 70 characters. There is also a separate system of mobile cash. It's 150 won, and is different from regular cash. You get to use this only for your phone bill. For every minute of your phone call, you will be charged 4.20 won for

making the call, and receiving a call is free of charge. The strange thing is that your mobile phone (195) will be charged 3.80 won if you pick up a call coming from a landline phone. I guess you can say that 150 won will get you 25 minutes of phone calls.

North Korea has a network system similar to the internet. But the thing is it's rather cumbersome although you can access it through your computer and your phone. Some people do use it. Recently, there's been internet banking in North Korea because they connected it to the banking infrastructure. But I don't know if it is used predominantly by people in North Korea. What I do know is that it's not the Kwangmyong Network that South Koreans think it is. It comes in a different name, but I can't seem to remember what. You have to sign up for it and pay a fee. I believe you need to pay 50 won or more per month to sign into the network, similar to how you would pay 150 won for the mobile phone. If you want to read newspapers, the registration fee is 50 won with a monthly charge of 20 won. To watch TV, you need to pay a registration fee of 100 won with a monthly charge of 150 won.

There are no app-stores like in South Korea. There are basic government-issue apps when the phones are first released. The apps are pre-installed, but you need to buy the key-code to use them. Without the key-codes the apps are of no use. You can get to the table of contents, but not the details. The key-code can be bought from the Information Exchange Agency under the Ministry of Communication. I've used one of those apps before. It was an app called, “My Travel Companion” (*naeuigildongmu*). There were continuous version upgrades. I saw version 4.0 come out before I left. I saw that you could read lots of books on this app. There were lots of North Korean books, but also foreign

books, so-called “classics.” There were American novels too. While watching TV shows or films from the U.S. would mean certain death, reading books was okay. There were actual books out there that you could read. Reading such classics through books wouldn’t get you in trouble. But you are never allowed to watch movies and TV series. A lot of the books were on politics, economics, and culture. Also, there was a lot of sports content, and movies too. Movies are mostly North Korean ones, or they would be government-approved films from the Soviet Union or Eastern Europe back when it was still communist. This app also requires a key-code to access. There are a lot of games too.

Many South Koreans seem to wonder why North Koreans living in oppression do not stand up to the government.

My observation is that we North Koreans do not get to see much of anything during the course of our lives.

We’re no better than frogs living at the bottom of a well. We go through ideological training and indoctrination from a young age, and everywhere we look it’s all propaganda. North Korea always has money to spare on propaganda, if not on anything else, and they do upgrade the content. It must be a big portion of the government budget that goes into propaganda.

I did see South Korean films when I was in North Korea and

felt that things were different. But movies are just movies. You don’t believe everything you see on the screen, right? You can associate yourself with the emotions portrayed on screen, but you assume the realities must be different in real life. It’s the same with North Koreans. They know about South Korea at a cultural level, but they understand movies as just that, and expect things to be different in real life. While there are some who say that they left North Korea after watching a movie, I don’t give full credit to those statements. I encounter people who say similar things, from time to time. But I still doubt those claims thinking, was it really the movies that made them leave?

Most who made it to South Korea did so because they are so impoverished to make a living. Or, they may have found themselves in trouble politically. Or, they are in a situation where life in North Korea is no longer possible. 80 to 90 percent of the time, it’s these reasons. So, while my mother and younger sibling came to South Korea first, I didn’t think much of having to come along. This was because I had built up my foundation of living in North Korea, so I didn’t give much thought to coming all the way to South Korea and going through the difficulty of adapting to this new society. This goes for others too. My friends and relatives all think the same.

The young generation nowadays is a generation brought up without any government support.

Everything became market-oriented, which means they were supported by the market.

Even so, I think most youngsters are still loyal to the state, although individual differences may exist. I say this because soldiers were going through difficult times and starvation when I was serving... And still, we couldn't think that this was because Kim Jong-un was doing a bad job, or that he was locking us up for indoctrination in order to maintain his regime. We continued to think that his leadership was excellent since that was all we were told through indoctrination. Even when you turn on the news channel or read the newspapers, Kim is shown diligently conducting site inspections, working hard to improve people's lives there. So we would believe those claims at face value. As to why we were so impoverished and hungry, we thought it was because of the sanctions imposed by the U.S. and other powerful states which forced us to live by our own means. I never doubted the indoctrination.

I think North Koreans do not say Kim Jong-un is bad because they do not think Kim Jong-un is bad. As I said, when given the chance to talk, most people attribute their hardships first to the sanctions imposed by the U.S. and other powerful capitalist nations. Then, they would hold the workers and cadres accountable for not doing their jobs properly, even though Kim Jong-un's leadership is fine. I would say 90% of the people think this way.

In fact, a lot has changed since Kim Jong-un came into power. It may not seem like a lot when seen from South Korea and the rest of the world, but it has to look good when seen from. Kim Jong-un does appear to be doing site inspections and providing relief solutions to flood zones and areas with other natural disasters. So, the people cannot think badly of him. They think it must be the cadres below him that are not executing

properly and doing a bad job.

North Korea has adopted the concept of equality between the two sexes a long time ago. The government conducts education and indoctrination projects. Still, the position of women in society remains very low - especially at home. This has recently been starting to change because men's roles are decreasing. Before, when they had government rations, men would go to work and the wives would be supported by it. But now there are no rations. With the infrastructure gone, women partake in a lot of economic activities as it is no longer possible to live on government rations alone. It's not that men can't partake in economic activities. But the government requires the (male) head of the household to come out to work. There are those without jobs, and those people must pay the government a certain portion of their income or a fixed amount. This is technically illegal. This lifestyle came about ever since Kim Jong-un came into power and allowed individuals to run private businesses. We can say that now both men and women participate when it comes to the economy, but women's freedom and rights are not part of the people's basic mindset just yet. There's a deep-rooted patriarchal culture in the society, which takes time to be fixed, I suppose.

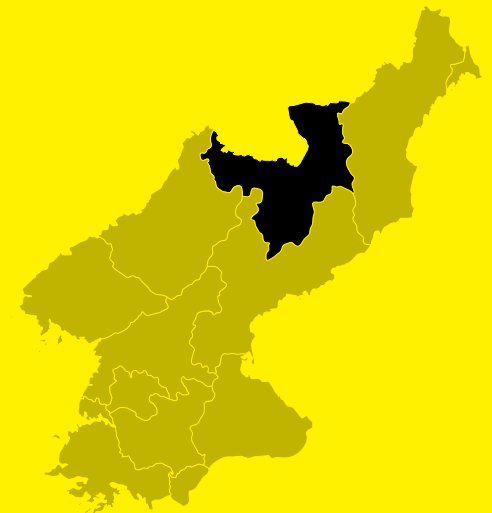
Whether there is discrimination against women among North Korean men, I would say, is something that depends on the man's individual character and level of education. One cannot openly disregard a woman simply for the fact that she's a woman. If she's my superior, I am not allowed to talk freely in front of her. So, I cannot disregard her face. There can be no gender-based discrimination in such situations. While there are many more male cadres, women also become cadres through hiring and promotion. Discriminating against women is something else. It

never happens openly in a woman's presence, maybe behind her back. I had female superiors in the military. I may socialise with them freely in daily life, but I could not disregard their orders when working on an assignment.

Voice  
16

Joint Ventures and the Local Economy

Hello, my name is  
Lee Mi-sun.  
My hometown is in  
Ryanggang Province.  
I left North Korea  
in 2019 and reached  
South Korea later in  
the same year.



Hello, my name is Lee Mi-sun. My hometown is in Ryanggang Province. I left North Korea in 2019 and reached South Korea later in the same year. You can say I made it out of North Korea right before they locked down the borders because of Covid-19. I think there are few people who have made it out of North Korea since 2020.

Before leaving North Korea, I had a corporate job as well as my own business. My day job was in a factory / corporation, and in my spare time I would take commissioned work from joint ventures. You have to have the factory / corporation day job. Otherwise, you'd be registered as jobless. You cannot be jobless in North Korea. You need to have your name registered somewhere and show up for work when needed. A factory in North Korea is like what they call an SME here in South Korea. Corporations refer to everything run by the state. "Factory / corporation" is one word in and of itself. You can say "factory" or "corporation" separately or say "factory corporation" in conjunction. If it's a shoe manufacturer, the simplest term would be a shoe factory. But the official title is something like "X City Shoe Factory Y Corporation." If it is a rice refinery, the full title would be 'Rice Refinery Z Corporation'.

The word "company" (*hoesa*) only came into use a few years ago. Companies refer to joint ventures created by private individuals who made money in North Korea and decided to raise seed capital in collaboration with Chinese people. Government-owned businesses are not called "companies." Joint ventures are relatively new, and state-owned businesses are just called "factory corporations." A woman in North Korea is required to work until marriage, and once married she does not have to work because she is responsible for supporting the household. I had to work

because I didn't get married. A joint venture can be said to be like a workplace that does not cover social insurance in South Korea. You cannot be a full-time employee and they only hire you for one day at a time. You are working as a part-time contractor, and you are paid according to your workload. Joint ventures don't pay you more necessarily, they pay for the work you manage to get done. State-owned factories and corporations don't pay you at all. They are working for the state. But you can be paid a fair share for your work at a joint venture.

There were many joint venture companies in Hyesan of Ryanggang Province.

There were about three or four headquarters and many branch offices.

A great number of North Koreans would work there, mostly in their 20s such as myself. There are joint ventures that make wigs. The hair that is used in making the wigs comes from China. It is the raw material that goes into the manufacture. There are North Koreans who grow their hair long and then sell the hair for money. I'm sure the hair first gets shipped to China to get processed and dyed before coming back to North Korea for making wigs. You can work at a wig factory if you have the skills. They pay a fair share based on your productivity. I was paid 400 Chinese yuan, and that was enough for one person to eat and live well for a month. But that would not be enough for the whole

family. It's enough to buy food, but there are other bills to pay.

Joint ventures are mostly owned by a Chinese person, as the company is invested in and supported by Chinese capital. Chinese technicians would frequently visit our factory to train us. I believe that the joint venture company stopped operations once the borders were closed. Joint ventures allowed rice and (cooking) oil to be distributed throughout the country, and I was told that without them, oil prices go up and so do other food prices. Joint ventures are probably out of business. The closing of borders must have made a big impact. Border regions like Hyesan, in particular, cannot do anything with the borders closed. We didn't have agriculture there.

Brokers these days no longer trick women into human trafficking. What is referred to as "human trafficking" in North Korea does not refer to trading a person against their will. It refers to a broker connecting you to someone. The person gives her consent to be transported. In South Korea, I understand that human trafficking means someone being cheated on and sold to another person. In North Korea, being transported to China according to mutual consent also counts as human trafficking. Basically, all brokers that are transporting people to China are human traffickers. These days, everyone wants to go and actively seek out brokers, just like how I found mine. They reach out to the broker of their choice after careful selection. It's all consensual these days, being sold against your will must have happened decades ago – maybe in the 1990s and early-or-mid 2000s. Lying about business opportunities and selling you off without your consent is history. These days, the state imposes heavy crackdowns on people trying to make it into China, because the population is on the decrease.

North Korean women are also having fewer children in marriage.

Low birth-rates are a serious issue.

The reason why North Koreans refuse to have children is because it is so hard to get by. You can hardly make a living for yourself. These days a couple would have one or two children. Two is already a lot. The government neither encourages nor discourages births. People decide on their own. If you are well-to-do, you can have more kids. If you're poor, you don't have kids.

Let me tell you about birth control in North Korea. In South Korea, you have the pills and men can also wear condoms. In North Korea, it's all up to the women. Women have to prevent births by inserting a loop or something because men don't. Men do not use condoms at all. If pregnant you can get an abortion at a hospital, but that will leave a record. So people seek a licensed private practitioner. These doctors have the surgical equipment at home and you can pay them to carry out the abortion in secret. In South Korea, it appears that hygiene comes first in hospitals. In North Korea, they apply some alcohol for disinfection and that's it.

In North Korea, patriarchal culture still has a strong presence within households.

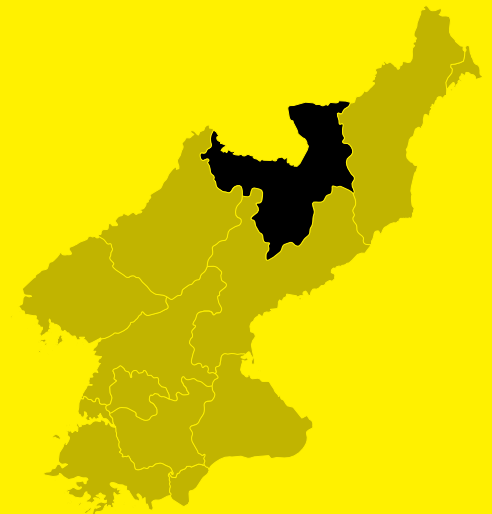
Women are sometimes ignored at the workplace.

I did not experience such things myself because I was not trying to pursue a career, but I did hear a lot of comments saying “what’s the point of becoming a cadre if you’re a woman”, “what good is a college-educated woman” and such. It’s not that women are barred from entering college or becoming a party cadre. But it is true that women’s participation in the workforce is lower than men’s. Women look nice when they are in military uniform or police uniform. There are not that many women cadres in the Police force, the State Security Ministry, or the Prosecutor’s office – maybe about 20%. These people are continuing to pursue their careers after marriage. You can if you are capable. North Koreans won’t disregard a woman State Security Officer or a policewoman just because they are women. If you are in uniform and if you appear fierce and charismatic, they cannot slight you. You are recognized as an officer before being recognized as a man or a woman.

Voice  
17

Wiring Money to North Korea

Hello, my name is  
Go Song-eun.  
I lived in Ryanggang  
Province until I left  
North Korea in the  
middle of 2019.





Hello, my name is Go Song-eun. I lived in Ryanggang Province until I left North Korea in the middle of 2019.

I reached Incheon airport in late 2019 and came out to South Korean society in early 2020. My mother left for South Korea before I did. That was in the 2000s. The State Security Ministry knew that my mother went to South Korea. If a month has passed since a family member had gone missing, it's normal to think "oh, she must have run away." My mother was not even reported missing. Around that time, no one bothered to report such things. In North Korea, it's common sense to think that a missing person must have gone to China. So the State Security Ministry could have suspected that my mother had also gone to China, but there are spies in North Korea.

While in North Korea, I lived off of the money that my mother sent me from South Korea. But I did not make it apparent that I was receiving money. I used to pick up the cash from a remote location. The relatives that I lived with made a decent living by running a business, and this was the case for all family members. So we didn't attract suspicion from the neighbours for spending the money.

In my border-side hometown alone, I think at least 20 to 30% of the households were receiving cash sent from South Korea.

I would say it's still a minimum of 20% even if we include the other border regions.

My relatives would also hold money meant for people from other provinces, perhaps from the more southern regions, for safekeeping. If you live down south, the border residents will come get you. First, the people who made it to South Korea will try to reach out to their family back in North Korea. They will talk to a border-side broker about whom he needs to find and the address. The border-side broker will travel to this remote region to bring them close to the border, make a phone call to South Korea to confirm, and give the cash. The cash can be given on the spot, or in about 2 days' time at most.

For instance, if someone in South Korea wants to send one million South Korean won to a family member in North Korea, they will first have to wire cash into the broker's bank account in China via phone or internet banking. Then the broker will withdraw that amount in Chinese currency to send to another broker on the North Korean side. The North Korean broker will hand the money over to the actual recipient themselves. Brokers these days always have some cash in store. That or, the money is handed over to another broker who handles the cash, and the recipient makes a phone call to South Korea to receive the money from the broker the next day. The brokerage fee between the brokers is 10% each. When I was young the surcharge was 15~20% total, including all the fees. But right around the time I left North Korea, the surcharge rose to 25~30%. Now, I am told that the fee alone would cost 40% and above.

It's harder to make direct phone calls because of the lockdown these days. So a family member in South Korea will record her voice or video using WeChat<sup>❶</sup>, which would then be sent to the broker on the North Korean side. It's a relay method, in which he will play this recording to the family members in North

❶ A Chinese mobile messaging app.

Korea and then record them admitting they have received the money. This recording will then be sent to the original sender in South Korea, who will pay the broker the amount due.

But the broker doesn't cheat you in the middle. The protocol is always to make a phone call with your family member first, and then hand over the cash. The person asking for the cash transfer from South Korea will always pay back the broker. If not, both sides will be in danger – not only the broker but the family back home in North Korea too. It's less dangerous for the recipient than it is for the broker because the recipient can say that the broker simply gave you the money, but the broker can lose a lot of money because of this. That's why both sides keep their promises, as far as I know. Right now, the borders are closed, but there are rich people in North Korea who have savings in China. They can transfer money back and forth since they have money on both sides of the border.

So there are no issues in sending money over to North Korea from South Korea, even these days (middle of 2022).

But there is an inconvenience where you can't talk about the situation or the family there when transferring the cash, as we used to before.

I sent cash to my aunt in North Korea early this year (2022).

But I couldn't ask for details about the situation there. She did say that people were not allowed to walk outside in the streets after 6 PM. She didn't say anything about infected patients, but she told me that people were not allowed to walk about freely. The broker even told me once that he planned on visiting my relatives the next day as it is impossible to move after 6 PM. Nowadays, there seems to be a rising number of Covid-19 patients there. I'm assuming that the regulations and lockdowns only got worse. I hear stories of quarantine being practised in North Korea due to Covid-19. While I'm sure there are people with plenty of food at home, it must have been hard for the people who didn't have enough. Well, at least you're letting them cook inside their houses, so that's not as bad, I guess. Creating smoke from the chimneys used to be prohibited back when we did evacuation drills. But I guess quarantine must be different. North Korean households don't always have a stockpile of vegetables and foodstuff, as they do in South Korea. Kimchi would be pretty much the only side dish that goes with rice. I'm sure you're not allowed to go out during quarantine, but I assume people would come out late at night to get kimchi. North Korean households don't have refrigerators, but what we do have are dugouts (*kimchium*) where we store kimchi for long periods. Every household has one. I don't think the government provides foodstuff or life necessities.

There are outside films that ordinary North Koreans can watch – like Chinese ones. But it's not like you can watch anything just because it's filmed in China. You can only watch what has been allowed. There are CD stands by the street. CD-ROMs are hung up for display, with titles written on them. People gather in front of these stands to see what's there to watch. There are animations, Chinese TV series, and movies. They have

everything except the ones from South Korea and the US. These are all legal to watch. But there is Chinese content that we're not supposed to watch. If you see a "magnolia" mark on the upper left of the screen when playing a CD or a USB, those are good to watch. CD stands are run by private individuals but they are licensed by the state. The CDs sold there have the magnolia mark on the covers too. Those CDs have gone through state censorship. State-approved CDs look different from illegal ones. The illegal ones don't have the magnolia mark to start, and if you flip them the CD plates appear transparent and bluish in colour. The state-approved ones are less transparent and have a whitish tone.

You can read books from other countries. There are books from the U.K., Russia, and Germany. These are the so-called "classical literature." There are detective novels like *Monsieur Lecoq*.

There are bookstores too.  
But it is forbidden for an individual  
to write her own book or distribute her writing.

No one dares to do such a thing.  
They cannot think of writing something themselves.

So there are no independent magazines. There is no free press run by the private sector. It's all run by the state. There's *Rodong Sinmun*<sup>②</sup> and other papers such as *Joson Inmingun*<sup>③</sup>. The latter is only read by military officers. These newspapers are not allowed to be exposed to the general public. But I had friends

② Literal translation: *Workers' Newspaper*.

③ Literal translation: *Korean People's Army*.

whose fathers were military officers, so I would read the paper whenever I visited these friends.

Among those who have left North Korea, there are many who came to South Korea only after spending a decent amount of time in China. More specifically, there are lots of women who had kids with a Chinese husband. Some kids speak Korean well. These are kids that were taught Korean by their mothers during their stay in China, or came to South Korea at a young age. But if the child was surrounded by Chinese speakers only while in China and even the mother spoke only Chinese, then it's hard for the child to start learning Korean speech and Korean writing from scratch upon reaching South Korea. These kids go through a lot of stress. The younger ones come to South Korea at age 5-7. They learn relatively fast. But the kids who come to South Korea at middle-school age find few friends who can understand them at school. They wish they could go back to China, and have a hard time adapting to the new environment. I saw a lot of kids from China when I went to an alternative school. I saw that those kids were having a hard time adapting. And they want to hang out among themselves only. Kids straight from North Korea, such as myself, did not like to play with those kids from China. They can't understand our language. Also, Chinese kids have their way of doing things the Chinese way. We also had our way of doing things the North Korean way, but having come to South Korea we tried to follow South Korean customs. Yet, the Chinese kids seemed to have a difficult time adopting the South Korean way. They also eat different food. They tend to eat a lot of Chinese food. There was also a big culture gap.

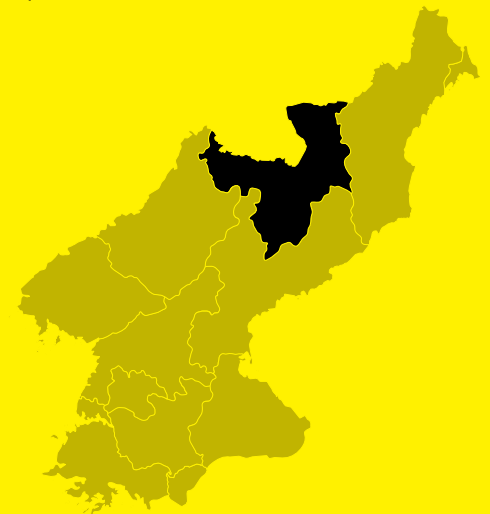
Some of the kids want to go back to China. Some want to stay in South Korea. But the kids having a really hard time do

say they want to go back to China. But when you look at the kids with difficulty adapting, it's often their moms who are giving them a hard time. For instance, a mom would pressure the child to do better, but there are things beyond a child's ability. The children get stressed out from the mothers being too harsh on them, and they end up being on not so good terms with their moms. There are good mothers to be sure. But there are some moms about which we even feel "Ah, that's bad parenting." So the kids are stressed. I mean there's corporal punishment as a part of parenting.

Voice  
18

Migrant Workers in China

Hello, my name is Jo Jin-hwan. I used to live in Ryanggang Province before crossing the border between North Korea and China in late 2019. I reached South Korea in early 2020.



Hello, my name is Jo Jin-hwan. I used to live in Ryanggang Province before crossing the border between North Korea and China in late 2019. I reached South Korea in early 2020.

This wasn't my first escape. I've been back and forth between China and North Korea ever since I graduated from school. Just ten years ago, people were anxious to serve in the military as soon as they finished school. But now, people who don't want to serve can pay bribes to skip the draft. In my home province of Ryanggang alone, there were more than a hundred new soldiers who ran away after less than a month of basic training. In my case, I couldn't serve because of my parents. I tried for a few years to see if I could serve, but I couldn't.

I went to China after graduating and got jobs at construction sites and at farms. I was mostly in the region of the Korean Chinese population – Antu County or Helong in Jilin Province. I took up jobs that are often called “manual labour.” I couldn't think of getting a corporate job. I just did my manual work and got paid. At first, it was so hard to get a job. I didn't know anything and I didn't speak the language. But after one year, I started getting to know people in China, so I could get jobs. They knew I was there illegally, and that meant they could get in trouble too if I got caught. So there was a mutual understanding to keep things quiet. Things were fine as long as we kept our lips sealed. One time, there were up to forty North Koreans hired for picking blueberries, but the Chinese people didn't report them. Not only that, I worked in bean farms a number of times, again without any issues. But nowadays Chinese people tend to report these people, perhaps out of a change of heart.

I was in charge of managing a number of North Korean workers on site. I got paid more for being a manager. By 2013,

a day's work paid me about a hundred yuan. The people who worked under my management got 60~70 yuan per person depending on the work. I visited China so often that I could speak some Chinese and had many friends in China. When it's blueberry season, the blueberry farms in the mountains are more dangerous than the city. The Chinese police are after North Koreans at the blueberry farms. The Chinese police were on high alert trying to arrest any North Korean on sight. But I knew how to escort people safely, so nothing happened while we were travelling to the city or working in the countryside. In this way, I would work for one or two months in China and then escort people back to North Korea. I would also spend some time in North Korea before sneaking out again. Since there are a lot of people waiting to get back to North Korea, the return trip had to be repeated three or four times with ten persons on each trip to get everyone back to the North Korean side. I would be the last to return, after getting everyone across.

I would usually spend the autumn in China working on bean farms or corn farms. In 2018 and 2019, I was mostly working in construction. Farm work was all done on private farms. It's all private farming in China. My job as a construction worker was on the 7th and 8th floors of a hotel that was being built. I also drove bulldozers and forklifts at a regular factory too. I didn't have a licence, but they would have me behind the wheel as long as I knew what I was doing.

I started visiting China more often starting from 2018. Back then, I was under the impression that there weren't that many North Koreans in China. But turns out there were a lot. It's mostly women who come to China to settle down. These days, migrant workers like me who make money in China and go back to North

Korea are fewer in number. Since it's so hard to cross the border to begin with, people prefer going all the way to South Korea once they make it to the Chinese side. There are less people who, like me, go back and forth between China and North Korea to make a living.

The border region is most dangerous between July and mid-November. It starts snowing in December and with snow up to your thighs, the military cannot find you very well. I travel to China carefree during that season because I'm not worried about getting caught. May and June are also quiet. You can cross the border with ease. Recently, Kim Jong-un gave strict orders against crossing the border, so people dare not approach the border. Compared to the past, maybe one-tenth of the people are crossing the border. By the time I was leaving, the state and Kim Jong-un himself were meting out harsh punishments which discouraged people from attempting to cross. Those who used to frequent the China side now say they dare not approach the border because they get too nervous. In the years 2017 and 2018, the saying was that border-crossers will be shot on sight, or shot after making three calls to halt. Those who are not familiar with the waterways of the border region do not dare try approaching the border.

The Yalu River flows down from Mount Paektu, so that's where the river starts. Between Mount Paektu and the Tumen River, there is a 25~30 km segment where the water is shallow or almost dry. A person can skip across in one leap, as the river turns into a narrow and shallow stream of water. Some segments are only knee-deep. That's where I made my way into China. I tried both the Yalu River crossing and the Tumen River crossing. It was safer across the Yalu River. You only need to cut through the barbed wires, climb over a mountain, and cross the river –

no other issues. But as for the Tumen River passage, the Border Patrol can chase me down once they find out I've made it into the border area. They have an entrance to go in and out, but I have to cut through the barbed wire. So it's dangerous there. It's only about a 500m distance, but it can get very dangerous if you are not careful. They have barbed wires everywhere in the border area. Before, they only had barbed wires on the Chinese side. Now they have them on the North Korean side as well, and the Chinese side also has the wires placed more densely. The North Korean side in particular has barbed wires placed so dense that a chicken wouldn't be able to make it to the other side. The holes in the wired fences are only about 5~10 cm in diameter. The fences on the North Korean side were placed in around 2015 or 2016.

The reason why I risked my life many times crossing the Chinese border was because I could make much more money on that side of the border.

I did the maths while I was in China, and I figured that a family of four engaging in farming in North Korea makes about as much money as I did in a matter of ten days in China.

If you have a cornfield, a year's harvest will end up getting you 1,200 North Korean won per kilogram. As there are no private farmers in North Korea, one cannot farm as one pleases. With

the little money they have, they cannot afford fertilisers and pesticides. The yields only get less and less. When I was in China, back in 2018, I made about 180~200 yuan per day. Ten days' work in China is equivalent to one year's farm work in North Korea, meaning that it's worth making money big time in China instead of working yourself to death in North Korea.

Still, if you spend too much time in China, the Ministry of State Security will find out. Once caught, all your earnings will go to the Ministry. Usually, you would spend about two months in China, come back, and then go to China again. In North Korea, your neighbours will recognize your absence after only two or three days. It's a small region, and people tend to live together for decades. Then there are those made to spy on such things in the neighbourhood. In the People's Unit, there are informants working for the Ministry of State Security. These people are at least known informants. They had three or four married women without jobs to spy on other people.

I started making trips to China from the age of 20, so my family members knew where I was going. One day, my family members told me that the Ministry of State Security was after me. They said that I was told to lie low since they knew about my trips to China. I figured out who was on close terms with the State Security officer and found out who the snitch was.

I could never sleep tight because of this.

Since my trips to China were illegal,  
I had to assume I was a dead man once I was caught.

I had to pay someone to cover my absence – saying that I was working for them instead the whole time. I would plan ahead with the same person and move in unison. You have to report yourself as being far away so that the Ministry will only make a phone call to confirm instead of an investigation on site. If it is close, they will come to see for themselves. That would make it easy to get caught. Still, you would get law enforcement officers that come visit sometimes. There are not so many cars in North Korea, but there are a lot of motorcycles. Law enforcement officers mostly ride motorcycles. In truth, I had to hold my breath every time I heard a motorbike passing in front of my house – wondering what it could be this time. I couldn't have one night of decent sleep because I was always worried at the back of my mind about my illegal trips to China.

It was 2014 when I first tried coming to South Korea. I knew many broker connections that could get me to South Korea because I visited China so often. There were some brokers who would offer me help in getting me to South Korea. That's when I started having thoughts about South Korea. I dealt with many ethnic Koreans in China, and I made friends there including ethnic Korean sisters. I've also shared a flat with a South Korean person for about two months while in China. I could hear about South Korea through these encounters with Chinese Koreans and South Koreans. After that, all I could think about was going to South Korea. But back then, my family would have surely starved without me. I couldn't leave my family behind. So, without any alternatives, I kept crossing the Chinese border to make money. Even so, the Ministry isn't stupid enough to not see what I was doing. Rumours spread, and I had the Ministry people visiting my home. The State Security officer must have known all along that I

was making trips to China. But without the evidence, he couldn't really find me guilty.

Ultimately, I had to leave home in 2019. By then, I knew the Ministry had me cornered. So I packed my stuff and ran off to Hyesan in the middle of the night. Back then, I was the only person among my family who had a mobile phone. As I was leaving, I gave them my phone telling them to call my friend's house at Hyesan if anything happens. I stayed in Hyesan for about two days when I heard that the Ministry visited my house to arrest me. I was told they didn't make it obvious that they were trying to arrest me, and they just stepped in, looked around, and left.

It would have meant certain death for me had I been caught trying to escape North Korea. I had a history of crossing the Chinese border for quite some time. At the very least, I would be sentenced to seven or eight years in a Reform through Labour Camp. I figured that I could at least get my family to bring food to my cell if I was the only one caught attempting to escape, so that's why I escaped alone. Even a single year of a reform through labour sentence is hard to survive. The beating is one thing, but it's really the strict regulations and hard labour. The food is horrible there – a machine-pressed lump of corn flour that's shorter than your average finger. That's why most people there die from starvation or illness. They rarely make it longer than a year and a half. So I had no choice but to sneak over the Chinese border alone. I started preparing for my next trip to South Korea as soon as I made it across. Then I got the help of a broker I knew there to get me to South Korea. It all happened in a flash.

I didn't realise how wealthy South Korea was until I left North Korea. I did hear that South Korea fairs better than China.

To my eyes, China was a very developed country. Since South Korea is said to be better than China, there was no doubt about it being a wealthy country. Above all, I couldn't sleep at night while in China. I was so tense that I would wake up at the sound of a stray cat passing by. In case I got arrested by the Chinese police at any point, I would have been sent back to North Korea for sure.

North Korea restricts its people too much. The state never lets us be – they want our money. I had to pay bribes in tobacco and cash. The law is meaningless there.

I think the people leave North Korea these days because of the oppression.

My guess is that there are still about 60 to 80% of the people crossing the Chinese border due to economic difficulties.

North Korea has a poor economy. It is the lack of food that compels North Koreans to cross the Chinese border out of hunger. There are many among them that don't have enough to eat. People who are there to make money, such as myself, are fewer in number. People's work and lives are regulated in North Korea, when in fact they want to live on their own terms, and so many are discontent. Bribing is necessary every step of the way. Your hard-earned money has to go to the law enforcement officers. That's what makes things hard.

I believe more people are leaving North Korea than 10 years



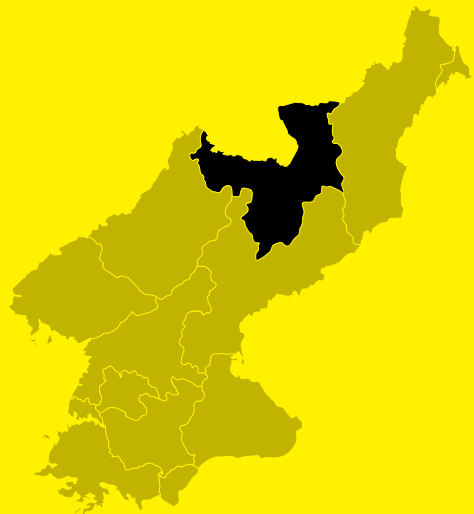
ago for reasons other than poverty. The border control was much looser 10 years back. It was a time when people who had family or relatives in South Korea would make an escape. But now, people are informed and a lot of them feel that they need to go to South Korea in search of freedom. But that became difficult due to tighter border controls. There is no freedom in North Korea. It is extremely stressful to live there. Well, I hear that some North Koreans get stressed out after coming to South Korea. But I have never been under any kind of stress since I made it here. In North Korea, I was always on the edge, always shaken. Compared to the high stress levels coming from daily life in North Korea, life in South Korea is comfortable beyond comparison.

When I was working in China, all I had in my mind was to return to North Korea. More so because I had family back in North Korea. I worked in China sleeping two hours a day, and I cooked for the workers there aside from my day job. I told my boss that I intend to do so, and I got more pay after negotiating the terms. Including the pay for my cooking, I made 250 yuan a day. As I was making all that money, I had a strong desire to make it back to North Korea – perhaps because I had family there. As for the others, the group that I escorted into China in 2019 refused to go to South Korea even though I'd told them I could find them a broker. Those people didn't know much about South Korea, and they had bad impressions about the country. Anyways, I worked with them in China, and escorted them back to North Korea because that's what they wanted. You need to be a worldly-wise individual to know about South Korea. Many North Koreans will go nuts even at the mention of South Korea, as if it was the end of the world. There are still many people like that in North Korea.

Ever since I came to South Korea, I no longer think that I

am a North Korean. I don't regard North Korea as my homeland. Learning about the Kim family in South Korea made me mad that I was living a lie. Still, I don't feel that I'm fully South Korean just yet. I don't think that has taken root in my head. One thing for sure is, I no longer think of myself as a North Korean, because it was so difficult living there. Whenever I see North Korea being mentioned on TV, I just turn it off. When I see staged accounts in movies and TV series where North Koreans mention the "Supreme Leader", I turn it off, cursing to myself. I try not to think about North Korea anymore.

Hello, my name is  
Park Hyon-ju.  
I used to live in  
Ryanggang Province,  
and left in late 2018.



Hello, my name is Park Hyon-ju. I used to live in Ryanggang Province, and left in late 2018. It was early 2019 when I reached Incheon airport. I came to South Korea because I saw that, as long as I was in North Korea, I had to continue making a living out of what is deemed illegal there.

I used to work at a police station. You can work at a police station without having done military service, although the requirements differ for each department. I handled paperwork in my department. You need to have a good background to be able to work at a police station. But even with a good background, you can't secure a position without money. You need to comply with some of those requests. North Korea is a caste society. That is to say, a child of a farm worker has to inherit that work. Given this, the parents try to make the most money off of their work if they can. Money will make your life easy.

My day job was constantly recording the daily routine of others and such information. I would record a person's change of profession, visits to China, sentence to Reform through Labour Camps, sentence to Labour Training Camps, etc... I was made to record everything and anything. If someone gets promoted to the ranks of cadres, the Cadre Officers in charge of doing background checks would come in to open up his resident registration record and take a copy. They have a set circle of close relatives to be investigated for the background checks. A police officer would be investigated up to several generations, a State Security Officer would be investigated up to several generations. The background check is for you and your relatives. One cannot be promoted if the check shows poor ancestry. The resident registration holds records stretching up to your great-grandfather's generation, but the original copy will show relatives that you didn't even

know existed. These are ancient documents that have been recorded ever since North Korea was first created as a country. After a while, these documents were made into booklets with photographs attached. Then after a while, they became printouts. Now we have the documents along with the computerised files. That is to say, if you want to make changes, you have to reconcile the two different versions. There are those who handle the paper copies, and there are those who handle the computer files. It's all segregated in this way. If one person were to handle both, they can manipulate the records very easily. When I first joined, computers were being used, but not for documentation. The decision to computerise the records was only made because we received so many requests for background checks and other tasks related to the documentation. Only then we started using computers to store and write the records. I think this was around 2010.

Just like in South Korea, cities are divided by districts. There are police officers and resident registration officers in charge of each district. Within the district, some people are chosen to provide intel. They will go on to share information on who does what for a living, what that person is like, etc. These intel providers are technically spying on other people. State Security Officers have their agents undercover, and the district police would have their own people undercover. This way, the people cannot trust each other. It's harder to control the crowd when the people stand unified. That's why North Korea, as a country, strives to make its people suspect one another. If someone criticises the leader or the party, somebody might report that to the State Security Officer in charge. But around the time I left for South Korea, people had experienced South Korean culture enough

that friends may complain about things but not report that to the outside. Of course, you cannot complain too loudly. You may have said things out of trust for the other person but may end up taking all the blame. People have a lot to complain about. Everything is regulated more and more. Everything is illegal. The state doesn't give you anything, and the state doesn't let you go out and make a living. They just tell you "This is illegal, and so is that", and the people find it hard to cope.

Since North Korean parents seldom have more than one child, they seem to focus on the one child.

Most couples will have only one. Two is very rare. Having children is not taken for granted these days. Well-to-do households want to get ahead, so they get really competitive about child-rearing. For instance, you may not want your child to be sitting in the third row on picture day. On 1 June (Children's Day), they have all the kids in kindergarten dancing in a group. The front row costs 500 yuan, while the next row costs 300 yuan, the next costs 200 yuan, and so on. Even if your child looks nice and is a better dancer, she may have to stand in the back row where no one can see her. Every time there is a school event, they would undertake a school modernization project, which would require parents to donate money, bringing in a truckload of mixed gravel, a paint job, or a new windowpane for the research building. The school would mobilise the parents for this kind of construction work. The parents will do all the work. The fathers would visit the school after work to do interior work. The parents

who cannot make the time will hire someone to do the job. Such things exist.

Just so you know, birth control does exist in North Korea. We have condoms from the UN. They are called “UN commodities.” Contraceptive pills are also imported from China. They’re all imported via China whether they are manufactured in South Korea or in another country. Condoms are sometimes used, and sometimes not used. There are many pregnant adolescents who end up dying while trying to have an abortion without their parents knowing about it. There are no abortion clinics in North Korea. Abortions are all carried out in private households. They are individuals who have experience working at a hospital. Even so, one must assume these private homes will no doubt have inferior equipment. The sanitary conditions often result in septic infections leading to death. Or, there could be extreme blood loss which the doctor can’t do anything about, so they end up dying. Adolescents and grownups die in this way. Getting an abortion in a North Korean clinic will require you to go through a lot of protocol, paperwork to sign, and approvals. It’s all very complicated. So you’d rather pay an individual to get it over with. As for contraception, women say they put a loop in the womb, which is also done by an individual practitioner. These IUD loops come in gold, silver, and bronze that come at different prices. IUDs are the most common. Then there are these things that doctors with some overseas experience will inject into your arm. Men in North Korea do not think much of contraception. So when girls go to join the military, the parents will get them contraception (IUDs) before they join. Because if things go wrong, it’s all on their daughter and no responsibility is held on the man’s part. North Korean society is like that.

I think North Koreans are having fewer babies recently because, in a way, they’ve opened their eyes to reality and they feel they need to live their own lives.

Knowing that having many children will not bring happiness, they are reluctant to have children.

Above anything else, it’s not easy to look after multiple children. I am sure that there are couples who have fewer children because life is hard. Everyone has their own lifestyle. These days, couples rarely give birth right after marriage, at least where I come from. A couple would live together for 2 or 3 years, and then register their marriage only when they have the conviction to live on as a couple. That’s when they choose to have a child. Couples often move in together like this in North Korea these days.

Getting a divorce is very difficult In North Korea. Ever since Kim Jong-un came into power, it has gotten even harder. Divorce costs a lot of money. It will cost about 10,000 Chinese yuan to cover all expenses. There are those that live with less than 100-yuan worth of savings. Also, young people find marriage tiring and divorce even more tiresome. They prefer to live by themselves. This is why they won't register their marriage right after they get married. Also, you need a lot of money to get married these days. It is expected that the husband pays to buy a house. If the man is so smart and good-looking but without money, the woman’s family may take him to live with them. They will send the child to college. In exchange, however, the man

does not get to voice any opinions on family matters. He is pretty much a trophy husband because his wife provides for everything.

Getting a divorce will not get you stigmatised by society, but it's so hard to get a divorce in the first place. That's why a couple would prefer to live together first, have a child, and register their marriage later. The state asks you to register your marriage for the census and other reasons. But even the police officers sometimes live as an unregistered couple. There are many who are married on paper but are virtually divorced so that they live apart from one another. If a spouse goes to South Korea, the household will file a missing person report. After 3 years, the marriage is automatically nullified. There's no money to be paid for that. Either the wife has gone missing, or the husband has gone missing. It's an automatic divorce. In North Korea, we refer to these people as "missing persons", but the State Security Officers and the like know where they are. They know they are living in South Korea. So in North Korea, when someone goes missing, we think they must have gone to South Korea since so many leave the country for South Korea. And the people are very envious of other households that have family members in South Korea because the family back home receives money and maintains a better living. Sometimes they will complain by lamenting on how their own children don't plan on leaving.

When I first reached South Korea, everything was unfamiliar and I could only make out the words being spoken. I assumed that things would work out since I speak the same language, but turns out there's discrimination. Sometimes I didn't know what I was doing with my life. But it's better now. My daughter adapted very well and she really likes it here. Seeing her, I feel like it was a good choice to make for my child. Above all,

you get to go anywhere you want once you are in South Korea. North Korea is so limited you have to go through protocols even if you want to go. You cannot travel abroad even if you are very rich. So although it's tough living here, I think it was the right choice.

Older people are immersed in the Juche ideology of North Korea, but the people in their 20s, 30s, and 40s are different. It's just that they don't talk openly about it, but you can already tell from their fashion and hair style. And if you see someone with good manners, you can tell that he must have watched a lot of South Korean movies and TV shows, or foreign shows in general. You can tell the difference in the way they greet other people in meetings and events. It's apparent from the way they start a conversation. But even that is only noticeable to those who watched the shows. North Korean society still restricts people's clothes. They will literally bring scissors to cut your dress. They will do so to your clothing and your hair. That's truly an act of indignity. Censorship officers and university student inspectors will approach you with scissors. The ladies from the women's union will also regulate unusual fashion. The young people will fight it and retain their style. In reality, their style is clean and fine-looking. So the younger people will often retort by saying, "Don't bother us and go regulate those other people with torn clothing." They argue with the censorship officers. Here in South Korea, it is fashionable to wear clothes with wear-and-tear, but there are people in North Korea that wear torn clothing because they are poor.

These days, people in their 30s and below think very differently compared to people in their 40s and 50s.

## The mindset is truly different.

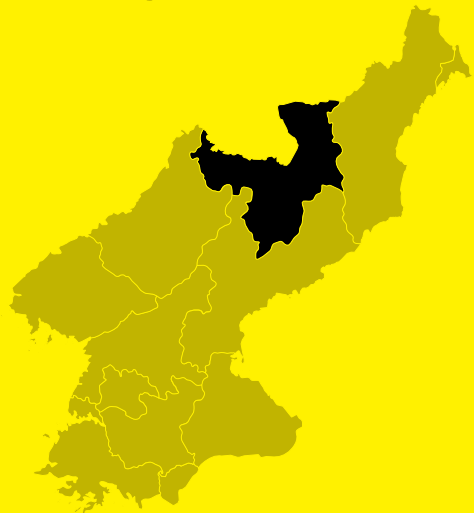
In North Korea, we refer to those young people as having a crooked mindset. But I don't think this will lead to a regime change even if it were to persist. It's strange. Inside North Korea, you see that the world is truly corrupt. It is a communist regime only in name. And so, I keep thinking to myself that this is what herd mentality does to people. Just looking at the state of North Korean society, you see drug addicts everywhere. It truly is like that. It's also a country where illegal actions are so prevalent. It makes you wonder how such a country can stay on its feet. I think, at the end of the day, it has to do with the fact that there are fewer people with crooked minds than there are those with uncrooked minds. And, the people of that country, having seen so little in that tiny world, have not seen much at all. People who witness the outside world will think something is wrong and attempt to escape to South Korea. Right now, no matter how difficult things are in North Korea, the regime will remain since people haven't seen much at all. One slip of your tongue could be the end of you.

I contacted my family back in North Korea just recently. They tell me that life is hard because prices have jumped due to the border lockdowns from Covid-19. They didn't tell me about Covid-19 outbreaks or anything. But they did say that the common cold this season is unusually tough, and that they had caught it. So I told them to take good care, because that is Covid-19. This was in May 2021 I believe. We had a longer-than-usual phone call that day. But there have been no phone calls since then – just texting. Phone calls are harder to make these days with the

stricter crackdowns, so I text them instead. They said they caught a cold, but I told them it was Covid-19. It's just that they've never heard of such a thing. I told them to take medicine, and they said they are taking medicine. If North Korea had people tested for Covid-19, my family would have told me something about it. But they didn't. Anyhow, I was in contact with them via phone until May last year (2021) and kept reaching out via texts since then. They let me know how things are over there.

If you're rich, North Korea is a nice place to be, if you can manage to live without caring too much. But since you are committing illegal activities for a living, you never know when you will get arrested. Even if you bribe all the members of the judiciary, they will come after you once you hit a certain tipping point. So you will be nervous even with a lot of money. There's no place in North Korea to store all that money for safekeeping. In North Korea, we don't make deposits in banks. One has to hold on to all the cash. So that makes you very nervous. You get nervous even if you're making a lot of money. Once people around you start getting suspicious of what your source of income is, you will be a target. That will get you blamed for crimes that you did not commit, and once you're arrested you can't escape the charges. So that's why I decided to leave for South Korea.

Hello, my name is Lim Eun-hwa. I was born in Ryanggang Province where I lived my whole life before leaving in late 2019. I reached South Korea after travelling through many countries including China.



Hello, my name is Lim Eun-hwa. I was born in Ryanggang Province where I lived my whole life before leaving in late 2019. I reached South Korea after travelling through many countries including China.

They say that North Korea passed the “Reactionary Thought and Culture Denunciation Law” in December 2020. Even before the enactment of the law, accessing foreign culture was subject to harsh punishments. While punishments were made, they were usually one-month sentences to Labour Training Camps depending on the severity of the violation. People get sent to the Training Camps when they don’t have money. If you do have money, you can pay your way out. Being caught while watching South Korean movies or TV series, on the other hand, was a more difficult situation to get out of. People would receive a year of prison sentence for that.

And recently, there are so many people escaping from North Korea that I was told the punishments have gotten harsher ever since I left. I don’t know if you’ve heard this one, but there was a major crackdown on those who fulfil cash transfers from South Korea, those brokers that arrange phone calls with South Korea, and the like. I was told that around 40 or 60 people were all arrested and sent to a Political Prison Camp. To be precise, this was between April and May 2021, when they did a crackdown on Ryanggang Province. All the brokers were arrested. The punishment wasn’t so harsh before, but I’ve been told that the situation got much worse since 2020 – after I left. Even a sneak peek is going to cost fifteen years’ sentence, they say. The regulations have strengthened around the matter. Before, you just had to pay a little bribe and things would be fine. But now, if you try to bribe somebody, that somebody might lose his job. So

the officers fear the consequences and cannot go easy on a person who has watched South Korean content. The crackdowns and punishments have gotten harsher than before.

In 2018 and 2019, there was a mood for reconciliation between the two Koreas. Talks of peace and reunification would appear on North Korean television. But even then, they would regulate South Korean culture. Hearing the news, regular folks were giddy as if reunification were waiting at their doorsteps, talking about how their leader is meeting the president of the United States and the president of South Korea.

But after the summits, there were lecture sessions held for each organisation.

The lectures told us that we should never trust the Americans and the South Koreans.

They told us that the Americans are cunning, and so are the Japanese, and the South Koreans are no different. They are all corrupt capitalist societies and cannot be trusted. We must be self-reliant and have trust in ourselves only. Even after Kim Jong-un met all those leaders, they would still make indoctrination efforts against the people. The Women's Union, the Youth League, and the Korean Workers' Alliance<sup>1</sup> – the party... Instructions are made to every organisation. That's how they indoctrinate. It's brainwashing in order to keep people from having thoughts.

<sup>1</sup> Also referred to as the General Federation of Trade Unions of Korea. One of the four major workers' organisations in North Korea. They follow the instructions of the Workers' Party of Korea. All workers and employees over the age of thirty who are not a member of another organisation will be made to join.

Some South Koreans say that we should give aid to North Korea for peaceful purposes. I think that's wrong. Even if you do give aid to North Korea, none of it goes to the people. Aiding North Korea will only make Kim Jong-un and his family richer. I didn't know when I was in North Korea myself. There was a time when Mr. Chung Ju-yung, the founder of Hyundai Groups, aided North Korea with rice and flood relief as North Korea was struggling. Kim Il-sung was in power at the time. North Koreans received rice in yellow sacks of 40 kilograms each that said "Republic of Korea." South Korean rice was of superior quality. There was aid supplied from South Korea even after this. Didn't South Korea provide cement when there was a lot of damage caused by floods? But do you know how North Korea announced the situation to the people? The authorities would announce that they won't take anything from South Korea and that all of it has been dumped into the river, while using aid relief from South Korea all that time. They would take the goods behind their back, but tell their people otherwise. They continued promoting propaganda not to trust South Korea. When aid comes from South Korea, the people start thinking that South Korea must be wealthy and that's why they can support us. The authorities didn't want the people getting such ideas, so they spread lies that South Korean relief items were useless. People like myself were naturally made to think that South Koreans were two-faced. That's how I made sense of it while in North Korea. I cannot think otherwise, as that is all I hear. That's why I think South Korea shouldn't supply North Korea with anything. These supplies won't help with reunification and won't help the people.

That said, I do wish people would stop sending air balloons with leaflets and fliers in them over to North Korea.



I say so because once the leaflets made it across, North Korea would organise a mass demonstration. It was a demonstration denouncing the traitors who left the country, and it was those family members remaining in North Korea that took all the blame. The Ministry of State Security summoned those people to interrogate them about whether they were colluding with South Korea in sending their family member. I still have family in North Korea. That's why North Koreans living in South Korea such as myself have raised a complaint to these North Korean refugee YouTube celebrities and others who are that fly balloons into North Korea. We told them that those who have settled in South Korea have it easy, and we shouldn't impact our family members living in North Korea. We've sent word to these activists to stop what they are doing. "Please stop, we beg you." Those people claim that their leaflets give North Koreans access to outside information and open their minds. We don't necessarily agree, because the North Korean authorities block everything.

They shouldn't be doing that to North Korea. They should instead let the world know about the situation in North Korea. North Korea blocks everything making its way in, so sending balloons won't have a penetration effect. Whatever they were flying into the country, it was cut off by the North Korean government before it could reach the people. It only adds to the difficulties for the people.

They shouldn't try to inform the North Koreans.  
They should try to inform the world about North Korea.  
The entire world should learn about  
the reality of North Korea and raise their voices.

This isn't just me. Most people from North Korea share this opinion. North Korea is currently isolated due to UN sanctions. This is good. The Korean president shouldn't meet Kim Jong-un, and neither should the U.S. They should choose to isolate North Korea - from the world, that is. People who have escaped North Korea feel that's the right thing to do. The world should know about the human rights situation in North Korea that we have experienced first-hand.

The situation in North Korea is serious, but I don't think the other countries should give aid. None of it goes to the people. Those in the central Workers' Party will build their lives on the aid provided. The people don't get to protest about why the aid is not given to them. In South Korea, people would protest to the president, right? North Koreans cannot even start a riot. People simply wonder whether there is anything left for them to take. That's how ordinary people think. That's why you should never aid the country. This might be a cold-hearted thing to say, but it's better that the people start a riot out of starvation. Otherwise, there can be no change.

But then, North Koreans have gone through the Arduous March. Even then there were no food riots as people were dying out. Why?

The first word that babies learn in North Korea is "Supreme Leader."

Having been taught that all their lives, there can be no riots or rebellions.

That's why all the refugees from North Korea, not just me, were furious to learn the things they didn't know before – as the facts were revealed to us. In North Korea nobody talks. In South Korea, everybody talks.

As we were leaving North Korea, our eyes were wet in thinking that it is the regime that is to blame and we are not leaving because of any bad feelings toward my homeland. Even then, I felt slightly sorry for Kim Jong-un because I still had some indoctrination left in my mind. The others who escaped with me also shared similar attitudes of feeling sorry, in that we are leaving our country behind when we've been taught to be self-reliant all the time. But upon arriving in China and hearing the things that I never heard, well... I couldn't believe how naïve we had been and I felt a rage inside me. I couldn't keep myself from cursing at the facts. But no matter how hard one tries to send those words to people in North Korea, they are unlikely to receive any because they are blocked from access. So I would like to make this fact known to the world, so that the world can speak to North Korea and Kim Jong-un to come to terms with how his people are doing.

I want to ask Kim Jong-un, claiming to be the father figure for his people, whether he knows how his people live. I want to ask him to go out alone and meet regular people, without his attendants. When Kim Jong-un comes to inspect the sites, his attendants come in advance to clear the way. My house, which didn't have anything at the time, was all of a sudden furnished with a refrigerator, electric lights, name plate, rice, oil, snacks and all – simply because Kim Jong-un was coming to survey my neighbourhood. It's all staged. Once Kim Jong-un leaves, they come to retrieve the props. That's why Kim Jong-un has no

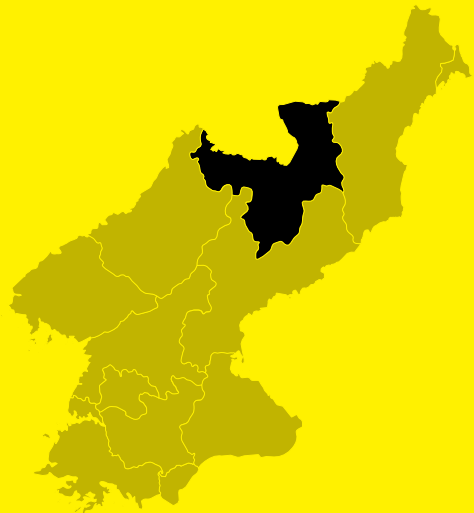
clue. I'm sure this is the case for other heads of state too, but the attendants block the view ahead of Kim Jong-un's arrival.

There was a woman who was married to someone in my hometown. She used to be a masseuse in Pyongyang – working under the Department no. 5 of the central Workers' Party<sup>②</sup>. Her husband was also a retired bodyguard for Kim Jong-il who had returned to his parents' home for marriage. I was so surprised to hear what this woman had to say. This was in the mid-2000s, and the women in Department no. 5 were offered so many things. This woman was outside Pyongyang for the first time, and she found the lifestyle so unfamiliar and different from what she was accustomed to that she would just stare with her eyes wide open. There are no paved roads in the countryside. It's all dirt tracks. This woman couldn't walk very well on these roads, because of the dust. She would take a step and wipe the dust. Take another step and wipe some more. That's how she was. If someone who is merely at Department no. 5 behaves like this, then I can only imagine how the Kim family lives and the directors of the party supporting the Kims. Hearing about life in Pyongyang from this lady, I thought to myself that the lifestyle cannot be more different – although I didn't show it. That's how I started feeling some resentment. The livelihoods of Pyongyang residents and ordinary people are too far apart.

That's why I say that no matter how much world-wide support is offered to North Korea, only those at the top will enjoy the benefits. Kim Jong-un said it himself. He said everything else can go to ruin, and he just needs Pyongyang residents to rule North Korea. Rural people are out of sight. We are treated as pigs and dogs. That's why they can execute people at a shooting range so easily.

<sup>②</sup> Department no. 5 is an organisation tasked with special duties including assisting the Kim family.

Hello, my name is  
Kim Jin-seon.  
I was born in  
Ryanggang Province.  
I left North Korea  
in early 2019 and  
reached South Korea  
in the middle of  
the same year.



Hello, my name is Kim Jin-seon. I was born in Ryanggang Province. I left North Korea in early 2019 and reached South Korea in the middle of the same year.

I graduated from a professional college and had a company job. It was a trading company. This was not a joint venture with China. You can call it a commissioned manufacturer from China. North Koreans would manufacture the products ordered from the Chinese side to ship back to China. I worked there until 2019.

These operations mostly take the form of “commissioned manufacturing.” Ever heard of basketry (*chomul*)? You may have seen straw hats worn in Vietnam and other tropical regions. I worked for a basketry manufacturer – where we would weave such products out of straw. I worked in quality assurance. Workers are given 80~100 kg of straw before work. There is a fixed quantity required for making a single hat. For instance, if you can make one straw hat with every 200 grams of straw ingredients, 2 kg of straw would allow you to weave ten hats. People worked from home. Once you are done with your batch of straw ingredients, you are visited by someone from the company to pick up the finished goods. Then there are the QA agents like me who would assess the goods made. The quality had to be good given this is a transaction with China, and there are many competitors in the market.

People that make wares at home do not necessarily stay at one workplace. Rather, they move about here and there in search of work. It is only natural for them to find a company that pays them quicker and better. From the companies’ perspective, they need to be able to keep up with a faster payment cycle for the workers to attract more people to work for them, while keeping up with a certain level of quality assurance. But as for me, I placed

strict bars for my quality assurance. The reason I did that is because people who failed my bar would go submit their work to another company. That company would end up with lower-grade products as a result. That way, my company would naturally grow a competitive edge against the other company. The Chinese buyer really liked our company. Our company didn't produce a whole lot, but we made goods that were of fine quality with barely any defects. Our way of work built a level of trust.

There were a number of competitors in the neighbouring area that manufactured similar goods as we did. There were many that produced goods other than hats. There were so many companies that made wigs, fake eyelashes, and those that weaved basketry. The materials would come from China so that North Koreans could manufacture them into products by hand. The finished goods are then sent over to China, and the proceeds are paid in cash.

The company is run by a North Korean CEO. Everything is operated by North Korean hands. The only part where the Chinese get involved is that there is a Chinese buyer who places the orders. We didn't have these Commissioned Manufacturing companies in my hometown back when I was young. The business started booming all of a sudden, as it became harder to make a living and the smuggling trade was restricted.

I can't say for sure when exactly the business started spreading, but roughly one-third or one-quarter of the local population were under the influence of the Commissioned Manufacture-related businesses by the time I left North Korea.

It's difficult to define individuals in the Commissioned Manufacture business as belonging to a certain class of people. Young people have good eyesight and that gives them an advantage in certain types of work. Then there are older people in their 50s and 60s who may not have good eyesight but are good at sewing and knitting. This is something that the younger generation is weak at. As such, there are tasks people specialise in by different age groups, so that younger people do what they do best and older people do what they do best. These tasks are mostly handled by women. There are some men to be sure, but this is a full-time job that requires 12-plus hours of work. If you think about it from the other side, can you imagine men taking up that task? It does not make sense for a man to be crouched for 12 hours a day, working on the floor. Moreover, North Korea is a patriarchal society, which means men do not participate in home economics.

These commissioned manufactures do have business areas, but they are mostly used for exchanging raw materials and finished goods. There's no way 70-80 people all gather up at the business area for work. The work instead takes place according to the individuals' timeline. Some people might get work done while having a meal at home, and others might do so while watching TV – don't you think? The business sites are only used for exchanging raw materials with finished products. It is difficult to get employees to come to the site for work. But there are instances where people do need to show up for work, which is when they go through training at first – because no one is skilled at it from the start. In order to train the rookies, we start with the first 20 among 100 workers. These 20 workers would go on to teach the next 20 workers and so on. Workers may have to show

up at the business site to select trainers and stuff.

The wage system is capitalist in concept. That is to say, you get paid according to your workload.

For hats, you are paid by the unit. There are no set fixed working hours. The more hats you finish, the more money you make. Some people work on this while sitting at their stall at the marketplace – like those who work “two-jobs” among South Koreans. You could call these North Koreans as having three-jobs actually – because the women do home maintenance and work at the market stall as well as do the commissioned manufacture work. For sure, these people are less productive than those who work full-time. Those who work in this business full-time will take meals prepared by their children and continue with their work. That’s why the money made with commissioned manufacture work differs by individual. Those with quick hands can make one or two straw hats a day, which amounts to 300~500 Chinese yuan per month. But some make less than 50 yuan.

These companies are all legally approved by the state. Once approved, the company has to make a certain “contribution” to the state. Think of it as similar to paying taxes in South Korea. This is not a private enterprise, but more of a public-sector enterprise acknowledged by the state. Companies as a concept in North Korea have existed for only 10 or 15 years. They have not been around for decades. These companies cannot do anything without the approval of the state. That’s why I think these are

public sector corporations, but not like the rigid public service providers seen here in South Korea. They simply take the form of a public enterprise. Manufacturers with hired hands or trading companies that fetch dollars both serve the same purpose, which is to serve the state. These are legally operated businesses in North Korea.

With the continuation of the Covid-19 pandemic, I think these companies may have gone out of business. When I was in North Korea, Chinese people would move between the two countries officially through customs. But when regional politics became complicated and relations with neighbouring countries turned sour, the customs would be shut down for a while. This would cause a delay in movements for one or two months at a time. Now, the Covid-19 pandemic has closed off the borders completely. Would there still be some people and goods moving back and forth? I doubt that. That’s why I am assuming that the company went out of business as of now. That will cause more suffering among the people. I do hear such stories from North Korea.

Those individuals who had been making money in this way should be able to find some other alternative to make a living, to survive. But I can’t speak in precise terms about the situation after Covid-19 because I left North Korea before that. I can’t say for sure. The way I see it, people may move from the cities to the countryside – out of their will. Because that’s what city folks used to do when things got hard there. The sole reason is because they need to live. In the cities, people usually pay for everything. They use money to exchange goods and convert value, but this is not the case in the countryside. In the countryside, they have crops. Those who are rich in the cities have less of a problem because

they have the money. Those who belong in the lower class or in-between may have to go to the farming villages to grow food for a living.

Just because I said city folks will flock to the countryside does not mean that working class people will turn into farm workers. City folks are simply moving to the country to survive. They are not born as farm workers. It's not that people from the city will permanently relocate to a farming village. They will try to be strategic about it. For instance, there could be some who go to grow crops in the spring and return after the autumn harvest. Or there are the so-called "gleaners", who would only be there during autumn to pick what little the others have left behind after autumn harvest. This could be it, or there could be some other way.

You might be wondering which pieces of land the urban folks are farming on when they reach the countryside. There is privately-owned land in the countryside. These lands are bought and sold. They are the "small plots of land." Then there are those who perform slash-and-burn agriculture. That's how they find arable land. But even the private lands are technically state-owned on paper. So are all the houses. How can anything be private property in North Korea? It's a socialist country. And yet, people buy and sell housing in North Korea. It's the same story with land.

There are no small plots of land in the urban regions. I mean, think about it. Who would want to plant chilli peppers in a busy city centre like Gangnam, Seoul? It makes more money to build a flat complex there. North Koreans are no different from South Koreans in that way. Cities are crowded and require tall buildings for people to inhabit. Who would plant cabbages and

potatoes there for food? Sure, city folks have tiny patches of land for home gardening. They can grow some lettuce. It's not a wide patch of land at all.

Unpaid Workers  
Forced to

Live a Double Life



22	Lee Geun-hyok	A Law Enforcement Officer's Take on Human Rights	221
23	Hwang Mi-suk	The State of Medical Care in North Korea as Seen by a Doctor	232
24	Jeon Eun-yong	Medicine and Healthcare in North Korea according to a Pharmacist	250
25	Kim Chol-hyong	A Farmer's Life	261
26	Park Jong-chul	A Worker's State of Mind	274
27	Kim Hye-seon	Harvesting Pine Nuts as a Side Job	284
28	Oh Geun-chul	An Account of a North Korean Worker Sent Overseas	295
29	Ju Hyon-ja	A People's Unit Leader	315
30	Lee Jin-chol	A Train Engineer's Assistant's Life on the Train Tracks	323

Hello, my name is  
Lee Geun-hyok.  
I was born in  
Ryanggang Province.  
I left North Korea in  
the middle of 2019.





Hello, my name is Lee Geun-hyok. I was born in Ryanggang Province. I left North Korea in the middle of 2019. I arrived in South Korea later in the same year.

As of now (early 2021), the Covid-19 pandemic has created two to three layers of roadblocks to pathways into North Korea. Although officially, the smuggling trade is nearly gone, I believe manufactured goods, foodstuffs, and oil are still being traded. Historically speaking, the smuggling trade was a constant in North Korea no matter how tight the borders were controlled. Even if North Korea were to build a concrete wall 10 metres thick stretching across the Chinese border area, wouldn't there be a single hole in the wall? Of course, the volume of the smuggling trade isn't what it used to be. But vegan meat<sup>❶</sup> is still there. Vegan meat is a life necessity in China. The vegan meat you can find in Daerim, Seoul actually originates from North Korea. North Korean vegan meat is smuggled into China to be sold to South Korea.

Anyways, what I'm trying to say is that even with the Covid-19 pandemic at large and with the Special Forces named the "Storm Corps" stationed in the cities, the smuggling trade goes on. Before Covid-19, smuggled goods would come in four batches a day. The times would be 9 PM, 11 PM, 2 AM, and 4 AM. I worked at the Prosecutor's office while in North Korea. I used to be out at the border area at those hours, trying to arrest criminals such as smugglers. You could say that what used to be four batches of smuggling a day has now dwindled to just once a day. Before, they even had scheduled hours four times a day, but now it's only once. The price of goods went up as a result. Prior to Covid-19, a can of oil (3.5 kg) used to cost 40 Chinese yuan. Now the price is 100 yuan. The price of goods has more than doubled. When

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❶ A food product manufactured by applying high temperature to soybean residue that has already gone through the process of extracting oil. This product is high in proteins and has food textures similar to that of meat.

smugglers bring in oil under difficult circumstances, the price is meant to go up. However, it never comes to a situation where the border control is completely watertight so that no goods can make it across the Chinese border.

I was a law enforcement officer working for one of the law enforcement institutions. Law enforcement institutions consist of these three things – the Ministry of State Security, the Prosecutor's office, and the Ministry of Social Security. I took a number of cases during my career as a law enforcement officer. When something is called a "case," there's a distinction between a case found at a police office, versus a case found at the Ministry of State Security, versus a case found at the Prosecutor's office. There are clear distinctions between the cases dealt with in these three institutions. This is such a broad topic that I could go on.

Let me talk about prosecutors, especially in the law enforcement profession. One does not necessarily need to have a diploma to become a prosecutor in North Korea. There are three requirements in order to become a prosecutor. For one thing, you need to have a clean background all the way up to your grandparents' cousins. When we say background check, one must not have anyone executed or sentenced to Reform through Labour Camps as a criminal in the family line. Also, you cannot come from an ancestry of landlords. In short, you have to come from a good caste (*songbun*). The second way is for one to serve in the military and have a university degree. One has to graduate from a central university instead of any old college. One can be assigned to a central university upon graduating from high school. It is the Workers' Party that makes the decision. While provincial colleges are located in each province, those are not central universities but regional colleges. One must graduate from a central university

to become a prosecutor. The third is to become a member of the Workers' Party of Korea. These requirements are must-haves. Only then can one qualify to become a prosecutor.

But there are cases where a prosecutor is exempted from military service. Sometimes, all other conditions are met save for the military service piece, but he may have certain expertise – let's say medicine, healthcare, education, computer science, etc. Although military service is a must, if the candidate is found to be a person with a loyal mindset, he can be hired by the state. However, such a prosecutor cannot advance to become the head of the department or head of office. The regulations say that such a person can be hired as a prosecutor and can be promoted to a senior prosecutor, but no more than that. In order to become the head of a department or office in one's career, one needs to become a licensed jurist. Without the licence, one cannot advance up the ladder in a prosecutor's career. One needs to graduate from the Law Department of the People's Economic University, the Kim Il Sung University, or the University of Politics and Economy in the Ministry of Social Security. There's also the State Security University. It belongs to the Ministry of State Security. Then there are the law majors within the provincial Workers' Party academies. One must graduate from these schools in order to become a licensed jurist. One cannot advance all the way to the head of the department or the office without a licence. Among these, only the State Security University is a four-year program. Everything else is for two years. One needs to be at least a member of a level 3 corporation to get admitted. As for Kim Il Sung University, one has to join right after graduating from high school.

Regarding the defence attorney's job, if I was inspecting

a factory/corporation and found a case of corruption deemed so serious that the perpetrators should be sentenced to reform through labour, I would start a case.

The case would go through the steps of investigation, pre-trials, prosecution, and trial.

Once I start a case, the defendant gets to hire a lawyer – public or private.

However, this does not hold much meaning. If it is the law enforcement officer that opened the case, it will follow these steps. The result can be said to be predetermined.

Still, you need to have a lawyer. The lawyer is made to have his role like it or not, but it's true that he plays a very weak role. A lawyer would most often give out a formulaic defence. A very intelligent lawyer who knows how to do his job may take it to the end according to his beliefs. The lawyer can raise his opinion on the matter even if it's contrary to the opinion of the state (law enforcement officer). But such cases are very rare. Maybe one or two cases out of a hundred. All the rest would simply proceed from the prosecutor's indictment to the judge's sentence. It is very rare to see the lawyer's disagreement leading to the case being rejected or called off.

There have been beatings and torture taking place inside the detentionment facilities.

But the thing is, there's a lot of talk about human rights violations within North Korea these days.

If I used violence during the pre-trial process as a law enforcement officer, for instance, the rules say that I will lose my job. That's how it's written in the rules. The party continues to instruct us to get rid of violence and stop beating the accused – telling us that a skilful interrogator should be able to do his job without having to beat anyone. It takes skill to extract the truth of the matter without having to apply beatings to criminals or outlaws during interrogation.

But the beatings continue anyhow. The reason for this is because there's a culture of condoning such behaviour on an institutional level. Even if the victim of such violence reports on what happened to him, it will be hushed. In a way, there is a tendency to believe that there must be something wrong with the person who was beaten instead of blaming the person who gave the blows. This is a shared understanding from the person at the top all the way down to the working-level interrogators. The understanding is that the accused was probably not answering questions correctly, hence he got what he deserved. In South Korea, for instance, a prosecutor that uses physical violence will be accused accordingly. Beatings cannot be allowed as they fear the law. In North Korea, a person does not report such beatings.

Reporting won't solve anything. The prosecutor will say that others are welcome to do a better job being an interrogator, and that he will quit, so that others can try the job for themselves. This way, no one can question his method. Even if a prosecutor did beat up a detainee, wouldn't there be the chief prosecutor that he reports to? I mean, even if a Party institution comes over to censor the prosecutor in question, the Prosecutor's office won't have it.

As this has been the continuing trend, the beatings are considered to be nothing unusual. If a law enforcement officer was walking by the hallway and saw criminals sitting outside the waiting room, he may kick on their legs, and curse at them to clear space. This is considered nothing unusual. The person taking the beatings thinks this is normal given how he committed a crime. Anyhow, as this has been the way so far, anyone who commits a crime and gets detained by a law enforcement institution should be prepared to take some beatings – even as there are instructions prohibiting torture. Once detained, the detainees are not treated humanely.

There have been instructions to refrain from using violence from a long time ago. Law enforcement officers, especially those in the police, tend to apply force or violence in their interrogations. That's why there were instructions to stop human rights violations but without a viable solution. I saw an ordinary citizen in South Korea get into a fight with a police officer on the news, and couldn't believe what I was seeing. You'll get killed for that in North Korea. Korean cops are so gentle... They all seem to value human rights. I see special protection zones for children while driving around the streets of South Korea. I see those things and think, "Wow! This is where the people-centred

mindset is a reality!"

Put simply, North Korea is a great place to live if you want to live carefree. Here in South Korea, a cop would get in trouble for beating a civilian. Not only would he lose his badge but he would have to pay compensation too. Having been a law enforcement officer in North Korea, I can tell you that a common phrase is to "stay still unless you want to get killed." If the North Korean people want to sue a prosecutor, let's say, they will have to think twice beforehand. It takes strong connections and economic background to become a prosecutor. That means someone powerful must be looking after that prosecutor. To get a prosecutor to lose his job will take a tremendous amount of effort, so they might as well let it slide.

They say that the international community should voice concerns over North Korean human rights and continue to put pressure on North Korea. It does help resolve the human rights issue in the detention facilities of North Korea if people point out these issues. The North Korean authorities do take note of when the international community and the media are critical of human rights violations perpetrated by North Korea.

In the old days, a detainment facility would be a building without any windows to let light in and be freezing cold in the wintertime. But since the 2000s, once the Arduous March was over, there were slight changes such as renovating the facilities or building heating systems. The state of these detainment facilities is miserable. It gets very cold in winter in Ryanggang Province. There used to be people dying from starvation and low temperatures inside the facilities. But this is a thing of the past. There have been some improvements since then. So I'd say it's better having the outside world criticise

North Korea than to have no criticisms at all. If the international community stops reporting on those issues, North Korea will go rogue and do as it pleases – as it is already a rogue nation...

Some South Koreans say we shouldn't raise the issue of North Korean human rights for the sake of peace between the two Koreas. What do they mean – ignore human rights issues for the sake of peace? I personally think that while it's important to deal with human rights issues seriously, there should be no slander towards North Korea before pointing out such issues. If that is not the case, North Korea will have a say against these criticisms. They will point out how South Korea likes to talk about reunification and human rights issues, but that South Korea should first refrain from acting childish to humiliate North Korea and its leadership."

Mutual respect should be the approach in improving North Korean human rights.

Otherwise, North Korea will never listen to what South Korea has to say.

There could be, of course, some improvements. There should be improvements in other sectors if one wants to remind North Korea of its human rights record. Tell them they shouldn't be doing something, say something about their detention facilities, or tell them to comply with global standards, and only then would North Korea pay attention. Unrestrained criticism will

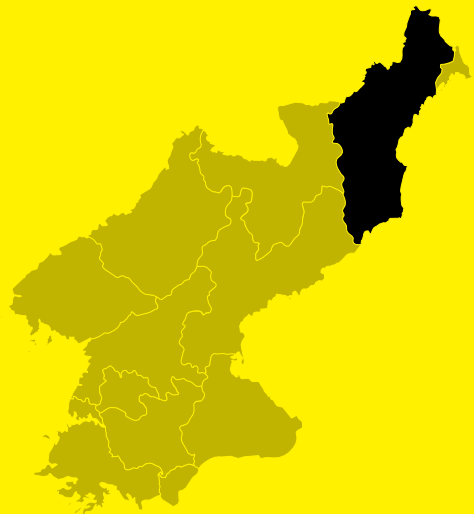
only backfire.

Simply put, we can get North Korea to listen when we start talking about human rights accompanied by lots of measures. North and South Korea are different culturally but also in terms of thought processes. This is because North Korea is a dead-end country and its politicians also deploy some level of brinkmanship. The approach must change because regular methods won't do. If South Korea uses harsh words, North Korea being a rogue state will react first and think later. The entire North Korean political system is configured in that way. That's what's so scary about it.

What I want to say as someone who used to be a North Korean is that the people cannot care less about the sanctions. This is because even before the sanctions came into effect, nothing was being actually provided to the people – even when the supplies were there like medicine, for example. The people cannot care less about the sanctions. There was one time when North Korea received consumables for people from the UN – soap, toothpaste, and so on. Medicine too. I think it was around 2003. What North Korea should've done with those goods was to distribute them among the people or release them at a cheaper-than-market price saying that those products are UN aid. What actually happened was that all those goods were smuggled out of the system to be sold at the marketplaces. This means that the government didn't distribute those items, they sold them for money. This is why the people in North Korea hear how they are being sanctioned and isolated – how the American imperialists intend to isolate communism – and the people don't mind that. The absence of those sanctions won't do the people any good. They've been poor their entire lives with or without the sanctions.

If South Koreans feel pity for North Koreans and want to save those people in the way of aid – even if it doesn't mean full reunification – I would have someone sent over to watch if the aid is properly handed to the North Korean people. Only after witnessing how the relief items are evenly handed to the people should the monitoring party return to South Korea. I mean when it comes to medication or even rice. One time, North Korea received some South Korean rice in sacks with writing – maybe it was made in the U.S. But none of it was provided to the people. Humanitarian relief from the UN or from South Korea should be stockpiled at the shops and distributed by the head of households. But there is no such thing. If South Korea wants to send relief to North Korea in its isolated state, you shouldn't simply send aid and get it over with. Once sent, the aid is kept by the top Workers' Party as an excuse to build a national fund. Virtually nothing goes to the people. I lived in North Korea myself, and I never benefited from such aid. This is because none of it goes to ordinary people. That's why there is a need to monitor the aid program on-site. I am not sure if North Korea will allow for it though.

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Hello, my name is Hwang Mi-suk. I was born in North Hamgyong Province. I lived there until I left North Korea in 1999. I reached South Korea in 2002, a long time ago.

Every time I get the question about what made me leave, I tell them, “I left North Korea because I was a doctor.” Some people say that it sounds ironic. You could say that. I was under too much stress being a doctor in North Korea. I had the worst time especially between 1993 and 1995, in the midst of the Arduous March.

At that time, I was a paediatrician. When I couldn’t treat children properly, I was surrounded by doubt, guilt, and self-hatred. I wanted an escape. I couldn’t bear watching endless deaths of children. After work, I would head home wondering which child’s bed will be vacated by tomorrow morning. Every morning I would head to work wondering whose turn it would be. I was suffering every day, surrounded by these thoughts. When I arrive at work and open the doors to the hospital ward, it could be one child’s bed that is empty or another... Or, there could have been an unexpected death of yet another child... Just like that.

I was distressed by the reality that there was nothing I could do about the situation. Children aged 3~5 had malnutrition and digestive problems by default. These are illnesses that could easily be treated with an IV injection. But it wasn’t there. I wanted to escape, evade reality where I couldn’t even do basic stuff. The first reason why I left North Korea was because there was nothing I could do with the substandard status of healthcare in the country.

The second reason is that doctors in North Korea are not necessarily well-to-do like they are in South Korea. North Korean doctors are paid by the state. Meaning that when the

state is doing bad financially, so are doctors. So my life wasn't a very happy one. On top of daily struggles making ends meet, I was overwhelmed with a multitude of different reasons which made me think of leaving the country. It was around that time in the mid-to-late 1990s when people around me were travelling back and forth between China and North Korea. Back then, the North Korean authorities would arrest escaping citizens in large numbers. Those arrested would wait about 3 to 4 years before going to China again. So it made me wonder what could possibly be in China that attracts these people so much. And then I started thinking, maybe I should give it a try. That's how I left. Until then, I had no idea I would never come back to North Korea. I was only thinking about making it to China and then coming back to North Korea.

It was a difficult journey. There were those who crossed the border by utilising the service of a broker back then, but I crossed the border on my own thinking I might as well die trying. It was dangerous but I had a strong desire to get to China. Back then, I wasn't trying to escape North Korea so much, but rather I wanted to escape reality and head to China. I saw such people getting jailed upon repatriation only to head back to China after the sentence. That got me curious about what China was like.

I majored in traditional Korean medicine, and I was a paediatrics doctor. The study of medicine in South Korea is what North Korean medical students learn in the department of clinical medicine. There are many departments in medical school. Traditional Korean medicine (*haneuihak*) in South Korea is also taught in a department called "Koryo medicine." A student can become a regular doctor or a doctor of traditional medicine depending on whether they graduate from the department of

clinical medicine or the department of Koryo medicine. As per the medical system in North Korea, doctors of traditional medicine are also given a doctor's licence. Doctors, on the other hand, are not licensed to practise traditional medicine. I was a doctor of traditional medicine, having graduated from the department of Koryo medicine. But I worked in the paediatric ward, and in the internal medicine ward, and did research at a clinical research centre. I learned both Koryo medicine and clinical medicine while in school. That's why I had no issues practising medicine after graduating from school, even though I graduated from the department of Koryo medicine.

Back when I was in North Korea, medical school used to be a seven-year program. It was one year of pre-med studies and six years of course work. I believe the years have been adjusted slightly since then. Medical schools in North Korea also have high requirements for students. Med school is not easy, so one needs to be a good student to be able to make it to medical school. Freedom of occupation is limited in North Korea, but I think one can still become a doctor as long as she is a good student. It's still true that there is no freedom of occupation, but the reverse is also true. This is the irony.

I actually didn't want to go to medical school. I wanted to major in law. But I wasn't qualified. One can become an officer of the law only when related to someone in a high position of the state. In other words, the eligible person has to have a good *songbun*. My parents were day labourers by South Korean standards. As a high school student, I learned that I wasn't qualified to practise law. So I gave up before even trying. My parents wanted me to go to medical school just like all parents do. I was actually a good student. And it worked in my favour

getting me admitted to medical school. Born of working-class parents, I wouldn't have been able to consider medical school if I didn't have good grades. But one of the slogans upheld by North Korea is that it is a society where the workers and farmers are the leaders. Even if far from reality, they would often send good students among working-class and farming backgrounds to college. That way they get to say, "Look! They made it too!" as propaganda material, and I was that material. Not only was I a good student, my parents were simple working-class folks with nothing to brag about. The authorities had nothing to lose by sending kids like me to college.

My colleagues from medical school had good backgrounds. The kid with a so-called "mediocre background" had doctors for parents. My father worked at the hospital washing stained cloth and fixing boilers. One time, the students in my medical school were made to fill in personal information and I just happened to be somewhere else. Another student filled in my father's job for me. All she knew was that my father works at the hospital. Since I was a medical student with my father working at a hospital, she assumed he must be a doctor. And that's how my father was mis-recorded as being a doctor.

As things became difficult from the early 1990s, free healthcare became little more than words.

The people who used to be treated at hospitals for free now had to pay for their treatments all of a sudden.

As North Korea was not a capitalist country, the people did not save money at home. They had their salary and their rations, so there was no reason to stash cash – neither was there a culture of doing so. Then all of a sudden, the hospitals ran out of medicine and started asking patients to pay. Patients started asking doctors what medication they need. The doctors told them the medicine they needed, so they could get it from the marketplace. Patients with money would acquire the medicine, but those without would die or suffer. Without medicine stored in the hospitals, doctors couldn't guarantee patients' health. The end of free healthcare came as a big shock to the people too. If they knew about healthcare becoming a paid service in advance, they could have learned little by little. It had never been that way, but all of a sudden one needed money to be treated or otherwise face death. This situation came as a tremendous shock to the people. There was unrest among the North Korean population as a result.

Ever since the mid-1990s, the state stopped giving salaries or rations to medical professionals. So I had to make a living by myself. The doctors in my hospital had designated days where they went out in search of food. If I had some money on me, I would buy some Chinese goods like tobacco and sell it in South Hwanghae Province where the Chinese merchandise is harder to come by. The province is a rice-producer, and rice is cheap. I would buy the rice to sell in Chongjin. In my village, people would sell tofu and bread. Then the situation got so much worse that it was beyond control. At that point, I was selling medicine to the patients for money, when in fact it was medicine meant to be distributed to those patients. I was running a business. If there were six doctors in the hospital department that I worked



in, three of them would treat patients at the hospital before noon while the remaining three would be out in search of food. Then we would switch roles in the afternoon. If we had to travel to a faraway place to get food, we would rotate in weekly shifts – three doctors this week and then the other three next week.

Also, just because they're patients doesn't mean they are dirt poor. Some patients in urgent need of treatment would bring bribes of sorts. I said bribes, but it was mostly food - tofu, unhusked corn, and such. The patients themselves also had to find food while tied to their jobs, so they needed time too. Not showing up at work would be considered a crime, so those people would often come to me to ask for a doctor's prescription so that they can spend some time away. Hearing that, I would write them a prescription for a week. These people, then, won't come back empty handed and would bring me one or two kilograms of rice for my trouble. Exchange of bribes and favours became normalised in this way. It was a win-win situation for survival. In such circumstances, survival was the first priority, and that's how people made a living. At the marketplace, moreover, doctors would sell medication and others would sell home-made bread and liquor, or sell clothes. I myself used to sell clothes at a market stall very often.

Nowadays, it is customary for regular patients to give bribes to doctors for treatment.

If someone asked me what the biggest difference is between healthcare in North and South Korea, I would have said that the

state and private sector handles healthcare together in South Korea but it's all state-owned healthcare in North Korea. But then changes took place from the 1990s onward, so that the healthcare in North Korea today is officially a state-owned system but is unofficially marketized. That's why some state hospitals get to charge money for their services, as I mentioned earlier. They don't charge a lot to be sure, but patients are paying some money to the hospitals. Pharmaceutical stalls set up in the city centre do charge patients for sure. These stalls, by the way, are commissioned by big pharmaceutical factories. Let's say there's a factory that manufactures traditional herbal medicine. The factory can set up a pharmacy store in another city that has a stockpile of medicine produced in the factory. When the pharmacy makes a sale, 70% goes to the pharmacy and the 30% is taken by the factory. I think the state has allowed for this kind of business operation. Pharmaceutical factories have to survive, you see. Private individuals are licensed to sell medicine, and the factories take a portion of the profit. The hospitals don't charge the patients so much as North Korea claims to have free healthcare.

But then there was a growing desire among North Koreans to receive proper treatment even if it meant paying money. This is what differentiates North Koreans nowadays from the past. As a result of this, they say there are less people coming to the hospitals for treatment. The poor will go to the hospital because they have no other choice. But someone who has even a little bit of money will visit the doctor of their choosing. This is not to say that state-owned hospitals and privately-run hospitals are two different things. North Korea assigns doctors to districts, which means they manage a set number of households. This is the official system run by the state, and the doctors are meant to use

the distributed medication to treat patients. But with the state not giving any medication, the doctors cannot treat anyone. Patients are not treated even when they are at a hospital due to this lack of medication. So it's the patients who end up paying the retired doctors or doctors who do not have a place of work to diagnose. This is not the official state-run system as you can see. But it is what goes on at the civilian level. This is what I'm referring to as marketization of medical care. Such practices are illegal under the North Korean system. But the state has no choice but to turn a blind eye.

Previously, systems like doctor's assigned districts or free medical care could keep North Korean society in one piece. In particular, assigning doctors to residential districts is a good system. But the problem is that one must only be treated by their assigned doctor. So, individuals are left with no choice. If a family member of mine had cancer, I should be able to take her to the hospital with the best cancer-treatment. In South Korea, that would be the Korea Cancer Centre Hospital, or some other good hospital. But this is not allowed in North Korea. I am made to get treated in my residential address. Nowadays, residents want to pay good money for the hospital of their choice and the doctor of their choosing. In this way, the atmosphere surrounding medical care in North Korea changed little by little. In North Korea, a doctor was responsible for the patient of his district. She had to give his very best, in all circumstances. Now there is a choice – something we didn't have in the past. That is to say, the choice lies in the doctor as much as it lies in the patient.

I believe it is this system, while not compatible in a socialist country, that will play a big role in changing North Korean society moving forward. I say this because doctors only treated

those patients who visited with symptoms. The doctors were salaried workers who would be paid every month regardless of the number of patients, so they were disincentivized to give the best treatment. But now, the patient visits the doctors with money. The doctor has to give his best in return. From the doctor's perspective, a patient who fetches him 100 thousand won today may be worth 200 thousand tomorrow. If the treatment isn't working or if the doctor isn't nice, the patient might go find a different doctor. The doctor has to give his best if he wants recurring patients. The doctors started taking note of their responsibility to the patient, importance of managing clients, and service quality. Such things were limited to capitalist societies in the past, and are being highlighted only recently. That's driving doctors to give their best.

This is also good for the patients, as they get designated doctors if they have no money, and good doctors if they have money. There is a choice. Such things are capitalist in nature, but I think it is taking root in North Korean society. It takes up a small portion of the medical industry so far, but a gradual spread of such culture could eventually lead to reunification of the two Koreas – I think.

Once I came to South Korea and started working as a healthcare practitioner, I felt that North Korean society's dependency on its free healthcare system needed to be resolved. When the two Koreas unify their medical care systems, it would be ideal to unify with the South Korean system for sure. But we can expect a certain level of opposition from the North Koreans when we start asking them to pay for medical care. They may think that they had no problem getting treatment free of charge so far, but the South Korean system asks them to pay money.

I thought about this a lot.

But the current situation in North Korea appears to be one in which people are slowly coming to the realisation that medical services cost money and paying for it could mean patients receive a better quality of service. This is an exemplary case of North Koreans teaching themselves how it should be done without any outside intervention. That's why I think that while it's heartbreaking to see so many people sick and dying because of the current state of the North Korean medical system, they are nonetheless taking painful steps to create a new system in their own hands.

This trend of marketization appears to have accelerated since Kim Jong-un came into power. It first took off in Kim Jong-il's era, but it was somewhat haphazard. When Kim Jong-il first came into power in 1994 after his father's death, the country was in a very difficult situation. People were trying to find ways out of the difficult situation with slow progress. Now the changes are taking place in the open. The state appears to be permissive of such things to a certain degree. One example would be to commission pharmacies to private individuals. This comes close to allowing private property.

I am curious what North Korea's next step would be. What does it have in mind? It's a socialist country but looks nothing like it. That doesn't make it capitalist either. Anyhow, I see them holding their ground yet adapting to the circumstances on their own terms. So I'm sure they will figure it out among themselves, but I see marketization happening in parallel. That said, the current North Korean medical system is a completely state-run system retaining its existing policies of free healthcare, preventive medicine, and assigned district doctors. North Korea

never claims to have made changes in these regards, or admits to changes taking place.

In a system of preventive medicine, the prevention part is basically about preventing people from getting sick in the first place so that they don't have to visit hospitals. This system is interconnected with the district doctor system. District doctors are also called to assigned households. Doctors are assigned to a number of households and are made to monitor the health conditions of those residents. The doctor is made to regularly inspect his assigned district to see if there are any sick people or anyone who couldn't make it to work. He is made to visit each household regardless of whether there is a patient there or not. He is supposed to make the rounds once a day – it was that way when I was around. I'm not sure how they are managing these days. The doctor makes a visit to observe the residents, so if you are feeling unwell, you can stay at home instead of going to work and wait for the doctor to come visit. Basically, each doctor is assigned to 800 individuals. Of course, this differs according to the region and the environment. In the countryside, a doctor may be assigned to just 300 individuals. In a densely populated area, there could be 1,000 individuals. It was a rule for doctors to visit these households daily. I also followed the rules to visit my assigned households every day. I made the rounds, but I also diagnosed patients at the hospital.

Now you might be wondering whether there is enough time for all this. Let's say I went to observe the households in the morning. During that time, there is another doctor diagnosing patients in the hospital. We would take shifts in this way. I visited these households every day, so I knew about their health conditions overall. That's why I think North Korea has

a good basis for responding quickly to pandemic situations – disinfection or quarantine – because the doctors come to visit every day. The doctors check on every household daily to see whether someone has a fever, so they have to know. The doctors not only offer diagnostics and treatment in their visits, they also explain up-to-date information on epidemics like Covid-19, MERS, or a new type of flu. They will tell people to “wash your hands”, “cover your mouth when coughing”, “don’t spend time outdoors without a good reason”, “Is anyone feeling feverish?” They will educate and check on the people. If they see the tiniest symptom, it will be reported to the authorities. Prevention can be made through disinfection measures. North Korea values preventive medicine, and preventive medicine is key. Without it, the environment could lead to deaths en-masse. Even then, it is impossible not to have any diseases. The vulnerable environment and hygiene inevitably lead to diseases. As such, preventive medicine and district doctors are closely intertwined.

North Korea has a state-run healthcare system so there are no private clinics like they do in South Korea. Hospitals of a certain size will have doctors assigned. Those doctors will go out to do the rounds in their assigned districts. That’s why private clinics have no use in North Korea. The size of the hospital differs depending on the region. It also depends on whether your region is classified as a municipality or a province. There are diagnostics centres in large areas. These centres are larger than the ones found in South Korea. There are many doctors there. There are small hospitals in the countryside, but even those will have four to five doctors. Recently, there is a culture for doctors to practise medicine as an individual. So maybe those are comparable to private clinics in South Korea. This treatment takes place at the

doctor’s home. These are not authorised by the state but function like a private clinic in South Korea.

Vulnerable groups of people such as women and children, the disabled, and the elderly have lots of opportunities to meet doctors. As doctors are made to visit homes every day, the accessibility alone can be said to be better than that of South Korea. One thing North Korea does have is a truly fine medical care system. But as I’ve said, there is no concept of choice. The right to choose is a very important right for an individual. It’s related to human rights. I had high regard for the country’s healthcare system when I was living in North Korea. I could get treated for free. How great is that? But the big mistake here is that there is no choice. That I couldn’t get the treatment of my choosing from the person of my choice was a debilitating factor on the basic rights of a person – that is, to be able to act according to one’s free will. So there is always a hidden shade behind the shine and glitter. I didn’t know about this while in North Korea. There are still many in North Korea who remain ignorant. Only after coming to South Korea did I realise that so many important things were not granted to us in North Korea and that we were fixated on what we could see, only.

North Koreans are vulnerable to all infectious diseases that are addressed by the international community – SARS, MERS, the flu, Covid-19, and pretty much anything else. As a matter of fact, when it comes to keeping things out, North Korea is undoubtedly world-class.

I'm sure it's doing a good job.

But there can never be such a thing as perfection.

I could tell you about environmental diseases too. Malaria, cholera, and hemorrhagic fever come from water contamination and latrine issues, while typhoid fever and paratyphoid infection comes from hygiene issues such as food sanitation and hand cleanliness. These are environmental causes, so I believe North Korea is still rather vulnerable to these epidemics and diseases. North Korea is always paying great attention to these. I believe North Korea makes a great deal of effort in modernising the more traditional latrines and outdated water supply systems. It's the same way with the Pyongyang General Hospital they are rebuilding. But while they try, I can't help but wonder if they will be equipped with the proper medical equipment and whether they will be able to get a steady supply of electricity. Building a hospital is only the beginning. A hospital must be constantly managed in these miscellaneous matters. The medication used in hospitals need to be replenished as per their rate of consumption. These areas are where the difficulty lies. There needs to be a pharmaceutical factory in operation if we want to supply medicines as needed.

Ever since Kim Jong-un came in power, he took a great interest in pharmaceutical factories. He needs to make medicine – lots of it. His interest in these matters showed in how the pharmaceutical department in a university was made into an

independent college of its own. He also secured investment from abroad. But to make medicine, there needs to be the facility and the base materials in place. North Korea is not capable of handling these things by itself. They will have to be imported, which is made difficult by the sanctions. But North Korea has in fact made a number of refusals to receive aid in the form of medication previously. What North Korea wants is to have the raw ingredients so that North Koreans can build back among themselves, without having to rely on manufactured end-products. They wish to manufacture their own medicines and respond to the situation.

I think this is a point made in the right direction. Of course, we need to connect this to the bigger picture consisting of many aspects – such as how could the sanctions be lifted? I think that North Korea should show some efforts for the international community to lift sanctions if North Korea wishes to make such arguments. I think that the situation in North Korea is not improving because they fail to make such efforts as of now. There's a need for a soft touch if one is looking for help, but North Korea is not willing to back off and simply asks others to comply. Such a stance will hardly make things better for North Korea. Of course, there must be aspects that ordinary people like me are ignorant of, but both sides should make concessions to set the focus of their political dialogue on people's healthcare.

It's hard to point out what needs to be resolved in North Korean healthcare in just one or two items. First of all, I wish people didn't connect the dignity of life within North Korea with political issues. I think the regime should come forward about the situation in North Korea in full honesty toward the international society to receive help from them. Next on, there

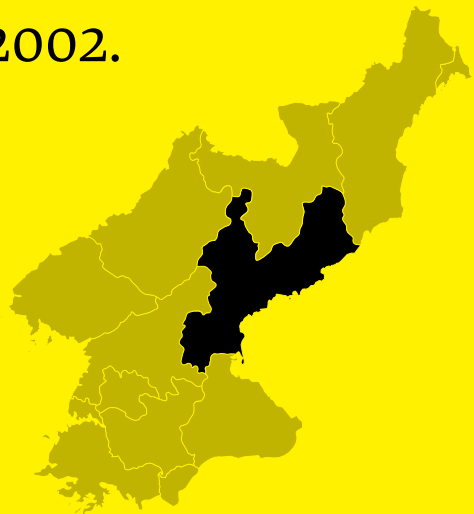
are many efforts to aid North Korea – from South Korea and from the international community at large. I wish people would stop making connections of such efforts with the political situation. Above everything else, it's about protecting lives – don't you think? I hope people can respect the humanitarian aspect of it.

Also, we cannot continue to aid North Korea forever, without end. That would be money spent in vain. A more effective way would be to supply resources to North Korea so as to help the country regain strength to get back on its feet. Let the country use the aid to run their own facilities and overcome their difficulties. I would say for instance, it's better to supply them with the ingredients for aspirin where they can produce as much as they want, instead of supplying them with 10,000 aspirin pills as finished products from the outside. This way, the people can get back on their feet, so I think this kind of aid is needed.

Except, I've been told that these same ingredients could be used for purposes other than to make pharmaceuticals, munitions for instance. Vitamins, for example, are essential for maintaining people's health, but could also be used for producing munitions – hence the sanctions. I did not know about this earlier, but I was told later on that the same ingredients could be misappropriated for munitions production. Irrespective of my intent, there must be good reasons as to why the international community does not allow the import of such ingredients. If North Korea wants to be supported in these things, I think it's up to the country to make an effort. Once North Korea is willing to provide a transparent report of where they were using the aid supplies, it will be made evident that they are not being used for munitions. With international recognition, they can opt for more aid. But as there can be no monitoring done over where the supplies are being

used once they enter North Korea, the aid system cannot work properly. That's why I think the North Korean government should take a proactive approach.

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Hello, my name is Jeon Eun-yong. I was born in South Hamgyong Province. I worked as a pharmacist in North Korea before leaving the country in 2001 and arriving in South Korea in 2002.

It's true that there is no freedom of choosing one's occupation in North Korea. But by the time I was in North Korea, college admission was still based on grades. Usually, a student would get to apply to three colleges. North Korean students tend to take more exams than South Korean students. They are ranked in terms of these test scores combined. I don't know how things are now. The top students would go to the central universities<sup>1</sup> while the middle-level students would go to provincial colleges. One has to have good grades to become a pharmacist in North Korea – the same way as in South Korea.

Pharmacies in North Korea are not independently established. Usually, the pharmacy can be found inside the hospital. If there are twelve doctors in a hospital and there would be about two pharmacists – the ratio being one pharmacist for every five or six doctors. Actually, there used to be pharmaceutical stores until the late 1980s, but the authorities closed them down as they could not meet the demand for medication. Starting from about 2005, pharmaceutical stores have returned starting in Pyongyang. The supply chain of medicine for the pharmacies in South Korea can be considered horizontal, but in North Korea it is vertical. In North Korea, the state supplies pharmacies with medicine. The central medicine supply hub will decide on the medication to send to the central level (4th), municipal level (3rd), and county level (2nd) before sending down the supplies. The 1st primary-level clinics are the ones located in villages.

<sup>1</sup> Central Universities are often located in Pyongyang or the major cities of each province.

North Korea was receiving its supplies of medicine from eastern European countries until late in the 1980s.

But since the collapse of communism in eastern European countries, the support also dried up.

That's when North Korea's medicine supply chain went to ruin. As the balance between supply and demand broke down, Kim Il-sung instructed hospitals "not to turn back patients due to lack of medication and to forage herbs from mountains and treat people based on Eastern medicine since North Korea is rich in mountains." That's when doctors and pharmacists alike headed to the mountains to pick herbs. In North Korea, there is a system called the "annual quota." Back when I was in North Korea, the annual quota set for doctors and pharmacists was 10 kg of dried herbs per person. You needed to harvest 100 kg of herbs to make 10 kg of dried ones. The dried herbs were submitted to the hospitals, which would then make traditional Korean medicine to allow for some supply of needed medicines. Each hospital would operate its own supply line and produce traditional Korean medicine.

The substances that go into medicine are the same everywhere in the world. It's the difference in the substance that determines the different effects of the medication. So given that the substances are the same, it can be said to be the same medicine anywhere in the world. The medicines that North Korea was being provided from Eastern European nations

until the 1980s were generic medicines that were created out of substances that are commonly used globally. The shortage of medicine became evident by the 1990s. That's when we started foraging herbs in the mountains to produce medicine from them – in accordance with the instructions to "become self-sufficient." If anything, I believe things are worse nowadays. Things haven't improved. The efficacy of such medication is not that great, truth be told. For instance, when medicine is administered through an IV injection, regular medicine would require only 0.5g while these self-sufficient herb-based types will require 50g or 100g. Also, while regular medicine would kick in right away, self-sufficient medicine would take time. With the booming of the marketplace (*jangmadang*) trade, lots of medicine from China made its way into the country. People started buying medicine from the marketplace instead of relying on state provisions or self-provided medicine. State-provided medicine can only be obtained by a few cadres. That's why ordinary people acquire medicine through the marketplace which is accessible to everyone.

Nowadays, it's easy for ordinary people to buy medicine through the marketplace. Vulnerable groups like the disabled and the elderly don't face any specific challenges in acquiring medicine. It's just a matter of money. Medicine is inaccessible to anyone who doesn't have money, it becomes easily accessible once you have money. The medicine prescription mechanism at hospitals is just like in South Korea. The doctor writes you a prescription, which the patient takes to receive medicine from the in-house pharmacist. But you do get to buy them without the doctor's prescription from a commercial pharmacy.

Until the early 2000s, pharmacists used to work at in-house



pharmacies located inside hospitals. Commercial pharmacies started appearing in Pyongyang around 2005. Even so, these pharmacies in residential neighbourhoods are still state-owned in principle. From what I can tell, such commercial pharmacies have become normal all across the country nowadays. Commercial pharmacies in North Korea can be said to be similar to South Korean pharmacies. Medical treatment is meant to be free in North Korea, so in-house pharmacies are prohibited from selling medicines. Instead, what the state did was to place the pharmacies outside the hospitals to get people to buy medicine for a price. I think the intent was for the state to collect money that the people possess.

A lot of the medicine gets provisioned to North Korea via the UN and such. Once the medicine gets supplied to hospitals, the in-house pharmacies won't be able to make a profit from it – as they claim to be a “free” healthcare institution. Instead, the medicine gets sold at commercial pharmacies outside hospitals. The profit gets divided in a ratio of 7:3. Every time medicines are sold at a pharmacy, the government takes 70% of the profit and the remaining 30% is for the pharmacy to keep. You can say that the pharmacy business is a state-owned enterprise, and the pharmacies are licensed sellers. When the state provides medicines for the pharmacies to sell, the pharmacist or “medicine compounder” holding the licence to the pharmacy will sell them to patients, out of which 70% will be for the state and 30% is retained. These pharmacists and medicine compounders are made to work in their state-assigned pharmacies. The difference between a pharmacist and a medicine compounder is that a person who has graduated from the 6-year program in a pharmaceutical college or medical school is called a “pharmacist,”

while a medicine compounder is a person who took the 3-year program in a professional school. Pharmacists working in these commercial pharmacies can be considered well-to-do. It's expected, as they sell medicine for a profit. There was another pharmacist who worked at the same hospital as I did. She had some strong connections. I heard later on that she was assigned to a commercial pharmacy and making lots of money. Such arrangements are only possible with connections and bribes. The people who spent money on bribes will get nice assignments.

In North Korea, opium and *bingdu*<sup>②</sup> are widespread, and many people use them.

Both are prevalent in the private economy which makes them easily accessible.

They are exposed to the public and easily accessible, which makes people desensitised in terms of using drugs and other narcotics.

Opium, in particular, was an important medicinal substance used in the folk practices of our ancestors. It's most often used as an antidiarrheal or pain relief medicine, although its effects differ depending on the substance. From a purely medicinal perspective, there's nothing wrong with opium. But abuse of the

② Methamphetamine.

substance could lead to severe side effects and even withdrawal symptoms. For ordinary citizens in North Korea who are in life-or-death situations, side effects or ethical issues related to drug usage are a luxury. They will undoubtedly resort to drug use in order to relieve themselves of the immediate pain.

Marijuana and poppy plants are grown in every part of a North Korean neighbourhood. South Koreans are well aware that it is illegal to grow marijuana and opium on one's own, but North Koreans are not so discretionary about the legality of such behaviour. In 2001 alone, the year I left North Korea, we were made to redevelop existing farmland into major poppy plantations under Kim Jong-il's orders to export opium abroad. Poppy flowers are aesthetically pleasing too, so people would plant them in their home gardens. It's pretty to look at and does the trick for curing diarrhoea and stomachache. Hence, people would grow them at home as part of the home medicine kit. Opium usage grew because opium had good utility value.

There are specific illnesses prevalent among North Korean people. Back when we were poor and starving, we would eat just about anything which would lead to maladies. There were all sorts of patients, starting from those who had perforations in the stomach from eating corn cobs ground up into powder and mixed with water. There were lots of patients with digestion-related maladies due to the coarse food they were eating. Antibiotics are key when it comes to treating patients in North Korea. 3rd generation antibiotics are used in South Korea, while only 1st and 2nd generation antibiotics are used in North Korea. Later generations have better efficacy but are more expensive. There are many strands of antibiotics, and a combination of multiple strands is called "broad-spectrum antibiotics." Broad-

spectrum antibiotics are especially potent when it comes to contagious diseases.

There was a time in 1996 when broad-spectrum antibiotics made their way into North Korea via the UN. These antibiotics continued to make their way into North Korea even after the 2010s – after Kim Jong-un came into power. Penicillin, being the baseline antibiotic, used to be produced in the Sunchon pharmaceutical factory. But with that factory gone, there was a shortage of penicillin. After that, we started getting penicillin from China. If the potency of regular penicillin is at 1 million, the potency of the penicillin we got from China would be at 800 thousand. Simply put, the potency was only 80% of what it should have been. Even so, the current situation is that people pay money for Chinese penicillin and almost completely rely on the marketplace for their medicine. A lot of the medicine coming from China to North Korea are knockoffs and the quality is significantly lower.

Malnutrition is also bad. There's an episode related to malnutrition in North Korea. A doctor at the hospital I worked at had a newborn child diagnosed with malnutrition from birth. It was around the time when the UN came to survey daycare centres. The authorities contacted the doctor repeatedly to bring the child to the daycare. This was because showing the child with malnutrition would help to secure aid from the UN. Rather than hiding the existence of malnutrition from the outside world, North Korea would try to display its existence whenever it needed aid. One day, the authorities made people weed out the grass on a riverbed near the mountain. There was a huge gathering of people. I didn't know why, but as I got to the task of weeding the riverbed together with the others, I saw a couple of cars passing

from afar. Once the cars were gone, the instructor told us we can leave now. Those riding the vehicles must have been foreign dignitaries. As such, North Koreans will mobilise people for display purposes and try to put on a show for outsiders.

North Koreans have grown immune to contagious diseases.

I'm not saying that their bodies have immune systems that can fight contagions.

I mean that people have grown to not care so much about contagious diseases making the rounds.

From what I can remember, there were scabies and measles epidemics in 1989. Starting from 1994, there was a continuation of cholera outbreaks as well as typhoid and paratyphoid fevers. From the 2000s onward, there was a continuation of other epidemics such as SARS, Ebola, bird flu, and MERS. North Koreans have grown a certain tolerance to the fear of contagious diseases, as they have been facing contagion after contagion for a long time. As for the current Covid-19 pandemic, North Koreans won't be as alarmed or afraid even as the rest of the world lives in fear. I had friends who suffered from paratyphoid infections, but they only recall that as nothing more than an eventful memory from the past. There was no huge stress about it like we have nowadays. The vulnerable environment they live in has rendered North Koreans mentally resistant towards contagious diseases.

That's why I don't believe North Koreans would be as unsettled about Covid-19 as we are. It is part of the annual repertoire for someone to fall victim to a contagion, so much so that people will assume it's normal when they see the disease take the life of someone close by. This is the reality of North Korea. People just don't fear contagious diseases that much.

North Koreans these days are most susceptible to contagious diseases such as hepatitis, tuberculosis, and the like... You can say that these are diseases stemming from poverty because the cause lies in malnutrition. Starvation is virtually non-existent in North Korea by now. But the diseases are prevalent due to poor food choices leading to an unbalanced diet and lack of food sanitation. Taking vitamin pills is a luxury. To resolve the root cause, we need a good food supply in North Korea including rice.

Malnutrition and poor hygiene are the root of all illnesses. Due to the economic situation in North Korea, power outages are frequent. This affects people's access to tap water too. Without electricity, tap water and water refineries are among the first systems to come to a halt. Without access to clean water, people must rely on unrefined water sources. There's no exaggeration when I say that all contagious diseases stem from poor hygiene in using contaminated water. People do dig wells and use groundwater, but that could be contaminated as well. Traditional latrines are still the norm there, and sometimes these latrines are located near a well. This results in continued typhoid infections among the people. When it comes to contagious diseases, it's not only the sick who can spread the contagion, but also those who have once fallen ill and gotten better, and even healthy individuals who may be carrying the germs. Anyone could be a carrier. They look fine on the outside, but they are carrying germs

everywhere. That's why the germs keep spreading, and diseases keep resurfacing. This is so commonplace that people choose not to care and even ignore the situation at this point.

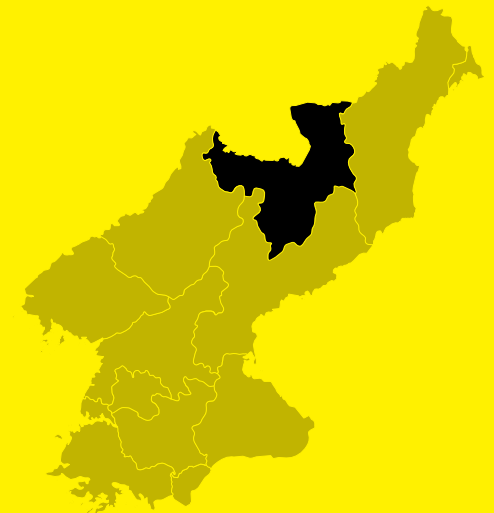
Basic diagnosis and treatment do take place in North Korea just like everywhere else. It's not at a dead-end or as vulnerable as South Korea or the international community likes to imagine it to be. This is because we have a basic healthcare system, and the system itself is superb. On the other hand, North Korea lacks the resources to run its facilities. Lacking the raw materials to produce electricity, we cannot operate. It's really the lack of raw materials, and the medical facilities and personnel are all there. Some well-intended folks say that medical professionals in North Korea need to be "re-educated" or "assisted to develop their capabilities," but I personally cannot agree with that approach. Medical training in North Korea is as good as in South Korea. There are some areas that North Korea does better. I've gone through both North Korean and South Korean textbooks for pharmaceutical education. I could see that there were areas that North Korean textbooks explained better. It wouldn't be right to compare North Korean and South Korean students, but North Korean students are as talented and knowledgeable in their field of study.

Put simply, the health care system in North Korea is well structured. It's just the lack of materials and resources that's keeping it from running properly. With the right materials and resources, I believe North Korea should be able to take on the challenges it's facing currently.

Voice  
25

A Farmer's Life

Hello, my name is  
Kim Chol-hyong.  
I was born in  
Ryanggang Province.  
I left North Korea  
in the middle of  
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two months later.



Hello, my name is Kim Chol-hyong. I was born in Ryanggang Province. I left North Korea in the middle of 2018 and reached South Korea two months later.

I had a job at a collective farm<sup>❶</sup> located in Ryanggang Province. I was a chief commissioner for the Korean Farmers Alliance.<sup>❷</sup> Farms in North Korea are all state-owned. The mix of crops that were farmed consisted of 70% potatoes, 20% corn, and 10% beans. We had about 450 farmers in my workplace. One country, for instance, consisted of 11 farms. The collection of farms made up the county. Each county had about as many farms. Each farm had 40% men and 60% women.

You can understand the tragedy of North Korean society by looking at the farms in North Korea.

For the male population, if your parents are farm workers, you and your children are also destined to be farmers their whole lives.

One does not get to choose another occupation by choice.

North Korea invests all capacity into the food production front, as the country is short on food supply. With ration cuts and factories at full stop, the workers don't have work to do. As a result, factories will let go of their workforce. What I mean by this is that factories cannot simply keep workers idle, so they send out

❶ Farms in North Korea are divided into collective farms and state-run farms. Technically both are owned by the state. The produce of the collective farms are redistributed among the farmers after deducting the state tribute and farm expenditures. But this redistribution is known to be meagre in terms of actual subsistence for the individuals.

about 80 men out of 100 to earn their own living while charging them for their monthly production quota. This is referred to as a “Monthly Plan” and it is in compliance with Party directives. If the quota is for one million won, the factory lets go of the workers telling them to make one million won with whatever means they have, then submit 70% to the company while keeping 30% to themselves. None of the factories are operational in North Korea. They are factories in only name and shape. There are no running factories because of the lack of ingredients and materials. This situation began with the food crisis in the early 1990s. With the ration cuts, people couldn't show up at work because they didn't have food to eat. During this time, the materials stopped getting supplied from the state and factories couldn't run either. The state started to change its ways by telling workers to make their living by themselves. The factories were still not under regular operation until recent times – for nearly 30 years. The factories make use of the money they've collected to maintain the factory operation. In this way, factory workers can spend time earning their own money by means of other work such as working at the marketplace or engaging in the smuggling trade.

A farmer, on the other hand, is not even granted such an option. He is made to work on the farm, no matter what. Even if a farmer's son finishes his 10 years of service in the military, he still has to return to the farm to work. He cannot do anything else. A farm worker serves the purpose of “strengthening the agricultural front.” That's why a farmer's children are often resentful of their parents. They resent how other parents are working class while their father is a farmer binding them to the same fate. As such, the tragedy of the farm worker is that they do not have the freedom to choose one's occupation.

❷ Also referred to as the Union of Agricultural Workers of Korea. One of the four major workers' organisations in North Korea. It follows the instructions of the Workers' Party of Korea. The membership extends to those aged between 30 and 60 (55 for women) who work as farmers in the collective farms, workers in the general field of agriculture, or workers in factories and corporations related to agricultural products.

A farmer is tied to farm work for generations to come. There are some that make it to college, but it is a handful - maybe less than one in every ten people. A farmer's son may want higher education and go to college, but he is oftentimes discouraged from pursuing that path. Also, one would need money to get into college in the first place. Farmers in North Korea are the poorest people, so they have no money. That is to say, college admission is made impossible unless you are smarter than other people by a large margin. Ordinary working-class people have little problem getting into college, while farmers' children have limited opportunities to be allowed into college. By the end of the school semester, North Korean high schools are notified to recommend students for college admission. If there are ten slots in the recommendation list, five of them would be filled with the names of corporate workers' children while only one slot can be allotted to farmers' children. There's a smaller number of slots for college entrance that a farmer can get into, making it all the more difficult for him to make it to college. Such distinction is made evident by the *songbun* caste system.<sup>③</sup> It's socially accepted that a farmer's children shouldn't think of leaving and stick to farmwork, or that they should study farm maintenance more than anything else. The state controls just about everything in a farmer's life. In reality, a farmer's son has to compete through the odds of a few thousand to one for them to manage to get into college. Unless one has the brain or the money to fight the odds, there is no opportunity for higher education even as one seeks such an opportunity. Also, one cannot go to college without money. It takes money to run a college program. They say education is free but only in words. Nothing actually operates that way. There is a large price to be paid for college entrance.

<sup>③</sup> In North Korean language, a person's "*songbun*" refers to one's social identity classified according to the person's ideological persuasion, profession, or upbringing. A person's "*todae*", on the other hand, refers to one's political identity categorised into classes according to one's family tree or ancestry.

Every school requires a different sum, so students may select college admission based on their economic situation.

I resented my parents a lot.  
There's a saying in North Korea that goes  
"A farmer is destined to be forever."  
It means that a farmer is meant to work  
at the farms for all future generations.

Among the different groups of people in North Korea, farmers are the most pitiful. The people will look down on farmers. Farmers' children do not have freedom in marriage either. Girls from farming households will have a difficult time finding a spouse. A marriage between the farmer's daughter and a working-class son could turn out disadvantageous to the husband's family. A farmer married to a working-class husband must be inspected by the People's Unit, the corporation, and the party every once a year. In North Korea, there is this activity called "farm building" in order to strengthen the farm front. If you are a working-class person married to a woman from a farming family, you too may end up participating in farm work in the name of "farm building" projects. If you're someone from a working-class family, it's unfortunate that you may get assigned to a farm for work just because you're married to a farm worker. People can fall in love outside one's caste (*songbun*). But I've seen many cases where the couple is unhappy in marriage later on. That's why a working-class person tries not to marry a farmer even if he is in love with her.

Food gets scarce as the situation worsens in the farming villages, and the state tries to maintain the number of farmers in the way of backfills where necessary. That's why working-class men who have married women from farming households are made to join the farms to work. Because of this, children from farming families always try to serve in the military. They have no choice but to stay with their parents and be a farmer their whole lives unless they serve.

The younger generation truly dislikes this arrangement. They have their own aspirations. It's true that ten years of service is a long time, but it could mean an opportunity to go to college. For men, especially, this could be an opportunity to get Party membership.<sup>4</sup> For North Korean men, one must become a member of the party to be treated decently. There are multiple conditions to meet in order to become a Party cadre. First, there is military service. Then, there's college. Third, there's the family background (*todae*). If one did not serve in the military, it means that he cannot become a Party cadre no matter how smart he is or if he has a college diploma. So those coming from a farmer's household will try to serve even as they know military service is difficult - because there is hope. Finishing military service means you have accomplished the most important step for Party membership. Of course, even after finishing military service, you may not end up going to college. However, there is hope that there is a chance you could be recommended for college admission. If you're really lucky, you could even become a cadre. But you cannot imagine anyone becoming a cadre with only a college diploma and no military record.

You could of course work in the field that you majored in. But even if you graduated from medical school, and you are

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<sup>4</sup> One must be a member of the Workers' Party of Korea in order to access political power, social recognition, and status in North Korea.

a doctor with very specialised skills, you won't be able to make a living off of it because of the absence of rations. So recently, even those with a college diploma would often start their own business instead. The rationing system does exist in principle. But I personally have not received any rations since the Arduous March. But what can people do in the absence of rations? In the factories and the like, some freedom is given to the workers allowing them to make money elsewhere during work hours. 70% of the profit would be paid to the state, while the 30% will be kept by the worker. This change allowed workers to live by their own means.

That's what became of the workers, but there was also change to farmers too. The policy administering the farms changed every year. The working groups would be in members of three, then of eleven, and there were these constant changes. The reason why the farms were not being managed properly was because land and manpower was limited, but the resources like fertiliser and pesticides that could improve the land were non-existent – and neither was there government funding for that. The cadres in charge of the farms were all trying to make a profit off the situation. The chair of the farm management committee, being the top man of the farm, worked towards his own survival only. In North Korea, each institution is assigned a yearly plan. Farms are no different. Let's say, if the instruction is to produce 70 tons of grain, the committee chair would try to execute as planned one way or another, so that he may secure his position. But without fertilisers, pesticides, and funds, how could the plan be met? We would end up mobilising a team of farmers to cut down all the trees in the nearby mountains, and sell the lumber to China. That's how we bought the supplies needed for farming. That is to

say that some members of the farm were chopping down trees to sell to China, while the other members would use the supplies bought from the money to work the fields. This was how we managed to execute the plans instructed at the state-level.

A portion of the farm product must be submitted to the government. Before the start of the farming cycle, a plan is set out to show how much we owe to the state. The produce is submitted primarily as military rations. Then, a certain portion has to be stored to cover operational cost. Then, there's the deduction to be made for the rations to be given to the teachers. Teachers tend to be better cared for by the government compared to other workers. This is because they can't stop the schools from operating. The students are under-aged, meaning they cannot be made to work. The teachers are the people who are supposed to look after these students. If one teacher does not show up at school because of their food shortages, it affects multitudes of students. That's why the state would give at least one-fifth of the rations to the teachers, even as they neglected everyone else. These rations all come from the farms. After all the submissions, farmers are left with almost nothing.

If I were to convert the amount of food needed for a person to live in North Korea into grains, one person would need about 150~160 kg of grains per year. But the farmers don't get to keep any of the grains because all the grains are sent away as military rations, and all we are left with are potatoes. The farmer only gets to hold on to potatoes, and even then, the most I remember getting was but two months' worth of potatoes. In Ryanggang Province, by the way, you can usually trade potatoes with grains at a ratio of 4:1. This means I have to find my own means to survive for the remaining ten months out of a given year. There

used to be no trees in the mountains in my hometown. The mountains were all bare, because they had been worked as small plots of land.<sup>⑤</sup> People planted potatoes and corn in the small plots to do some farming by themselves. A farmer had no other way to live. Without the small plots of land, everyone would have starved to death.

So the farmers have no incentives to be hard at work. They've worked hard for the country for a long time but have received so little in return. This has led people to change their mindset. The regulations may tell us to do otherwise, but so what? A person has to eat. The people will retaliate saying I can't work anymore. Even so, the farms do not take such excuses, because the farms have to abide by the law. Instead, the state started turning a blind eye toward these small plots of land worked by individuals. By the time I came to South Korea, there were almost no crackdowns against the small plots, but now that they are so wide-spread I'm thinking that there may be some crackdowns in place. Anyways, the state knew that a farmer toiled throughout the year only to receive two months' worth of food. The government must have been out of ideas, since no number of beatings or Labour Training Camp sentences would have made a difference, as people were sabotaging farm work. That's how the practice of having small plots of land gradually spread. This way, farmers got to replenish food for the remaining ten months. It wasn't enough, but it was barely enough to get by.

Farm work took place from 8 AM to 7 PM with a two-hour lunch break in the middle. When things were busy, we were made to work until late at night without fixed working hours. Weeding and harvesting had to happen during the right time of the year, so we had to work non-stop in those seasons. There

⑤ "Small plots of land" (*sotoji*) refers to patches of land where individuals grow food around their home or by the mountain side.



was no machinery involved – only manpower. Not only did we not have the equipment in the first place, but we had no oil to run the machines. How could we ever imagine using machinery for farm work in such a situation? We barely had food to go around. This is probably common to all regions in North Korea. I believe that the state provides subsidies to at least some of the breadbasket regions. But when it comes to Ryanggang Province, the government just expects us to manage by ourselves.

The farmers show up at work because, at the end of the day, we fear the law. They take part in the work, but never in earnest. They never invest effort into farm work. They are just trying to pass time in a lukewarm manner. People are smart enough to save the energy for their small plots of land rather than spend it all at farm work. Then once the farm work is done, the entire family will run to their small plot of land. They will work with nightlights on until late at night. Even when it's so dark they can't see what's around, they may bring a small lantern charged by solar energy or set up a bonfire by the field. They work hard to grow food for themselves. North Koreans have these solar panel chargers made in China. They use them to charge batteries whenever needed. With the work on the small plots added on top of farm work, working ten hours was an average day. I never gave a thought about having to work such long hours. It wasn't just my family, but most of the farm workers and their family living in the same way.

You can almost say that anyone who didn't work the small plots of land died of starvation. If a person does not work a small plot of land, it means that the person is so weak that he cannot participate in farm work anyhow, or is a very unmotivated person by nature. Even the cadres will openly make remarks on such a

person that the state cannot provide for anyone of you and yet you do not even work the small plot of land that everyone else seems to be doing. It implies that someone who does not work their small plot of land is lazy. Actually, farm work is hard enough that having to work your small plot of land on top of it does take a toll. It's to the point where you start to feel foam in your mouth because you are so tired. Still the majority soldiers on with grit, because without the small plots of land they will starve. That's why the entire family – including the underaged and the elderly – toil together on the small plot. These people get to have their own produce at the end of their hard work – which is not a lot but is still better than nothing. Also, a farmer does not get to run a business at a marketplace. Once you set up a stall, you might get arrested – under the pretext that you shouldn't be out here doing business when you're not even a good farmer in the first place. So, the farmers do not dare start a business. In fact, even if a farmer wanted to start a business, what would a farmer have to sell? It's funny because they don't have anything on them and it makes it so hard for a farmer to make a living. What a farmer can do is that they might carry a sack of corn or beans they harvested to about a hundred *li* distance and exchange it with rice once in a while.

People want to become cadres. Among the farm members, there are many cadres such as the farm managing committee chair, the work unit leader, the team leader, the ledger manager, and the warehouse manager. Only those who have served in the military can take a cadre's position. Then why do people want to become cadres so much, you might ask? A work unit leader manages a piece of farmland about 50 *jongbo*<sup>⑥</sup> in size, whose manpower and land are all administered by the work unit leader. Under the leadership of the farm managing committee chair,

⑥ A *jongbo* is approximately 9,900m<sup>2</sup> (3,000 *pyeong*).

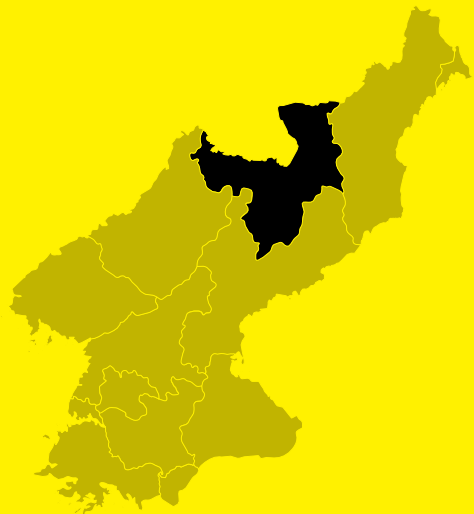
there are about seven work units within a farm. Then, there are three teams within a work unit. A work unit leader or a team leader manages the input and output of the land. So, it's easy for them to look after themselves, as they can stash some of the produce for their own good. This is bigger than you might think. That's why on the farm, holding at least some kind of position will certainly help you get by. For a farmer to become a cadre, one has to have the basic qualifications (military service, Party membership, etc.) and still work his back off to get the job. Without the qualification, it is virtually impossible to become a cadre.

From the human rights perspective, I think the situation got a little better after Kim Jong-un came into power compared to his father's era. In terms of the freedom of speech, though, it's the same – such as whether one can criticise the party or make political statements. I believe, however, that treatment toward farmers and their children has gotten better. Becoming a Party member is no small deal, but now farmers are given better opportunities when joining the party. Farmers still have to toil away even without enough to eat. Factory workers, on the other hand, get to do their own thing when the factory isn't running. That's why the state grants more opportunities to farmers who join the party. If a hundred people from a single county are getting party membership – including farmers, factory workers, white-collar workers, teachers, and all – seventy out of one hundred may be allotted to farmers. This is what changed in the Kim Jong-un era. This can be said to be boosting the pride and morale of the farmers. Once a farmer becomes a Party member, he can become a cadre of the farm.

But even as he becomes a Party member and a cadre,

a farmer is still a farmer. He cannot escape from his farmer identity. He is simply a farmer and a cadre of the farm at the same time. Simply put, he has elevated to a position where he can look after himself a bit more. Even if a farmer-turned-cadre has a child, that child is but another farmer. Unless the child goes to serve in the military or goes to college, he will have to farm all his life. That's why they say, "a farmer is destined to be forever." It is extremely rare for a farmer to move to another profession.

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Hello, my name is Park Jong-chul. I was born in Ryanggang Province. I left North Korea in the middle of 2017 and reached South Korea within about a month.

After finishing my military service, I returned to my hometown. The Labour Department assigned me to work at a mine in another county. I couldn't accept that I was assigned to a job in another region far away from my home, so I resisted. I argued that I didn't serve for 10 years just so that I can get a job as a miner. I spent some time at home and tried pulling some strings via an acquaintance. This was before bribery existed, so I gave him some clothes to ask for a favour. I had two documents that I had to get updated - the party membership card and the food rationing suspension form<sup>❶</sup> (which follows me from birth). I needed the latter fixed so that I could prove that I would be getting rations from my new home location once I registered there.

So the first job I took was at a branch of Office no. 39<sup>❷</sup> belonging to the provincial Workers' Party. These offices exist in every province. The mine that I was supposed to work at was also under the jurisdiction of the same Office no. 39. All the gold mined from that place is taken by Office no. 39 of the Workers' Party. Anyways, I worked at a newly built factory that was under the management of the Bureau of Gold Ore Management. Ryanggang Province contributed to foreign trade through the existence of these gold mines in the province. But as this place was brand new, the facility had to be built from scratch. Then, in the middle of the 1990s, the North Korean economy fell apart and the constructions were called off. I was assigned to another job afterward.

My next job was at a train station. From the mid-1990s

- ❶ Food Rationing Suspension Form is a document related to food rations. A person submits this documentation to the previous workplace when moving to another place of residence or a place of work.
- ❷ Office no. 39 is a Party organisation in North Korea that is known to collect and manage secret funds for the supreme leader through foreign trade.

onwards, difficult living conditions and the death of Kim Il-sung brought the country's social order crumbling to pieces. That's when the rail transports became lawless. Inspection units were created to regulate such behaviour. I was an inspector myself. A travel permit is needed in North Korea if one wants to travel to another location. Without a permit, one cannot move. You need a ticket to get on a train, but you need a travel permit first to buy a train ticket. Most people cannot afford tickets because they do not have a permit. That's why there would be a lot of free riders. I was responsible for stopping those people. It was a small station that I was assigned to where 70~80% of the people climbing aboard the train were free riders. They would climb on the train roof or break in through the windows. The rules in North Korea only allow for 2 pieces of luggage that weigh less than 20 kg (of reasonably small size) per person. But due to the difficult situation in North Korea, there were many who didn't follow the rules and tried to get on board with many pieces of luggage that were bulky and heavy – a sack of potatoes for example. There were those carrying pieces of scrap metal like nickel and copper to smuggle over to China. I used to regulate such individuals.

Once they are brought into the interrogation room, I would write a report. I would notify the person on the spot that they have to pay a certain fine, and I received the amount. Upon reception, I would write him a receipt and let him go. But the truth is, there is no fixed fine. I just made up the numbers based on the circumstances. A part of the fine would be given to the state while the remainder was for me to take. When writing the receipt, I would write on three layers of paper including the carbon paper in the middle. Writing on the top layer would result in a carbon copy of the two below. One is given to the person

paying the fine. One is submitted to the state with the cash. The remaining one would be stored as a record. If you make a weak impression on the paper when writing the receipt, you can easily manipulate the writing later. So that's what I often did. I worked there for a few years until I went somewhere else.

I worked at a munitions factory right until I left North Korea. We produced mortar shells and grenades. North Korea prioritises the munitions industry, which they refer to as the "Secondary Economy,"<sup>③</sup> even when they can't produce anything else. The factory was supplied with so few materials by that point that the factory manager (chief executive) had to go out and get the materials needed for production. The materials that used to be plentiful in the past are no more. For instance, we used to have a large barrel full of alcohol to clean the manufactured goods. Nowadays, we have pieces of cotton dipped in alcohol for the same cleaning process.

Also, the metal required to produce shells was not supplied by the state. So we had to find a way. There are individuals in North Korea that smuggle metal plates and other scrap metal to China. We needed the metal plates more than the scrap, so we would visit someone who dealt with those to trade 750 kg of scrap metal that we had for 500 kg of metal plates. Those plates were brought to our factory to manufacture the shells. Scrap metal and plates are two different things. Metal plates are flat and take up less space. That makes them easy to transport. Scrap metal, on the other hand, takes up more space, and it is easier to get caught during a smuggling run. Smugglers prefer plates over scraps. That's why the ratio for trading metal plates to scraps would be 1:1.5.

Munition factories in North Korea are called something else.

③ Another name for the military economy. The "primary economy" refers to the regular economy - the people's economy.

The factories are referred to as those that produce machinery, packaging material, precision mouldings, and so forth. The factory I worked in used to produce one hundred thousand mortar shells a year during the late 1970s and early 1980s when the North Korean economy was doing well. Grenade production took off more recently. From the 2010s onwards, production decreased to about 8,000 shells a year. It's less than one-tenth of what it used to be. Even this was a hard target to meet. The 8,000 shells would be divided into 12 months, so as to track the production monthly. But due to the power shortage, we would work day and night whenever the power supply was on – without returning home and eating at the factory. We had times when we couldn't produce a single shell in a period of one month due to the power outage.

It's not so much that the power was on for a few days at a time, but rather it was about five or six hours daily on average. If the workstations go out of operation because of a power outage, we would sit around at the office and resting area to play cards and bet on drinks and tobacco. We would be drinking alcohol until the power came back on, when we would return to the factory plant to start production again. The company instructed us to work according to the power situation. We would show up at work and spend the entire day relaxing. When we saw the lights coming back on we would run inside the factory plant to start running the machinery until the power was out again... We would work in this manner. We produced about 1,500 hand grenades a year. Even meeting that 1,500-production volume was near impossible. As for the mortar shells, the factory needs to produce more than 50,000 shells to meet the required quota of 8,000. This is because the lack of materials and the problem with

the electric voltage leads to many defective products. Even after cranking out 50,000 shells, a lot of it would be thrown out and only 8,000 shells would remain.

In principle, workers are supposed to receive monthly wages and rations separately. But they are rarely provided monthly. I was supposed to claim my wage from the bank, but the bank had no money to give. The cash flow in the country would be so slow that I would receive my wages once every three or four months. Meeting the quota, I was entitled to 3,000 North Korean won. But if I failed to do my job because of power outages, I didn't get any wages. At the end of the day, I had to work in order to get paid, but the pay wouldn't be at fixed intervals. I got paid a bit more for a month if the production was good, and then got paid nothing if the production was bad due to shortages in materials and electric power. I wouldn't even get to claim all 3,000 won. The company would deduct fees to cover other people's weddings and funerals from the 3,000 without letting me know. In North Korea, we all use Chinese currency. To convert the value of North Korean currency, you need to take rice prices and Chinese currency as the baseline. Before I left North Korea in 2017, a kilogram of rice was priced a little bit more than 3 yuan. A yuan was equivalent to 1,200 North Korean won, so a kilogram of rice would cost about 5,000 won. That is to say, my 3,000 won salary would get me only half a kilogram of rice. That's what my monthly salary was worth. We used to say among ourselves that it was not for the pay that we showed up at work.

The state will arrest you for not showing up at work, so there is no other choice but to show up.

So, the workers would take a more lukewarm attitude towards work.

They don't care whether there are defects being produced, they are put to work simply because they are made to. There is no repercussion for defects being made, so people work in a clumsy way just to meet the quota. I wasn't getting anything in return for showing up at work and doing my job. The wage I did receive wouldn't buy me anything, so there was no incentive to work hard. By the way, rations were non-existent. From Kim Jong-il's time, there was a directive to support the workers in the "Secondary Economy" just like they do in the military. In North Korea, they at least feed you three meals a day in the military, no matter what. But the directive turned out to be empty words because the state didn't have anything to support us with – no rations. We would get maybe 3 to 15 kilograms of corn a month, or not. There was no steady supply. The rations were less than what I would consume in a month. It was impossible to feed a family with them.

The manager is the chief executive of the factory. The manager takes responsibility for the production, maintenance, and workers' backend support. A party cadre who goes by the title of "Elementary Party Secretary" also holds a position in the factory. In North Korea, there is a saying that goes, "a man's life is both political and emotional." We also say "ideology governs everything." The state continues with ideological indoctrination aimed at people. The Elementary Party Secretary is there to maintain the ideological training of the factory workers. Life Review Sessions are held once a week in the factory.

Lectures also take place once a week. Then there is a separate study session once a week. So that accounts for a minimum of three indoctrination sessions taking place every week. These sessions are handled by the Elementary Party Secretary as this is indoctrination.

Life Review Sessions are held differently for every company, but they all have elementary-level Parties at the highest level, Party parts below, and Party cells at the lowest level. One work unit constitutes a Party cell. A single cell has fifteen members. Life Review Sessions in North Korea are held separately among Party members, among Workers' League members, and among Youth League members. I was a Party member, so I had Life Review Sessions with them. If you have a job while not a Party member, you will get to have Life Review Sessions with the Workers' League members.

As for the lectures, the lecture materials will be sent from the Central Party – telling us what the lecture will be about this week. Those materials contain information about some internal situations in North Korea not released to the outside and recent events. If the lecture is meant to cover a topic related to production, the factory manager may be asked to lead the lecture instead. Lectures are held in a way where the lecturer reads out the materials verbatim and adds a little bit of his opinion.

Different studying sessions are held at different times. For instance, New Year's Statements are made every year in North Korea. The lecturer will later explain what the statement was about word for word. Study sessions also take place on a fixed day of the week. My factory held study sessions every Monday – usually about 2 hours at a time. Workers in the entire factory will gather up to learn. These sessions are led by the Elementary Party

Secretary almost 100% of the time.

North Korean workers  
work Monday through Saturday.  
We only have Sunday off.

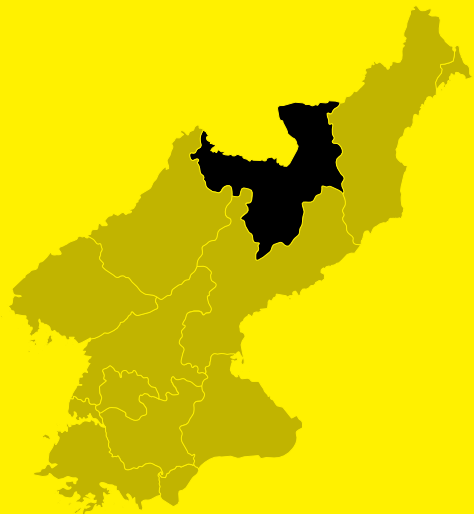
But even on Sundays, it's not all rest. On some occasions when there's work to be done, all workers are made to come to work even on a Sunday. Corporations such as factories will be assigned to social work on top of their mainstay function. Although I worked at a munitions plant, we were sometimes required to do road construction in another region. Another example would be when some houses had been torn down to make way for railway tracks – we would be instructed to build a certain number of duplex houses in a certain area. This type of work is usually required on Sundays. It's more work required on top of our mainstay job. This happens frequently. People do get disgruntled by the fact, but they still show up as this is nothing new. No one complains about how this is unfair. No one complains that this is bad.

The people do not criticise the leader or the state in North Korea. There is no freedom of the press, of assembly, or of protest. Attempting to exercise such freedom would get you arrested immediately by the Ministry of State Security and sent to a Political Prison Camp. The reason people cannot speak their minds freely is because they are afraid of punishment. Limiting the freedom of speech does more than indoctrination. Put simply, if you do not know who could be a Ministry informant as we

sit together in this room, then anyone could be spying on me. I cannot speak freely for that reason. If I speak my mind, my words will be ultimately picked up by the Ministry of State Security and will lead to my punishment. There are many rumours about those who have been arrested and taken away.

There was a nuclear experiment conducted around 2013. Two days after the experiment, the party assembled people for a public gathering celebrating its success. The instructions were to show up by a certain hour. There was one lady in my neighbourhood who refused to show up because she had to make ends meet and showing up at the gathering would prevent her from earning her daily meal. The People's Unit Leader informed her again that everyone must attend the celebration as the party has instructed, but the lady was stubborn and said "the nuclear experiment has nothing to do with me. I am too busy trying to make ends meet." At the end of the day, the Ministry of State Security took her and had her detained for maybe ten days. After that, she kept her mouth shut at all times and did as the party told. I can only imagine what she had to go through...

Hello, my name is  
Kim Hye-seon.  
I lived in Ryanggang  
Province until  
early 2019 before  
leaving North Korea.



Hello, my name is Kim Hye-seon. I lived in Ryanggang Province until early 2019 before leaving North Korea.

Jobs in North Korea are very different from those in South Korea. In North Korea, you don't get paid. People with jobs have to pay money to the workplace instead. That's why it is preferred to become a Party cadre, but that is only for a few people. The dream job for ordinary people in North Korea is to be part of the "money-making crew." This refers to people who have their names registered as workers somewhere, but the workplace leaves those people alone for the next year. Not showing up for work in North Korea is a criminal offence, men under the age of 60 or young people prior to marriage will be punished or sent on "Storm Troops" (*dolgyeokdae*)<sup>❶</sup> duty by the labour section of the People's Council. But once you have your name registered to a workplace, they stop looking for you. I could, for instance, have my name registered to some factory and have an arrangement with the factory manager to not come to work for the next year. I would only show up at the year-end to pay my share. The money would be in Chinese currency. The price used to be set at 300 yuan when Chinese currency was strong, but then the price got inflated to 500 yuan and 700 yuan by the time I left. That money would get me registered to the workplace for a year, but without the responsibility of having to show up. I could either enjoy life or do my own business. That's what's called the "money-making crew."

This is considered a dream job for men, because once you have a job, you will inevitably be assigned to a Storm Troop. They assign a number of people per workplace. There are "Pyongyang Storm Troops", "Samjiyon Construction", "Hwanghae Province Waterway Construction" – a few people selected from the factory to be assigned here and there, after which they will be working

❶ Groups for the requisition and management of unpaid forced labour for construction. There are various forms, from small and medium-sized temporary labour groups to permanent organisations similar to the military.



in shifts for a few months. That is to say, if the state orders us to secure 300 troopers from Kimjongsuk County, each factory will assign individuals to be sent on Storm Troop duty. So the factory manager is stressed out about the Storm Troop quota. Every worker in his factory has an excuse not to go, and they don't want to go. Moreover, once you are dispatched as a Storm Trooper, you have to pay for your own meals for the next number of months. So, when a person assigned to Storm Troop duty complains that he doesn't have any money on him and therefore cannot go, his coworkers will chip in to help him cover his meals. In this way, every workplace requires some kind of expenditure day after day. Once you are assigned as a Storm Troop, you need to work your butt off. That's why people with money will make a deal with the Storm Troops leader so that he doesn't have to go. It all comes down to money... Anyhow, one has to go on Storm Troop duty if one has a job. The factory does not have the ingredients, so instead they send people out on mobilisation projects. We are made to work on road construction, railway construction, and to get firewood from the mountains. These are very stressful projects.

My hometown has a lot of pine trees. The trees planted during the Japanese colonial era have now become large trees and spread across the region. Harvesting pine nuts and smuggling them into China makes big money.

Pine nuts are smuggled into China by private individuals. The weight of the nuts must be a few dozen tons.

The men sometimes pay their share to the workplace, and earn time to smuggle pine nuts. This way they can make a living.

Pine nut season is for one month. Working diligently for one month would fetch enough money for one to pay his workplace for an entire month and enjoy life. Pine nut season is in September. Before, we used to harvest any pine nut in the forest, but since word got out that the nuts make a lot of money, the County-level Party Committee instituted strict control over the pine tree area. In North Korea, the party comes first. The first secretary of the County Party Committee, who is the most powerful person there, would be comparable to a mayor in South Korean politics. There's another position called the "administrative committee chair," but the first secretary rules supreme.

Every year, the first secretary will assign the different areas with pine trees to the people. Initially, there was no exchange of money. The cadres in power would distribute pine nut orchards to each of the factories, in exchange for a certain amount of money or pine nuts to be paid to the County-level Party. The remaining amount would be used for keeping the factory running and for paying the employees. It is difficult for an individual to keep a pine nut orchard to himself, so people would try to steal the pine nuts before they are ripe. They would sneak in to harvest them around August when the nuts are starting to ripen. A kilogram of pine nut costs around 25 to 30 Chinese yuan. A large tree with lots of nuts may give as much as a hundred kilograms. A person would be able to harvest a minimum of ten kilograms a day. The amount of money they make is truly astounding. This way, the

country folks live better than the city folks. Unripe nuts only cost about 5 to 10 yuan, while ripe ones will cost up to 30. The workplaces will get employees to guard their orchards starting from July. They set up tents to eat and sleep on guard duty.

Nowadays, the County-level Party Committee will sell plots of orchards to private individuals for money. Now people with money can be allotted a good piece of land by getting close to the person in charge of assigning the orchards. Initially, the County-level Party only allotted these orchards in July to those who would pay 500 yuan for one *jongbo* of land. Whoever was the first to pay would occupy the piece of the orchard of their choosing. That's how the price got inflated year after year, and so by the time I left, people were paying up to 3,000 yuan for one *jongbo* of land. This way, the rich only get richer. They tend to buy land in units of 10 *jongbo* at a time.

When the time of the year comes, people try to secure a pine field for themselves, even if it means having to owe money to someone. There's even a saying that the money from all across the country gets concentrated in this region during pine nut season. There's even those who come all the way from Pyongyang with the money. The person who's secured the orchard won't be able to guard the plot by himself, so he hires ordinary people – the people living most poor. He pays them for hire. In pine nut season, the factories tend to have very little work to do, so they tend to give all the time to those employees who head out to the pine fields in search of money-making opportunities. If these employees want to work at the pine fields for a month or two, then they will be made to pay their share of 200~300 yuan for their absence. The price goes up during this time of the year. In this way, all the men from the workplaces, the unmarried bachelors, and heads of

households fight a war to secure an opportunity at the pine fields. That is to say, the money man secured 10 *jongbo*'s worth of land by paying 3,000 yuan each. He can't guard all that land by himself, so he is exposed to thievery day and night. If the maths is that you need 50 men to guard over this large piece of land, then the hiring is for 50 men. There is a contract between the money man and the worker. If the worker does a good job in protecting the orchard and harvesting the nuts, he will be paid 1,500 yuan for his troubles. His employer will be covering the expenditure of 30,000 Chinese yuan he had paid for the fields and make more money on top of it. Pine nuts make so much money. The hired hands will obey the money man to protect the orchard and harvest the nuts in the end. In exchange, they will take 1,500 yuan each. Deducting the 300 yuan to pay to the workplace, the remaining 1,200 is for him to keep. This is a profit.

This is like doing part-time work on top of one's day job in South Korea. You get paid as much as you work.

I think it's been maybe five or six years since we started seeing orchards being sold at a price and people getting hired every pine nut season. The gap between the rich and the poor turned dramatic from then. Those with some money will get rich only after one year of this business. The nut harvest wasn't so good in the year before I left. Nut prices were high, but the trees did not bear so many of them. There was also a typhoon in spring so that the pine nuts were blown away in windfall. One

moneyed man secured a patch of orchard at 30,000 yuan and hired many hands promising them 1,500 yuan each. But after the harvest, it turned out that there was very little money left for him to pay the workers, after covering the 30,000 yuan he paid for the orchard and another 30,000 for himself. So he didn't pay the workers in full. His promise of 1,500 yuan was only realised at 200 yuan each. The hired hands stood guard for more than three months, and only got 200 yuan in return. My nephew was in such a situation where he was supposed to pay 300 yuan for his job, but he couldn't. As a result, he was chased down by the factory manager. He got out of the pickle by making a truckload of firewood in wintertime instead. In such a way, those without money sometimes take the short end of the stick.

Although I did describe the relationship between the money man and the hired hand as a contract, there is no such thing as a contract in North Korea. I used to talk about such things with my friends before I left North Korea – about how we have to sign a contract before getting into an arrangement. I used to tell them that capitalist countries write contracts all the time, and that piece of paper serves as proof of everything. In North Korea, problems arise when a person lends money to another person. For a loan of 100,000 won, the lender may ask for a repayment of 300,000 won including interest. The borrower may argue back that he doesn't have 300,000 won when the reason he was borrowing money was that he did not even have 100,000 won in the first place. The two would get in a fight and get detained by the police station. Usury is illegal in North Korea. Because there is no such thing as a contract, people only make verbal arrangements for loans. Accordingly, the police station will order the borrower to give back only the borrowed amount. They are telling the lender that

he will not get to charge interest. This must suck for the lender who was lending money for interest. After many years lending such a big amount of money, he still cannot charge interest. That's why the folks in my hometown started talking about how we should write contracts too. The word "contract" does not exist in the North Korean vocabulary, but it caught on since so many people were using it. I think people picked it up from watching films from capitalist cultures. I was told that capitalist countries have written contracts, and the law does not interfere as long as you have a contract. This kind of talk began maybe two or three years before I left. It hasn't been that long.

My hometown had a well-developed smuggling trade. That is not to say that we had smugglers in every household. There's a fixed group of smugglers – only a handful of them. Ordinary people like us would recognize a smuggler by face. It's so well known that the smugglers run their business in collaboration with the Ministry of State Security, the police, and the cadres of the County-level Party committee. Smugglers are more powerful than your average Party cadre. You can say that 50% of their revenue from the smuggling trade goes to the cadre. It's the money that keeps the cadres docile. While smugglers are few in number, a great many people make a living thanks to their trade.

As for the pine nuts, smugglers need to secure their quota of nuts to be able to export to China. They send goods over to China in bulk. In North Korea, there are people who sell wares from their market stalls, and grocers who travel to the countryside and faraway regions to bring their produce. Then there are the truckers and middlemen. Retailers that are called "*doetko*" mostly consist of women. There is a fixed number of about 50 of them. These people make money by trading goods between the smugglers and

the ordinary people. They purchase beans, vegetables, mugwort, and the like. If a citizen in possession of some rice wants beans, he will come to one of them. They will weigh it out, and leave a margin before reselling it to someone else. A retailer would buy goods at 100 yuan and resell at 110. People know this but they visit the retailers as they have goods in large volume and variety. If the smuggler can be said to be a wholesaler, the *doetko* are the retailers. A smuggler may, for instance, buy a kilogram of pine nuts from the retailers at 25 Chinese yuan. The retailers will have bought the nuts at 23 yuan. So this *doetko* will function as a middle merchant, buying nuts from a multitude of other people and reselling them to the smuggler. The smuggler will get to secure the large volume of nuts he needs via the *doetko* that he is familiar with. These *doetko* are like middle merchants in South Korea. In pine nut season, there are so many women travelling on bikes carrying nuts for sale that it looks like cars stuck in a traffic jam in South Korea. It's the time of the year when people are busy travelling to the countryside purchasing nuts. Anyways, there are so many people benefitting from the smuggling trade. But then, even as these merchants haul goods to be smuggled, the guard posts located in every location may confiscate the goods. By confiscate, I mean that they will let you go after taking a kilogram out of the 30 kilograms of nuts you are carrying.

Previously, one could find ways around the law as long as he had a law enforcement institution offering protection. But I've been told that in 2020, there was a complete prohibition on smuggling due to Covid-19. I was told that the pine nuts that were harvested last September (2020) still could not be exported to China even now (early 2021). They are simply holding onto the nuts, unable to sell. With the smuggling trade gone, people

are said to worry that things might go back to the era of slavery. I contacted a friend of mine in North Korea and was told that this friend was living under difficult circumstances with only porridge to eat, as there is no money to be made. Prior to Covid-19, one could still find a way even with the strengthened border control by raising the protection fee from 1 yuan to 2 yuan paid to the Border Guards or the law enforcement institutions – as one could still purchase the nuts cheaply and sell them to China for a higher margin. Illegal activities were a constant no matter what happened. Things being so, around two or three years before I came to South Korea, the state found out that pine nuts make money and started participating in the smuggling trade under the name of “state smuggling.” But I've been told that my hometown no longer does private smuggling ever since Covid-19, and neither is there state smuggling either. I was told that in Hyesan, they still have some private smuggling going on in small volumes.

Before, when a private smuggler brought the goods to the riverside, the Border Guard would take 1 yuan for every kilogram and protect the transaction with the Chinese businessmen. Now in the name of state smuggling, the County-level Party Committee officially makes smuggling runs to the Chinese side at a national level. Trucks roll into the countryside in the name of state smuggling. Goods meant for the Chinese trade are purchased in this way. The trucks haul the goods across the river, and the smugglers are made to contact the Chinese businessmen before exporting the goods directly to the Chinese side. The smuggler gets nothing in return here. It is the County-level Party Committee that takes everything. Yet, the smugglers have to comply as it is a law enforcement institution engaging in these activities.

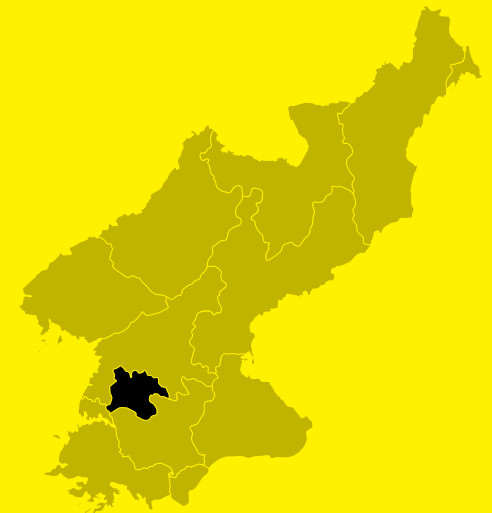
On the day of the trade, the Party Committee as well as the Ministry of State Security, the police, the Border Guards, and the People's Committee all move together. Multiple trucks will move back and forth all night. Even when it's state smuggling, it is conducted in secret at night. Other than the pine nuts, red beans are also sold to China. The money earned is divided among these different County-level institutions. With the advent of state smuggling, private smuggling naturally was naturally diminished. 10~20 years ago, it was mainly foodstuff that came over from China, such as rice, corn, and cooking oil. Now, we export pine nuts and receive money in return. With state smuggling though, we started getting things like petroleum from China. It happened in 2018 and 2019. Such goods are found in state smuggling. It's happened a lot.

There was one thing about South Korea that makes me think that North Korea has low levels of human rights. In North Korea, people don't know so well about contraception or abortion. There was a lady in my village that would help women get abortions. The way she did that is truly horrendous now that I think of it. She would get the girl to stand against the wall and punch her lower abdomen multiple times with her fist. She does this for a living, so she knows where to hit. The result is often bloody, but that's how she helped people get abortions. Also recently, I was surprised while seeing the president of South Korea speaking at a press conference. I was shocked that journalists could ask questions to a president. And I thought to myself, that's not what a state should look like. But it also made South Korea seem more liberal than North Korea.

Voice  
28

An Account of a North Korean Worker  
Sent Overseas

Hello. My name is  
Oh Geun-chul.  
I was born in  
Pyongyang. I was  
a North Korean  
construction  
worker sent to work  
in Kuwait.



Hello. My name is Oh Geun-chul. I was born in Pyongyang. I was a North Korean construction worker sent to work in Kuwait.

It was on 6 November, 1996 when I rode the plane from Pyongyang to Kuwait. I arrived in Kuwait on the same day and got to work the very next day. What's more is that I arrived close to midnight on 6 November and started working from 10 AM the next day – only hours later. There was no training. I worked until March 1997, so technically I only worked there for five months.

I arrived at a construction site for a residential area project in Kuwait. The place was called “Umm Al Hayman”. The day after arrival, I had to travel to the city centre for a health check which was a one-hour drive away. I think there were about 21 other workers who left Pyongyang with me. Our dormitory was a two-story building that used to be a school. A work unit would be made to unpack their belongings at a classroom and get to work the next morning. There is groundwork to be done ahead of the building construction. That's what I would be a part of. It's no different from manual labour you see in South Korea. Earth is dug up by an excavator for the regular construction workers to go in and work on the parts that cannot be reached with machinery. We work to crisscross the steel rebars and pour concrete. I was a carpenter, so I took care of the woodwork. A carpenter would be in charge of assembling a mortar. We took part in the groundwork in this way.

There were North Korean workers on site before I got to Kuwait. By the time I arrived, there were about 200 North Koreans already working there – all men. Maybe it was that the government of Kuwait didn't approve all the working visas at once, or maybe it was because the passport took time to get issued. Anyways, North Korean workers were sent in batches.

A batch may be as large as 80 individuals and as small as just 10.

I was made to wake up at 5, wash myself and make my bed. 6:30 would be breakfast time at the canteen. Meals were catered by North Koreans. A meal would consist of a piece of thick Kuwaiti bread and a cup filled with something to drink. Now that I think of it, they were serving us coffee. They would also give us two boiled eggs with some salt and butter. This was my breakfast every day. From 8 AM, we would go out to work on the site until noon. From noon to 1 PM, we would have lunch time. For lunch we would get beef soup and Indica rice. It was beef soup every day for the entire five months I was there. After lunch, we would work until 7 PM. Then dinner time was until 8 PM. We were meant to eat rice for dinner, but it got old. So these North Koreans came up with the brilliant idea of buying corn powder or flour from the local market and making noodles – using a noodle machine brought in from North Korea. Kimchi, by the way, was made out of cabbage. Those would be our three meals. Work hours were meant to be over by 8 PM., but there were only about two days a week where the work would actually finish on time. We were made to work overtime for the remaining five days. We would work from 8 PM to midnight or 1 AM. Oh, we worked seven days a week. Returning to the dormitory after working past midnight, we would be dead tired. But the next morning, we had to show up at work again and continue working. It was November there, but it wasn't so chilly and resembled Springtime in Korea. I asked the people who were working before me, and they told me that it gets unbearably hot in July and August.

The country observed public holidays, but we worked every day irrespective of that – even though Kuwaiti law prohibits us from working like that.

It was the North Korean cadres who would pressure the workers by saying “Let’s work loyally and make our Great Leader happy!”

It was political propaganda. South Koreans may not understand, but no one comments on political propaganda in North Korea. When a cadre makes an instruction, each work unit would receive the order. Then the unit leader overseeing 15~20 workers, being in a position where he is being ordered from the top, would say “Let’s work overtime out of loyalty!” and head out first. The unit members would head out to work with him. No one stayed behind. If anyone stayed behind, it would be treason. No one would call them out on it, but there is nobody who would stay behind. There might be one person from time to time who would stay behind if he didn’t feel well. But there wasn’t anyone who was directly protesting the overtime. Such a person would be reported to the superiors and would be put under investigation. That became a stigma.

Among the workers I was with, I couldn’t really tell who worked for the Ministry of State Security. But my understanding is that there was always one State Security officer working with us. I don’t think there was one in my batch – perhaps because our dispatch was delayed. But judging from what I saw working

there, there was always an officer hidden among the workers. There must have been one among the cadres too. This I can say for certain, as the North Korean system always includes a State Security officer. But how many of them there were, and who exactly it was – I cannot tell. Why I am so certain of their existence is because any suspicious or irregular activities taking place inside the work unit would be made known to the leadership the very next day. That’s how I know for sure. In South Korea, I assume this would be called “public safety” or “national security”, but in North Korea this is referred to as “State Security” (*bowi*).

I was not paid anything during my time working there.

Let me tell you how the payment system worked. There is the Kuwaiti client company that pays the money. Then climbing down the ladder of subcontractors taking the construction order, you reach the North Korean company (under the jurisdiction of the Workers’ Party of Korea) at the very bottom. The company I worked for was called “Joseon Gwangbok Construction Company.” It had an English name in addition to the Korean name. In other words, this is a company that is set up on paper to allow for North Korean workers to be dispatched abroad. The company was meant to disappear once the construction project was over. As for the project I was working on, it was a Kuwaiti company that contracted out to an Indonesian company that found another company willing to take the subcontract for a

cheaper price. The North Korean company that I was a part of was three levels down the ladder in that way. We were the company willing to supply manpower at the cheapest price of them all. I believe that our labour costs were being paid right up to the immediate client company right above us. But since our company technically belongs to the Workers' Party of Korea, there was a separate account to transfer the payment to the Party Treasury. I believe all payments have been transferred out in that way. They should have deducted the workers' pay at least, but I believe they transferred every last penny.

I worked there for five months without any payment. Life essentials were purchased for the whole group, so that that didn't cost us anything. When coming to Kuwait, the expenses for the flight ticket as well as meals and lodging were covered from our common treasury. When departing from Pyongyang, we were told by the government that we will be paid 120 dollars as a monthly salary. 120 dollars in North Korea would be an incredible amount of money. We would sing hurray to the Great Leader and to the party, only if that were true. But after two months working in Kuwait, there was not a single mention or suggestion about the pay. The workers in my batch also started wondering among ourselves why we weren't getting paid. The cadre started telling us that the client company is short on cash and cannot pay us at the moment. They made up excuses not to pay us a salary.

Then I entered my third month in Kuwait. I was working with foreigners at the time, who were engineers looking into technical matters. It appeared they were also from another country, hired by another subcontract firm. They would smoke cigarettes and drink coke during the breaks. They were interested to meet a "Korean" so they would ask us things, calling us "Korea,

Korea." We were fascinated by them too. We asked the foreign workers why we weren't getting paid after getting all the work done. They told us they didn't know anything.

Fridays are holidays in Kuwait. Every Thursday afternoon, they would stop working, leave the site and not come back like we do on the weekends. That fascinated me. They were observing holidays. I didn't know Friday was their holiday at first. We only found out about it after asking the foreign workers in the way of hand gestures. The North Korean cadres won't tell us these things. They decided not to share with us any sensitive or disadvantageous information.

Anyhow, we got to ask about wages in the way of hand gestures to these foreigners. We asked them how much they were getting paid, although we weren't getting paid anything. They told us they get paid 650 dollars. Of course, some of them were basic workers and others were engineers. But when we were first promised 120 dollars as we were departing from Pyongyang, we were excited because we did not know what the actual pay should be. Upon hearing that, I could assume that my company was probably making about 650 dollars per person claiming it to be our pay. We were taking on the same line of work as those foreigners, the pay couldn't be that different. But then, those people may have to spend a portion of the 650 in meals and lodging. Even after deducting the common expenses we were incurring, though, 120 dollars seemed too small. If these stories were made known, don't you think the North Korean authorities would be in trouble? I think that's why no one told us the specifics and instead just told us 120 dollars. Oh, there is one payment that I did receive during those five months. 16 February, which happened to fall in my period of stay, was Kim Jong-il's birthday.



On that day, we were given 20 dinar per person. I could buy about 20 packs of cigarettes and 10 bottles of coke. They weren't paying us anything up to this point, and then they paid us just this once.

We were not allowed out even when our work was done for the day. For one thing, work would be done too late in the day, and for another, the streets were quiet with no stores open after work hours even at the city centres. Notwithstanding all that, there were barbed wire fences surrounding the area where the North Korean workers were. This, of course, is a matter of perspective. Barbed wire fences might be for military reasons but could be safety fences too. What puzzled me was that there were no barbed wire fences in the area where the foreigners were working. It was only the North Korean area that had these fences. I was curious so I decided to ask the company's in-house interpreter what the fence was about. The interpreter told me that there are hundreds of multinational companies in Kuwait, and so the labour law requires sites with foreign manpower to have fences around them. I took that at face value, but when I asked the South Korean embassy to which I made my escape, the employee at the embassy laughed and told me that was ridiculous – there are simply no such laws. That means the barbed wire fences were requests from the North Korean authorities to the client company. It was because North Korea felt the need to control its manpower and make sure there are no runaways. The North Korean authorities probably gave the client company an excuse, saying that they are trying to do a better job at managing (the safety of their) resources. The client company and the host country probably had shared concerns about illegal migrants, so they were only too eager to comply with the North Korean request for barbed wires.

Anyways, it's past midnight by the time we finish work.

Where would I go? It was nonsense. Sometimes, work would finish at 7 or 8 PM, and some people might be interested in going outside. But once you step outside the abandoned school serving as our dormitory, it was all construction sites and deserts. It's so desolate that any movement could be spotted right away. We could go outside, but we weren't so keen to do so. There were no walls surrounding the dormitory grounds, and there were different service facilities that were surrounding the main school building.

Manpower is controlled both physically and mentally in North Korea. By physical control, I mean the barbed wires. By mental, I mean indoctrination. I was trained in Pyongyang before being sent overseas. The training told us never to be out alone in a foreign country, because you never know when the South Korean intelligence agents may get you. Once they do, they will use narcotics to make you spill all the secrets before they go ahead and murder you. So, they were trying to tell us that it's dangerous to be out alone. We are told we shouldn't dream of being out all alone. Also, they tell us about how there are surveillance cameras placed around the South Korean embassy that will take pictures of us. The South Korean intelligence agents will take the photographs to an international court of law to claim that a North Korean citizen was found near our embassy obviously trying to scheme something against us. So the lesson is that South Koreans are like that, so don't get too close to the South Korean embassy, and don't move about on your own. Only after these training sessions could I be sent to Kuwait. I was told this in the regular lecture sessions, but went through more intensive indoctrination over the course of one or two hours before departure from Pyongyang. Now that I think of it, they also had fake footage they

had fabricated. It was about a man who got kidnapped by a South Korean intelligence agent while drinking in a foreign country. He was tortured inside the embassy building, and transported to Seoul where he would meet a cruel death in the basement of the intelligence agency building. I was horrified when I saw the video.

One may think that getting out is easy only if you put your mind to it. But the problem with going out alone is that there were already about 300 to 400 workers having come from North Korea by the time I was planning my escape. That means there are 400 pairs of eyes watching me. It's hard to guarantee a successful sneak-out under 400 pairs of eyes. Also, workers are meant to spend time in their respective teams and work units. It's easy to see if anyone is missing. North Koreans have lived in this intertwined mutual surveillance system all their lives. The party told them not to move about alone. But if one person is missing, that would be a clear giveaway to raise suspicion. Inside the mind of a North Korean who has been indoctrinated all their lives, it is not easy to take individual action based on will power. And if it does happen, you will be framed as having been in collusion with the South Korean intelligence agents all along – because you've violated the Party Directives. The party's instructions were to never move alone in all circumstances. If you were alone buying tobacco or for whatever reason, you've violated the Party Directive to move in groups. My escape wasn't conducted alone either. One cannot do it alone.

All workers' passports are kept by the cadre.

So when I made my escape, I left without my passport. I had no choice but to go to the South Korean embassy.

I figured I could be recognized for who I was, given that people at the South Korean embassy would speak the same language. But the thing is that I didn't even know where the embassy was located. I headed into the city centre and asked around for the "South Korean embassy." I learned Russian and English in North Korea, so I knew how to say that in English. I wouldn't have made it here to South Korea had I not known English. Roughly speaking, less than one or two workers out of every ten that get sent abroad knows how to say "South Korean embassy" in English. They will never teach you that word. But I was already planning on leaving North Korea while I was in Pyongyang, so I knew. I don't think school ever taught us the English word for "embassy." When I was working in Pyongyang, there was a son of a Party cadre who used to be a diplomat. I had a job in "Pyongyang Overseas Construction Corporation," which specialises in sending workers on overseas construction projects. One needs to qualify to get a job there. Those with a bad background (*songbun*) can't make the cut. Everything is owned by the state in North Korea, and so the corporation is also state-owned. Anyhow, it's because of this friend that I got to learn what the English word for "embassy" was.

As I was saying, moving alone is deemed abnormal with 400 pairs of eyes behind your back. I had to put on an act to hide my escape. I made multiple attempts to escape. The method of choice was "part time" work. How this worked was that every morning,

when we finished breakfast and were heading out to work, I would tell my work unit leader that I intend to be out doing part time work for a day with another companion. I would promise him three packs of cigarettes upon my return. The unit leader would usually allow it and let us go. He is covering up for us. When the cadres come to do a headcount, the unit leader would come up with an excuse for the two of us. The two of us, on the other hand, would actually be working at another construction site. What kind of work, you may ask. In the residential areas, there are walls or houses that need repair and new roads being paved. Kuwait was a wealthy country, which means it had foreign labour from North Korea and Southeast Asia brought in for work. So there were a lot of Southeast Asian workers to be found there. Those people also start work early – usually in groups of two. We would get to their construction site and tell them, “Why don’t you guys take a rest? We will work instead, in exchange for just half of your day’s pay.” They will tell us “Okay, okay” and head inside their building to watch TV and relax for another five or six hours. We take care of their work during that time. If their pay is 200 thousand, we’ll take 100 thousand. From here, we give maybe 30 thousand to the unit leader. That’s how we made money. We didn’t have to meet a certain number of hours for part time work. We just had to get the task done in time. Still, we had to arrive at the dormitory by night because there would be another headcount taking place. If the part time work ended early, we could look around a bit. All we had to do was return to the dorm before the evening headcount.

I tried this twice, and then on the third day I made my escape. That day, I made a fake promise to my part time buddy. There were multiple gateways leading us out of the dorm

grounds. I was planning on escaping through the east gate, but I told my buddy to meet me at the west gate after breakfast. Then I headed toward the east gate. If I did meet my buddy, he and I would have to move together the whole day no matter what. I didn’t know what he thought of my plan, and it could ruin my chance of escape if he said no. So I told him to meet me at a different location, and I headed out through the other gate straight into the city centre and toward the South Korean embassy. That’s how I made my escape in the morning – because it’s less noticeable when you move early before sunrise. Usually we move in rows and columns, so wouldn’t it look strange if I was out there alone? I went straight to the South Korean embassy as soon as I left. I stayed in the embassy for seven or eight days. None of the government offices were working that day, so I assume it must have been a Friday. So I spent Saturday and Sunday there, after which I went to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) in Kuwait for an interview. I was asked about how much I was paid and how I did my job. As I was a runaway individual, I believe they wanted to record the circumstances. A few days after the interview, I took a plane ride to South Korea with a stop-by transfer in Germany.

I didn’t know anything about South Korea while I was living in North Korea. I wasn’t told that South Korea is a well-to-do country. North Koreans are in the dark, as no one tells them anything. In my workplace at the Pyongyang Overseas Construction Corporation, there were some people who had spent time abroad. Before that, I worked at the Ministry of Social Security for about three years and met older people who had spent time working in the Soviet Union. I used to be drinking buddies with them. Those who had been abroad would tell

me about their experience. Of course, they said nothing about comparing North Korea with the Soviet Union, or mention anything political. Such topics cannot be addressed. But they do get to say what's good about the Soviet Union, so that's what they told me. One person who's been to the Soviet Union told me that the Soviet countryside is so rich that they have stockpiles of bread and pork. I got suspicious hearing that, because I was told that the Russians got poor after the fall of communism. How could their shops be overloaded with bread and meat? But I couldn't ask that for obvious reasons. He also told me that on weekdays, the Soviets stopped working at 6PM sharp and went back home in their private cars. On Saturdays, they would head out to their countryside cottages with family to drink, eat meat, and dance. Workers had second homes in that country. The more I heard these stories, the more I thought that it must be a different world altogether – because I couldn't see anything comparable in North Korea. I may have seen it in the movies, but never in written publications or other forms of media. In this way, the people who had been to the Soviet Union let me learn about foreign cultures.

Then how did I learn about South Korea? It was in the early 1990s. Remember the Seoul Olympics in 1988? The construction department in the Ministry of Social Security, where I worked at the time, used to send workers abroad. Workers in the Ministry of Social Security were basically of good background (*songbun*). Among them, those who had been to the Soviet Union would talk about South Korea. There were lots of North Korean construction workers dispatched to Moscow. They would tell me that they saw South Korean automobiles in Moscow. They told me that there were TVs and washing machines made in South Korea from brands like Samsung and Daewoo. But those who had been

to the Soviet Union would only tell me so much and would not comment on whether that was a good thing or a bad thing. They simply mentioned the fact that they saw South Korean products there. I learned about South Korea in this way and felt I had to go to South Korea.

There were no beatings and no detainment while working in Kuwait. At least, I didn't experience any. I was told that such things did exist among the people who had been dispatched to the Soviet Union as lumberjacks. But I don't know anything about the labour conditions in the Soviet Union nor about the lumber industry. There were no beatings during my five months' stay in Kuwait. We were given three meals a day, and we didn't have to starve.

There were other forms of human rights violations instead. Withholding payment and making us work from 8 AM to midnight or 1 AM at night. These are extreme labour conditions. I believe these are human rights violations.

I used to work 14 to 15 hours a day. Those were my average working hours from morning to evening. I worked without off-days. I arrived in Kuwait in November and worked for two months until January without any holidays. By that time, the workers started murmuring about the situation. So starting from mid-January, we were made to take a half-day off on Friday afternoons. We were told to work in the mornings and take the

afternoon off after lunch time - just the afternoon! This is no different from the other human rights violations. Even the term human rights is something I picked up in South Korea. North Koreans are ignorant as to what that is.

If I could go back in time and put my North Korean hat on, an average North Korean can't even imagine how the money earned as the fruit of his labour might be utilised by the party. We just assume it's for the Party Treasury. Thinking more holistically, we think the money will be spent for maintaining the party and the state. We cannot come to terms with the fact that the money will be used for developing nukes or buying luxury goods. I wasn't an expert in such areas, so I don't know the full details. But from my experience living as a North Korean, I could try to think where all the money earned by the workers dispatched abroad would go to. And the only conclusion I could have reached was that it was going to the Party Treasury. The Party will be spending that money for the exuberant lifestyle of the leadership and the Party cadres. Average North Korean citizens can only think that Kim Jong-un is hard at work for the people – as they always see on television. Now that I'm in South Korea, I see that Kim Jong-un can only be fat because he ate lots of good food, often imported. I see his expensive car manufactured from a foreign brand. I see his private resort. The brand products that Kim Yo-jong and Ri Sol-ju hold must have come from abroad, for a hefty price. These are the things I see. Average North Koreans cannot even imagine such things. They only see Kim Jong-un's face on TV.

According to UN sanctions though, workers that North Korea has dispatched abroad must be repatriated to North Korea. Thinking about North Korean society overall, it is a difficult question to ask whether North Korea should be sending its

workers overseas at all. If we are thinking about Kim Jong-un, North Korea must stop sending its workers abroad. But from another angle, workers who are sent abroad get to eat and make some money for themselves. So it's hard to argue that the system must be abolished. This is, in a way, a dilemma. We can't leave it be, but we can't abolish it either. There are negative sides to be sure, but it's ironic that we don't want to abolish the system completely. I agree with the UN resolutions, nonetheless. It's true that the money gets spent on keeping Kim Jong-un's regime in power.

Despite UN resolutions, there are still numerous North Koreans working abroad. I claim that these people are undergoing human rights violations to this day. I have recently started to take a keen interest in North Korean workers dispatched abroad. It appears that lumberjacks in Russia have it most difficult. I assume they are not getting paid there either, but I believe that these lumberjacks are made to live deep in the Siberian taigas, where a man could die without ever being found, with only rice and basic life utilities and everything else needing to be secured self-sufficiently. Perhaps it's because people's characteristics can differ per each occupation, but these lumberjacks are made to work in the cold and are subject to the same indoctrination, Life Review Sessions, and tribute payments as the North Koreans back home – which can only mean the stress levels must be higher for them.

Kuwait, where I worked, was the only pro-American nation in the Middle East at the time. It was a capitalist country. I believe it was on good terms with South Korea. A government agent who accompanied me back to South Korea told me that I was lucky – that my case could go through a swift process due to the fact

that Kuwait and South Korea are friendly nations. Perhaps that's why there were armed guards stationed around the South Korean embassy the very next day after I arrived. I received a police escort as I travelled to the airport and got on the plane through a separate route. I could tell this was special treatment. I say this because Kuwait treated us this way since it was a pro-South Korean nation. Countries like North Korea, Russia, and China, on the other hand, come from communist roots – meaning the beatings are pervasive. Wouldn't you say that each country has different traits?

North Korean workers' rights are vulnerable both domestically and abroad. I think there is something that the international community can do about it. You could say that this is the Achilles' heel of North Korea. Whether the people are living in North Korea or abroad, they are North Korean citizens under North Korean rule. I believe they need to be enlightened – via influx of information. First, when it comes to dealing with North Korean people inside North Korea, South Koreans shouldn't try to condemn North Korea as evil. Regardless of the political situation in South Korea, we should aim to spread information about the isolated status of North Korea.

When dealing with North Koreans dispatched abroad, I assume high-ranking officials already have some access to outside information. So instead of them, if we were to deal with ordinary dispatched workers, I think it would help if we gave them outside information whenever workers on-site are together with foreign permanent workers – assuming that we turn back time to 25 years ago when I was in Kuwait. I don't mean much when I say outside information. I think informing them on the absurdity of North Korean workers' pay and the working hours

would be sufficient. We need to let them know that their working conditions are a violation of international law. Back when I was in Kuwait, I saw that the only construction sites with lights on late at night were those ones with North Korean workers. The other foreigners would watch us work until late at night and shake their heads - unable to understand us. I think we should let North Korean workers know that the treatment they are getting is unjust.

It is only normal for North Korean workers sent abroad to not understand that they are subject to unjust treatment. If you ask me what I learned from my five months in Kuwait, it's that North Koreans will be North Koreans regardless of where they are in the world. Being my first overseas experience, I was full of hope that there would be freedom and I would get to do as I pleased. Turns out, we were no different in Kuwait. We were confined by the boundaries of our construction site and dormitory after all. We were still confined within the same boundary called "North Korea", whether we were abroad or at home. What we saw, what was said, and how we lived there were no different from how things were in North Korea. Although we were in Kuwait, we didn't have access to local television channels. The one TV that we did have only screened video records of Kim Il-sung all the time. Newspapers in the Kuwaiti language didn't help. The only difference was that we got to see foreigners since we were technically in foreign territory. Without access to information, it was no different from living in North Korea. Another realisation was that we still had Life Review Sessions, indoctrination about the Kim family, and lectures that were no different from how things were in North Korea. I'm sure this still goes on among North Korean workers sent abroad. North Korea

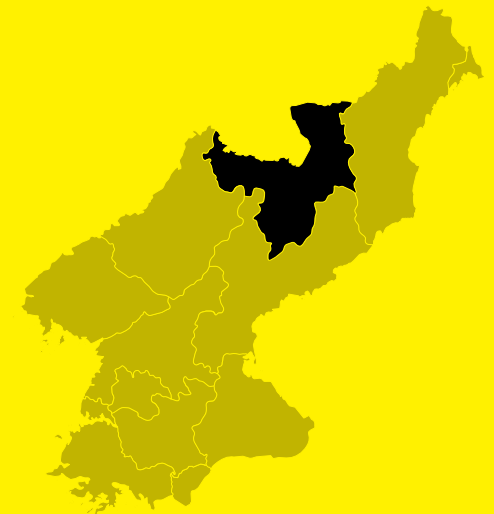
would crumble if they stopped doing those. Indoctrination is required to all citizens from the age of seven.

One needs to know the outside world to compare it with the inside. Only then can one question the unjust treatments. North Koreans, having lived in an isolated country and in such a culture all their lives, cannot know the outside world. They consider the situation to be justified. They are made to think this must be how everyone lives. North Koreans who have seen South Korean or other foreign cultures may start questioning this. Even so, you need a gathering of like-minded people to make a change. Without such an expression, no change can take place. Even if one watches a South Korean TV series a hundred times, that person will keep the knowledge and thoughts to oneself. He cannot make that knowledge public. There are a lot of people who “watch” South Korean TV. But even if every single North Korean citizen watches foreign media, they won’t be able to express what they saw or put it into words. People should be able to say that upon watching a South Korean TV series it made them think something is wrong about North Korea. With that not being an option, an influx of outside information probably won’t topple down the North Korean regime.

Voice  
29

A People’s Unit Leader

Hello, my name is  
Ju Hyon-ja.  
I left my hometown  
in Ryanggang  
Province in the  
middle of 2019 to  
escape North Korea.



Hello, my name is Ju Hyon-ja. I left my hometown in Ryanggang Province in the middle of 2019 to escape North Korea. I travelled across China and spent about 20 days in a refugee facility in Thailand before arriving in South Korea.

I was a People's Unit leader for about 17 years. The People's Unit is under the jurisdiction of the District Office. The District Office is under the jurisdiction of the Municipal People's Council. Then there's the Provincial People's Council above it (which has counted as a local People's Council to this point), and the Central People's Council. The municipal Workers' Party is under the provincial Workers' Party, while the provincial Workers' Party is under the jurisdiction of the Central Workers' Party. They all have separate buildings of their own – the municipal Workers' Party building, the provincial Workers' Party building, and the Municipal People's Council building. They do not share the same roof. In North Korea, the hierarchy starts from the Centre and moves to the Provincial level, the Municipal level, the County level, and the Village level.

North Korea lacks machinery, electricity, and fuel. It's all handled by manpower. Moving rocks, moving sand, and moving timber – it's all manpower. You could say that society operates by manpower which is mobilised by the People's Units. Difficult tasks are always assigned to People's Units. One People's Unit consists of 25~30 households, all of which obeys the words of the People's Unit Leader under all circumstances. The People's Unit Leader is a powerful position. People have no choice but to obey. An inexperienced People's Unit Leader may raise a complaint to the District Office, or if that doesn't work, resort to the law. But someone who's been a People's Unit Leader for a long time like me can get people to follow my leadership through propaganda

projects (*kyoyangsaep*) of my own.

Propaganda projects are when a People's Unit Leader propagates instructions or policies of the Supreme Leader to his people.

It is the ability to win the hearts and minds of the people through speech so as to build people's loyalty to the Great Leader.

For instance, I would tell them how the Great Leader, in an effort to make our lives better, sleeps on the road and eats rice balls for meals as he is on site-surveys all the time. I would tell them it is only right for us to repay that gratuity. I would say that we are the people of this nation, and the Great Leader is no different from our parents, and so we must devote ourselves to the leader as we devote ourselves to our parents. In other countries around the world, people have a higher level of consciousness which means they can see the world for themselves. In North Korea, people watch South Korean or Chinese television shows to get some sense of how things work in the rest of the world. But there are still a lot of ignorant people in North Korea.

But then there are still people who will turn deaf ears



to the propaganda projects of the People's Unit Leader. They wouldn't show it so publicly but think it's a joke. Still, the People's Unit Leader will win their heart by sharing what little he has on his plate. However, if those people stubbornly refuse to listen, then he may have to resort to legal action.

The law is a frightening thing. The Ministry of State Security will deal with anything that is political in nature – contrary to the ideology of the Great Leader. For instance, crimes of denouncing the Supreme Leader or the state, or crimes related to reactionary ideology are under their jurisdiction. The rest is handled by the Ministry of Social Security. Ordinary people being at fault is usually reported to the Ministry of Social Security – instead of the Ministry of State Security. And the reason why people are so scared of the People's Unit Leader is that the Police, The Ministry of State Security, and the municipal Workers' Party will often come to the People's Unit Leader for insights. They will ask about the different households. So if someone from my People's Unit has been selected to go to Russia or China to earn foreign currency, they come to the People's Unit Leader first to learn more about the household. They will ask how they live, and whether they are commendable. If the candidate has been doing a good job as a member of the People's Unit, I will give my recommendation right away. But if not, I might postpone that recommendation. The People's Unit Leader will ultimately give their agreement. But if the person is truly repugnant in his life within the People's Unit and his social life, I may not agree to it. Then he loses his chance to work abroad.

There's that. But I've been a People's Unit Leader for such a long time that I was around back when the two Koreas were reuniting lost families at Mount Kumgang. You needed to get an

agreement form from the People's Unit Leader on such occasions too. Agreement is assured for such a national project, but you still need the form stamped for formality's sake. Each People's Unit has a stamp that says "People's Unit Leader." You need to have that stamp on the agreement form for submission. As such, a People's Unit Leader has some power. Folks tend to think a People's Unit Leader is no big deal, but that's because they don't know what a People's Unit Leader is capable of. If you get in a fight with a People's Unit Leader and hurt him, the person will be expelled from the village. They go so far as to expel that person. A lighter treatment would be to send him to a Labour Training Camp. That's why they have no choice but to listen to what the People's Unit Leader has to say.

Also, if you are a smuggler, you'd get your goods confiscated by law enforcement officers from the Ministry of Social Security and the Ministry of State Security - even if the military was offering protection. On such occasions, the People's Unit Leader can step in to resolve the situation. In the case a smuggler gets caught while receiving a few thousand yuan in a bundle of cash, the People's Unit Leader can step in to save him from getting all of it confiscated. The smuggler will end up paying some bribes to the law enforcement officer, but the amount could go down significantly depending on what the People's Unit Leader has got to say. The People's Unit Leader could do one a favour like this. Sometimes one has to bribe multiple parties as inspectors from different legal institutions – such as the Ministry of Social Security and the Ministry of State Security - are all separate. That's why smugglers may make a thousand Chinese yuan overnight but only fetch 100 yuan in profit – because 900 will go to bribes.

I was a police informant (*tongbowon*)

within my People's Unit.

I was a unit leader and an informant at the same time.

A police informant is meant to report on the current status of his neighbours to the police department.

Police informants all work under the police station. Then there are the Ministry Informants (*jongbowon*) who work under the Ministry of State Security. As for these Ministry informants, no one in the People's Unit knows who the informant is – not even the unit leader. They may find out about it later, but most of the time they don't know who the informant for the Ministry is. When I was a police informant, I used to cover multiple People's Units. A police informant is not a big deal. An informant is given two blue notepads the size of your palm. You are meant to record the current status of your People's Unit - whether there is a household that did not show up at work today, whether there are households that moved into town, any household that moved out, any houses on fire, etc. I knew about my People's Unit, but when it comes to other People's Units, I would have to go to the leader of those Units to get his stamp of approval. There is a police informant in every few People's Units. The police station will designate such an individual. It was noisy and hard work having to cover eight People's Units every day. My notepad had to be submitted to the police station by 4:30 PM. You submit a notepad and receive another one. In this way, the two notepads would be

used in rotation. Once every quarter, the police informants will gather at the police station for a meeting. There you can see who is working as a police informant and where. There are police informants assigned at schools, hospitals, farms, and workplaces. At the gathering, the police chief will conduct reviews and assess which informant did a good job – give them praise.

I worked as a People's Unit Leader, but I didn't receive any compensation from the state for the work that I did. It's unpaid work. North Korea doesn't pay you even when you take on government duties. Working diligently day after day for a whole year at a workplace won't get you any pay either. That's why the women go out to the marketplace to make money from trade, men will make furniture to sell if they are good at handicraft or work on other small things here and there. Small plots of land are for old people. Young people do not work small plots of land. The state also prohibits people from having small plots of land. They will make them plant trees on that land, so as to stop them from growing anything else. Instead, they will let people grow crops underneath the trees for food. But once the trees grow bigger, the shades keep the crops from growing. You could have crops growing next to the trees for about 5 years after planting the trees. That's how it's done.

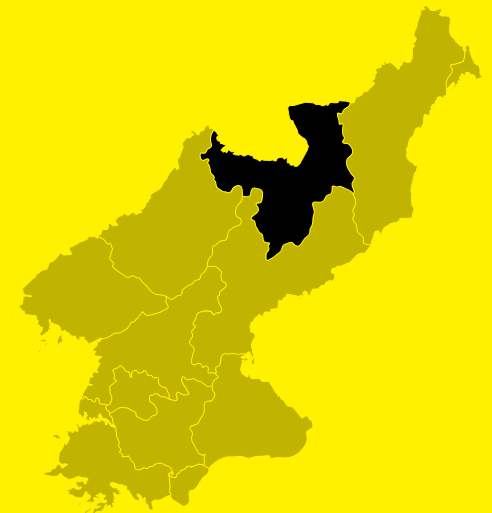
Now that I am here in South Korea, I see that the country with the worst human rights record is North Korea. The people have no rights. It's all about worshipping the Supreme Leader – the three generations of Supreme Leaders. There are no freedoms of the press, of publication, or of public gathering. I used to be an informant myself. Saying the wrong things in the presence of these informants would get you arrested by the Ministry of State Security. That's why you have to watch your every word in North

Korea. Your punishment is measured by your words. If you said the wrong things about the Kims, you will be sent to a Political Prison Camp. You are allowed to say that it's hard to get by in North Korea. But saying the wrong things about Kim Jong-un and Kim Il-sung will get you in a Political Prison Camp. There was no one around me who was sent to a Political Prison Camp while I was the People's Unit Leader. There were some that went to Reform through Labour Camps. Political Prison Camps are rare occasions. This is because people try extra hard not to get sent to one. A Political Prison Camp sentence can only mean that you've talked badly about the Kim family line or engaged in anti-state activities. It's for when you said the wrong things over a drink, or if you asked nonchalantly what the point of cleaning the Kim family portrait every day was – the portrait that all households keep. You will have to have committed some crime against the Kim family for you to end up in a Political Prison Camp. Then there are people who tried to escape to South Korea through illegal border-crossing who would also be sent there.

Voice  
30

A Train Engineer's Assistant's Life  
on the Train Tracks

Hello, my name is  
Lee Jin-chol.  
My hometown is in  
Ryanggang Province.  
I left China in late  
2019 and reached  
South Korea in the  
same year.



Hello, my name is Lee Jin-chol. My hometown is in Ryanggang Province. I left China in late 2019 and reached South Korea in the same year.

I was meant to go serve in the military after graduating from school. But I couldn't serve as I had a mother who had left for South Korea. This was unavoidable, since the state has full visibility of my family relations. The state knew that my mother had gone missing. At first, the Ministry of State Security started to probe me with questions as to where my mother was. I told them I didn't know. Staying away for a month or two is acceptable, but she had been missing for the past few years by then, which got the state to have valid cause for suspicion.

The Ministry of State Security is where you handle enemies of the state – reactionaries and rebels. If I say something bad about Kim Il-sung and get caught doing it, I become a political criminal. Political criminals are handled by the ministry.

As for me, my mother was found to have committed treason against the state, which made her a political criminal and rendered me the son of a criminal.

Although they never explicitly said political criminal, it was deemed that I had problematic elements in my family line, which kept the state from sending me to the military. But these days, the lines are blurred, and the Ministry of State Security also interferes with ordinary crimes. I think the ministry doesn't

mean much anymore. It is no different from the police station. The police station is where ordinary criminals are handled. They would handle street fights, for instance, just like the South Korean police.

As I couldn't serve in the military, I was assigned to a workplace right after graduation. In such cases, the assigned workplace is also a tough one. They tend to send us to serve in the Storm Troops. I had a job at the railway before leaving North Korea. To be honest, that wasn't my first job. I graduated from school and worked at the railway as a volunteer recruit (*chomo*). We were referred to as the "paramilitary," and we didn't carry guns. The reason they didn't want people like me in the military was because they were nervous about what I might do if I were an insane person and had the opportunity to carry a weapon. My mother was in South Korea, and so they made the judgement that my mental state might be unstable as a result of that. That's why they didn't make me serve. The railway didn't matter in that way, so they made me serve at the railway. I worked there for about a year.

Here, I didn't receive so much military training but more of on-the-job training. They teach us about the equipment and facilities of the railway. They don't even do a very good job at teaching us. Technically they are just sending us out to work on something – tending the staff members' crops or cadres' houses. They made me work on unrelated errands in this way, and I ended up growing food for them. They do this because the state does not provide anything to them. After one year working as a volunteer recruit, the state assigns you to a new post. I was assigned to the railway, and that's when I started working as a train engineer's assistant.

In North Korea, we have train engineers and the assistants that support them. They are referred to as the engineer's assistant. Not anyone can become a train engineer's assistant. In North Korea, you can volunteer for hard work and they will let you do that. But if you want an easy job, they are less keen to let you have it. A train engineer's assistant is not an easy job but it's useful in getting by. Because of that, not everyone can take the job. I lived in a mountainous region. Roads were not well-utilised. It was not easy for people to move to another city. Transportation usually happens by train. It's extremely rare to take a bus or a taxi like they do here in South Korea. That's why I used to take money or goods in exchange for letting people on my train. That's how I made money off of my job.

Almost all trains in North Korea are electric. I wouldn't be able to say 100% because there are still diesel trains with internal combustion engines. Most trains run on electricity, but with the unstable power situation in North Korea, a diesel train might perform the role of an engine car to provide traction from the front. Internal combustion engines take up maybe one-tenth of the engine cars. There are many diesel engine cars except they are often standing still because of the fuel situation in North Korea. Fuel is put into these trains only when needed, so regardless of how many there are out there, it's not so common to find diesel cars in actual operation. By the way, when they say "locomotives" (*gicha*) in North Korea, they mean the engine car in front. "Trains" (*ryolcha*), on the other hand, would refer to the trailing carts behind with passengers and freight.

The electric power supply improved somewhat around the time I was leaving for South Korea. This was because it was right around the time when they were putting some serious

① Samjiyon is a city in North Korea located at the foot of Mount Paektu (or Mount Baekdu). It is thought to be a sacred land with historic significance given how it is the battlefield in which Kim Il-sung fought against the Japanese and the place where Kim Jong-il was born. In order to strengthen public support and justify his right to rule passed down from his forefathers, Kim Jong-un promoted the county

construction effort into the city of Samjiyon<sup>①</sup> which meant the electric supply was pretty good. A train can reach up to 500 li<sup>②</sup> per day. But with lower voltage or many trailing carts, the locomotive will lose traction. The weak voltage of the power supply would keep trains from running. Once a train stops, it has to stay there until the power supply comes back up and the train can start running again. According to regulations, that shouldn't be the case. You need to inform the closest station and ask for support. But the train stations lie some 30~40 li away from one another, so that is difficult to do. Rather, people just sit and wait for the power to come back on.

There were no fixed hours when I worked as an engineer's assistant. I would be working nonstop once I boarded a train. That's the unfortunate part.

Some days, I worked four hours a day and got a break. One time, I went on a business trip that lasted forty days. It was a round trip to Pyongyang which is why it took a long time. The concept of taking breaks between work... I don't know what to say. When trains come to a halt due to a power outage, that's your break. Unless you call that break time, there are technically no breaks at all. When the power is out and the train is down, there's nothing an engineer can do about it. That's why power outages are time for rest, other tasks, car maintenance, and so on. Taking breaks between work didn't really mean much for me.

I did not get paid by the state when I was working as a train

of Samjiyon to the status of City in December 2019. He has been seen directing the development of the city until recent times.

② A li is approximately 393 m.

engineer's assistant. I received maybe 4,000 North Korean won a month for living expenses or living support. It was based on the state designate pricing system back when Kim Il-sung was around. Prices were set for, let's say, 10 won for a kilogram of rice, and another price was set for life essential products. The problem is that things have changed, and no goods are sold at those prices as of today. But the state can't raise wages to keep up with the actual price of goods. Since wages remain low, paying us living expenses with those standards is no different from not paying us anything.

Anyways, people used trains a lot, even if it took days to travel. Let's say I'm taking a bus to Pyongyang. I would probably have to pay about 150 thousand North Korean won for the bus fare. But trains are cheap. The most expensive tickets will come around 40 or 50 thousand won. Even if one rides the bus, it will take at least a day to get there. Riding the train, on the other hand, will only take three or four days. I don't know how you might think, but it makes sense for North Koreans to ride the train at a cheaper price and take three or four days to arrive. If you're rich, you won't even ride the bus. You would take a taxi instead.

Just because one has money does not mean they can travel to any region they want in North Korea. For instance, people from Hwanghae Province cannot simply move into my home province of Ryanggang. This is because Ryanggang Province is located near the border. There are hurdles in moving between provinces. Even within the same Ryanggang Province, there are hurdles in moving between different cities. As it is the border region, there are a lot of restrictions in place. There are so many guard posts on the streets. If I were to travel from Hyesan to Pochon County, a pack of cigarettes should be able to secure safe passage for me

under normal circumstances. That ought to be enough for them to turn a blind eye to me. But then there are those who behave more rigidly over these matters. They may have to be bribed with something more expensive. They tend to behave that way because that's their source of income.

Cigarettes are commonly used as bribes. North Koreans smoke a lot. Women, on the other hand, don't smoke. I don't speak for all women, but maybe there's like one in a hundred that might smoke. Patriarchal culture is still alive in many ways in North Korean society. Women are discouraged from drinking or smoking. Such cultural practices persist to this day. They say things have changed quite a bit recently. But that doesn't mean a whole bunch of women took up smoking all of a sudden. Maybe one or two... It's like that. For men, it's right to say that nine out of ten are smokers.

I started smoking at age 15. In North Korea, kids tend to start smoking at age 12. If a grownup finds children smoking, they will flog them and take away their cigarettes. But that doesn't stop children from trying. At school, they would sometimes inspect our belongings. A student caught smoking will have his cigarettes and lighter taken away. The kids don't have money, so they feel bad for having cigarettes going to waste. But they do it again. Young children can buy cigarettes from stores. There is no rule that says you are not allowed to sell cigarettes to children. There are parents that make their children run errands to buy cigarettes for them, so it gets out of control. As a result, grownups would simply shout at children caught smoking. In fact, they don't talk to children most of the time.

I think the current food situation in North Korea must be bad. But there's one thing that I find really odd. North Korea has

little arable land but produces a lot of food from it. The funny thing is, there is not a single year where we have an abundance of rice. Not a single time. They say the food produced goes to storage for military rations. But I've never seen food being plentiful in my life. It's gotten worse nowadays, to be honest. Before, we used to take rice from China via the smuggling trade. In the border region, like my hometown, it is impossible to farm rice. As such, it was the food that came in from China that resolved the hunger issue. But now there are barbed wire fences that prevent smuggling, and the area that used to live off of smuggling has run out of food.

And yet,  
we still manage to eat three meals a day.

Of course, I'm sure there are some households that eat two meals instead of three because of a lack of food. Here in South Korea, people eat two or less meals a day to lose weight. In North Korea, people eat two meals to save food. Now that I think of it, there is a reason why North Korea is short on food. Because the system is communal, a farmer is not hard at work at his union farm. The harvest cannot be good at all. Land that should be able to provide a crop yield of a ton of rice will only yield 300 kg as a result of lazy farming. That is why we end up with less food. It is because people are not hard at work. At the end of the day, only a handful of people can eat their fill. The high-ranking people would be given food even with a bad harvest, won't they? The farmers don't work because their hard work won't be compensated, and

this results in a drop in agricultural productivity.

I remember hearing about a Christian church while in North Korea. I was told that there was a church somewhere in Pyongyang. Oh, it was a catholic church – not a protestant one. I was told then that the church existed as a formality. People I knew told me about it. In reality, one cannot go to church in North Korea. Worshipping is illegal. The Ministry of State Security holds lecture sessions to propagate “Political Directives” (*jongchigangryong*) to children from first or second grade of primary school telling us what not to do. They would hold up a Bible and tell us that it is a tool for the South Korean puppet government to dismantle this country. They try to inspire hostility from a young age. Children are naturally made to think Christianity is evil.

When in North Korea, I couldn't help wondering why people got arrested for reading the Bible. But I couldn't say why as I've never read the book myself. Coming to South Korea, I figured out that the thick book with a dark brown cover that I once saw at a propaganda session in North Korea was the Bible. The reason the Bible was prohibited by the state was probably because those who become loyal to the church might get unruly. Quite a lot of people actually got arrested for reading the Bible. The South Korean intelligence agency, as well as the church and charity groups, used to send Bibles to North Korea along with other things. There used to be published materials from South Korea back then. Nowadays, we see a lot of USBs coming in. Back when I was around ten years old, which is quite some time ago, there used to be a lot of Bibles infiltrating North Korea. There are still remaining volumes that can be found. I'm sure such infiltration still happens these days.

I happened to have watched only one South Korean film in North Korea. That was all I had before coming to South Korea. Had the person who gave me the film been arrested and got me arrested as well, I would have been sent to prison. Such crimes are among the ones that are most heavily punished. They are categorised at the highest levels of political crimes. I tried not to watch such content as it could ruin my life. If a son of a People's Council Leader (roughly equivalent to a mayor in South Korea) got caught watching a prohibited South Korean TV series "*Descendants of the Sun*" (*Taeyangui Huye*), the repercussions would extend to his father who would be stripped of his position and punished. In North Korea, we don't use the term "guilt-by-association", but the concept is there. At least I don't recall ever hearing such a term. People you know will be hit hard as a result. But I couldn't access such content even if I wanted to - I had no connections.

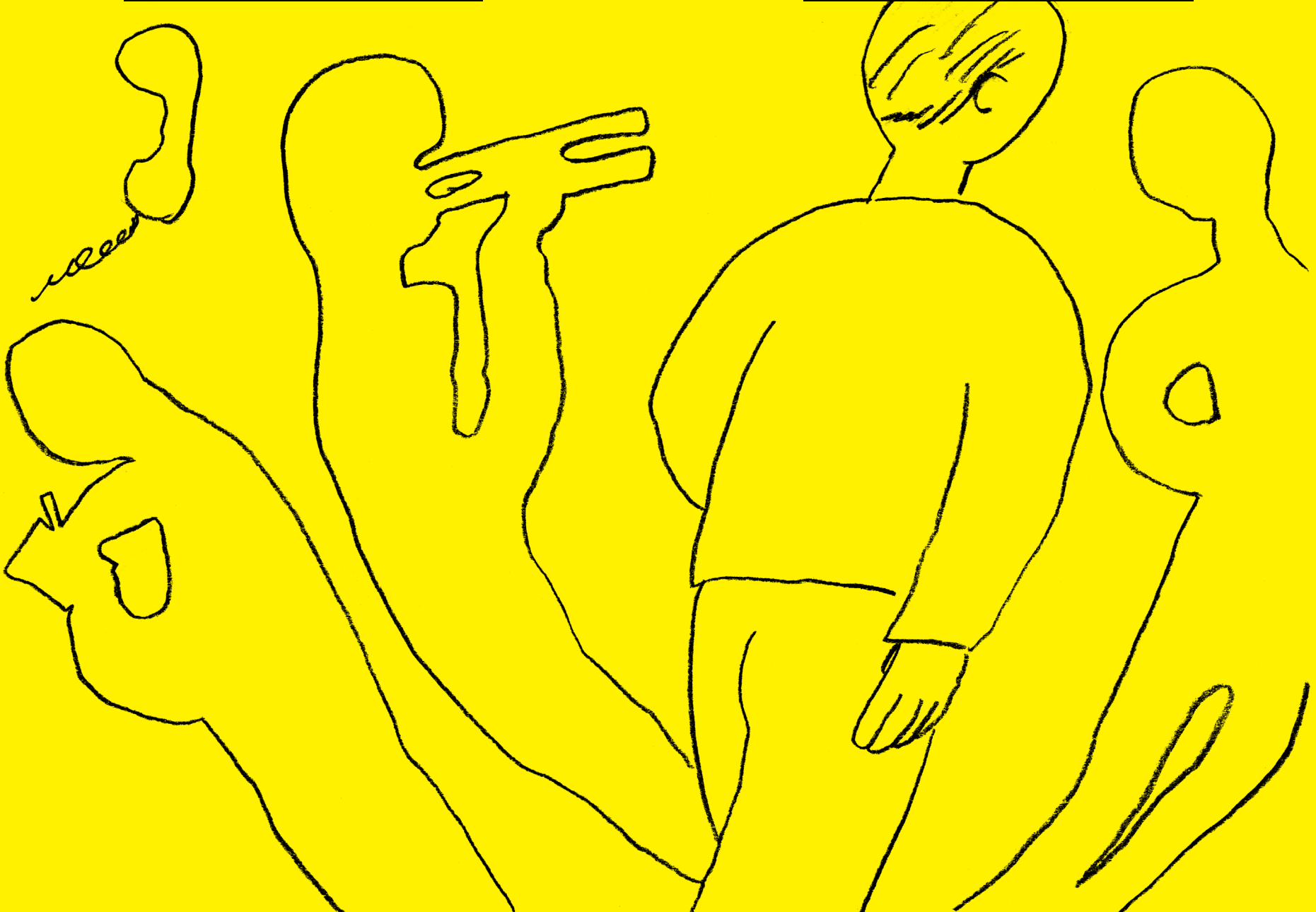
Believing in a religion other than Christianity is also subject to punishment. But people are unaware of religions like Catholicism or Buddhism. As for Buddhism, people are aware of it as a historic legacy. There are a few Buddhist temples. The county government tends to make use of them for heritage tourism as a business. Some temples may be kept to preserve history, perhaps. I don't think there are any monks in the temples though. They won't allow anyone to shave one's head and become a Buddhist monk. There are many superstitious people around me. I saw a shaman who was in trance. I also saw someone who got punished for doing such things (superstitious activities). I consulted a fortune teller once. She would guess correctly what had happened to me when I was young and told me when I could get married. But she only told me nice things about my fortunes, so I didn't take her word for it.

As for the public executions, I remember watching one when I was little. It was an execution held by the county. I haven't heard of any public executions taking place in the mid-to-late 2010s. I lived on the railway tracks, so I used to be away for days at a time. I don't know exactly. Regardless of the intent, those things did disappear in North Korea as time went on. What I mean to say is that public executions are old-fashioned. They tend not to hold executions so publicly nowadays. Even when they do execute a criminal, it's probably taking place somewhere remote and discrete. Public executions certainly dwindled compared to the past. But then there's this thing where people who willingly return to North Korea after an escape attempt used to be forgiven in the past - understanding their act to be that of redemption. But now, punishments are said to have strengthened and can even mean death - both for people who attempt to leave and attempt to return. This is what is made known to the people through state propaganda.



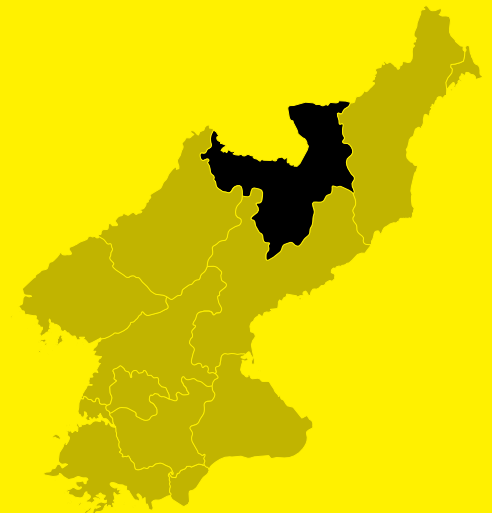
Restrictions in  
Everyday Life

and the Absence  
of Dissent



31	Lee Myong-ju	Escaping from Confinement	337
32	Go Hyok-jun	Student by Day, Smuggler by Night	343
33	Kim Seong-mi	Silent Discontent	351
34	Jeong Hong-chol	Reasons for Leaving North Korea	361
35	Yang Jeong-ho	Serving in the Storm Troops	375
36	Kim Sun-hwa	Corruption in North Korean Society	385
37	Lee Jeong-suk	Change Taking Place under Regulated Society	391
38	Lee Hyong-suk	Repatriation and State Surveillance	399
39	Lee Sun-ah	Ever-strengthening State Control	407
40	Jang Ok-yong	Undercover Informants	419
41	Kang Min-ji.	Prolonged Stay-over in China	427
42	Kim Kang-dae	A World without Opposition	437
43	Kang Jin-ok	Hardships of North Korean Women	445
44	Lee Eun-suk	Children's Rights in North Korea	452
45	Kang Eun-hyok	Art Censorship	461
46	Lee Gwang-chol	Medical Discharge	472
47	Jeong Yu-hun	Early Phases of Covid-19 Quarantine in Kangwon Province	482
48	Shin Geum-sil	Early Phases of Covid-19 Quarantine in North Hamgyong Province	495
49	Kim Min-seon	Inspection, Control, and Persecution	504

Hello, my name is  
Lee Myong-ju.  
I was born in  
Ryanggang Province.  
I left North Korea  
in 2018 and arrived in  
South Korea in 2019.



Hello, my name is Lee Myong-ju. I was born in Ryanggang Province. I left North Korea in 2018 and arrived in South Korea in 2019.

I used the help of a broker when I came to South Korea. But I wasn't actually planning on coming to South Korea. I was told while in North Korea that I could live a better life in China. So I crossed the Chinese border thinking I could help out my parents. I felt bad for spending my parents' money when in fact I had a job myself.

Even if you have a government-assigned job in North Korea, there is no pay.

One has to work unpaid, and not having a job was punishable by law. I was so fed up because I couldn't make a living even though I had a job.

So I didn't tell my family and got a broker to help me cross the Chinese border. It was only after I was in Chinese territory that I realised I was being sold. I didn't know at all when I crossed the border... It was only after I was on the other side, that I knew. The broker seemed to be Han Chinese and not an ethnic Korean. He told me, in broken Korean, that I was going to get married. It didn't make sense that I was getting sold to a man, and that I was meant to get married when under 20 years of age. The broker told me I get to cross the Chinese border for free when I asked

about it. But it wasn't actually free. The broker had trafficked me into China, so that he could cash in after selling me over to some Chinese guy. Not knowing this, I was in a good mood crossing the Chinese border. But once I made it to the other side, I was told inside some shack in Changbai that I was meant to be sold away. That's when I figured out what was going on, and I was lost for words. I thought I couldn't get sold away like that, no matter what. But I couldn't head back to North Korea either. In North Korea, I'd get interrogated by the Ministry of State Security. That would ruin my future.

So I told my broker that I refused to be sold off to a man, to which the broker started swearing at me. I told him I'm not going no matter what. I stayed put in that house for a month and a half. I couldn't run because I was locked in. And even if I did run, I couldn't speak Chinese - so I'd be noticed in no time. The Chinese police would surely repatriate me and that would ruin my life. That's why I had no choice but to stay in that house. I asked the broker to send me to South Korea instead. The broker asked back, how I knew about South Korea. I told him everyone knows about South Korea and insisted that he send me there. The broker kept getting angry at me, and repeatedly told me that I am to be married. So as a last resort, I asked him to report to the police if he's not sending me to South Korea. I told him, I am going to run away anyhow, even if he sells me to someone. That's how I resisted. Then, by luck, I found an opportunity to go to South Korea, and I made it.

I came to South Korea without having to pay for anything. Turns out the broker was not such a bad person. He was actually a nice person. I remained stubborn and the broker ended up introducing me to a South Korean missionary in China. Through

this missionary, I found another broker who could guide me along with a group of other people across China, and finally to South Korea.

I couldn't speak any Chinese as it was my first time in China. But those in the same group headed to South Korea had already spent 10, 20 years in China. Their Chinese was better than their Korean. They would talk among themselves in Chinese, so I barely got to talk with them as we were travelling across China. I didn't know anything about China, so I only followed them as I was told. So I actually don't know what places I went through. At one point, I was told that we made it to Bangkok, Thailand. We were in a prison cell there until coming to South Korea.

Upon reaching Southeast Asia through China, I was actually trained as a missionary for three months there. All I know is that the place is in Southeast Asia. I don't know which country it was. I wasn't allowed out during training, and I stayed indoors with other North Koreans. The missionary was a South Korean. After training, I was detained in a refugee facility in Bangkok. Only then could I enter South Korea. It was very hot in Southeast Asia when I received training, but the living conditions were great. Great food, great lodging – not to mention that it was safe.

To explain a little bit about detainment in Bangkok, there are so many North Koreans flocking to the place that they now have a good system in place. Upon arrival, they conduct a formal investigation and send us straight into the facility. It was dirty, but the women's quarters were relatively better. We had meals every morning and evening. There were many women from North Korea there. There were other foreigners too, but the North Koreans were detained separately in a big room. I was amazed to see so many people from North Korea. I remember there were

well over a hundred people. I was relieved to be with other North Koreans, but no one seemed to want to talk about themselves.

Even now, I feel that my journey to South Korea was a smooth one. I hear that nowadays a person pays about 1.7 million won to the broker to come to South Korea. But I didn't have to pay anything to come here. That's why others are surprised to hear my story and tell me that I was very lucky. They all say that it's very rare that someone makes it to South Korea in the way that I did. Even the missionaries that helped me would say that it is so rare to find someone travelling from China to South Korea in a matter of months without having to spend a penny. Others who cross the Chinese border are usually not so lucky. I have a friend that made it to China about two weeks before I did. She did end up getting sold to a Chinese man. I got in touch with her recently. She tells me she is doing okay but feels a lot of stress from the language barrier. I was told that she has hardships in ways she cannot fully describe, as she is a mail-order bride after all.

There are people who knowingly cross the Chinese border with full awareness that it is human trafficking. But most of the time, people are tricked into crossing the border – deceived by the brokers. The people that want to cross the border will usually seek a broker that helps with the river-crossing. If you meet up with the broker to express the intent of getting a job in China, the broker will tell you that he can arrange that. His words are the only thing that you are relying on in making that journey across the border. Normally you don't suspect you are being sold. Only after you've made it to the Chinese side will the broker tell you that you are to be sold away. People resist but they end up being sold to a man in China anyhow. These days, there are often cases where one family member has already settled in South Korea

before calling others to come over. These cases will be direct journeys to South Korea. You can say that cases like mine where you were trafficked into China but then made it safely to South Korea in a matter of months are rare. I was extremely lucky. A lot of the women who are poor will cross the border knowing it's human trafficking. But there are those who cross the border even though they are doing well in North Korea. It's not that they are desensitised about being trafficked.

There is no life in North Korea.  
One must live in confinement and  
do as told by the state.

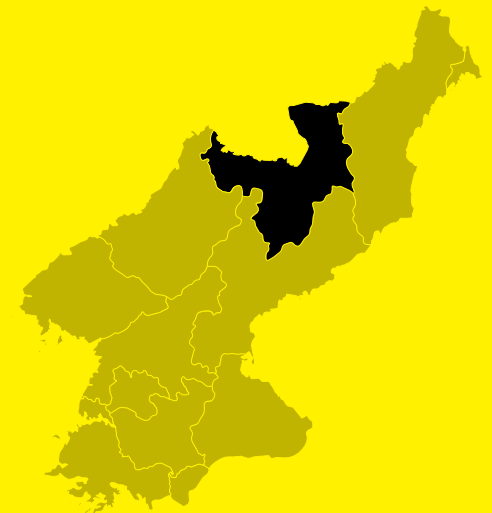
You can say that you are not entitled to  
your body in North Korea.

I was sick of life under confinement, and it led me to have thoughts about crossing the Chinese border even more. Then there are people who cross the Chinese border after watching a South Korean television series. I also watched South Korean TV shows while in North Korea to learn that South Korea is wealthy beyond imagination. The reality I saw once I came to South Korea was, of course, a bit different from the shows.

Voice  
32

Student by Day, Smuggler by Night

Hello, my name is  
Go Hyok-jun.  
I was born in  
Ryanggang Province.  
I left North  
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and arrived in  
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Hello, my name is Go Hyok-jun. I was born in Ryanggang Province. I left North Korea in late 2018 and arrived in South Korea in 2019.

My hometown borders the Yalu River. Being so close to China, there were many people making a living through smuggling or other trades. Here, ordinary people would participate in smuggling too. It is easy to get to China by crossing the Yalu River from my region, so it's well known to be an escape route. Most people take the Tumen River, but there are many who cross the Yalu River to get to China.

I crossed the Yalu River in 2018, and moved across China and Thailand to reach South Korea in 2019. Honestly, I didn't have a particular reason that got me to leave. I had a decent living in North Korea. But overall, things were hard for sure. My older sister made it to South Korea before I did. I would hear about South Korea from my sister through phone calls. She told me how South Korea is a capitalist society and a free country, which she likes. She kept insisting I should come to South Korea too. One day, I was talking with the broker who arranged these phone calls, and he mentioned going to South Korea with him. I got to leave North Korea there and then.

Smuggling was prevalent in my region. Herbs, tobacco, and a variety of other things are smuggled to China. Herbs are smuggled when it's herb season, and there would be different goods for trade depending on the time. Herbs are foraged by North Korean people from the mountains. The Chinese would mainly want scrap metal. Sending scrap metal to China makes money, so a lot of it would be traded. Even though it was dangerous, there were lots of people eager to take part in the smuggling trade as it made a lot of profit compared to other jobs.

From the China side, we were paid in Chinese currency or rice.

Smuggling usually happens through North Koreans who travel to China. There are Chinese businessmen called “*lobai*” or “*daebang*,” who will take the goods brought in by North Koreans. These people will have tents that look like greenhouses set up by the Chinese side of the Yalu River border. The tents are there during the night, because North Koreans are hesitant to cross the Yalu River during the day - as it is more difficult. If we reach the Chinese tents across the river at night, these people are already waiting for us. Here is where trade happens between the North Koreans and the Chinese. Goods are exchanged for money or rice. North Koreans will cross the Yalu River carrying luggage on their backs.

The Yalu River area has heightened security as it is a border region. The Yalu River is not something you can cross just because you want to. In other words, no one can cross it without the Border Guards knowing about it. The soldiers are there on duty. You need protection (“cover”) from the soldiers who will lead the way. If the soldier I had bribed is on duty from 2 to 4 AM, I would cross the river to China during those hours. This could still lead to problems. If I had crossed the border with an enlisted member as my guide but was met by an officer standing guard upon returning, I would have no choice but to pay him as well. There are other institutions, such as the Ministry of State Security and the Police involved, so I have to pay them too. If not, I cannot evade punishment when things go bad. Stubbornly refusing to pay might get you sentenced to a Labour Training Camp.

I took part in the smuggling trade between age 14 and age 18, crossing the Chinese border.

That doesn't mean I was skipping school. Smuggling happens during the night.

I would attend school during the day, and make money through the smuggling trade during the night.

It was dangerous, to be sure. But I knew about how the Chinese wanted scrap metal, and that there was quite some money to be made from it. By the time you are a teenager in North Korea, you learn about the value of money and you grow up as a person. Everyone starts thinking I need to earn my share to spend. Students engaging in the smuggling trade are not necessarily seen in a negative light in North Korean society. Of course, you could get expelled from school if you're unlucky and get caught in China and repatriated.

The Yalu River is only a few hundred metres away from where I lived. It was a good location for smuggling. Not just me, but most people around me took part in handing scrap metal over to China. I think we were all in it for the money. In my household, it was myself, my sister, and my mother – everyone except my father. I would personally carry up to 40~50 kg worth of scrap metal across the Yalu River when business was good. Scrap metal usually came from another region. It was easier to trade with

China from my village, so the people from other regions would send their scrap metal to our neighbourhood. We would buy those scraps coming from other neighbourhoods – myself and my neighbours. From there, we would haul those goods over to China. In 2018, which was my last year in North Korea, there was far less private smuggling than before. I believe the trade size is still negligible to this day.

Ever since Kim Jong-un came to power, the Yalu River border has been sealed off. In my hometown also, there was news of how Kim Jong-un had strengthened the level of border security. Barbed wires installed alongside the riverbed in the mid-2010s made private smuggling difficult. It was around that time when the number of people willing to go to South Korea dwindled as well. People who wanted to get to South Korea would often cross the Yalu River with the help of smugglers in my hometown. Recently, there is almost nobody smuggling through this path, which leads to a fewer number of people trying to get to South Korea in a like manner. But even with the strengthened security and the barbed wires, smuggling does continue. It's just that the river-crossing is not as easy as before.

I used to cross the border to China to have phone conversations with my sister. People around me would do the same when they needed to have a phone call with someone in South Korea. Once you're in Chinese territory, your phone call is safe no matter how many hours you make the call. I almost never made such a call inside North Korea, although we lived in the border region. Back in the days, brokers would bring in Chinese mobile phones to the border region where it's close to China, so we could make calls to South Korea. But that is no longer possible.

There are many new wiretap devices. No matter how close

you are to the Chinese border, pretty much any call made from North Korea to South Korea will be detected. In the last few years, a lot of the people who used mobile phones to make calls to South Korea were caught in the act. It was because of these wiretap devices. Some time ago, we used to hang up the call every few seconds because we were told that a call that goes over one minute can be wiretapped. But recently, we are told that the devices will be able to detect even when someone turns the mobile phone on or starts a phone call signal to South Korea. I believe the phone conversation gets recorded as well. One slip could ruin your life. The punishments are grave as you could be sentenced to a Reform through Labour Camp or a Political Prison Camp. To cover up, you need to pay a lot of money to the law enforcement institutions.<sup>❶</sup> Making phone calls to South Korea is now harder than before.

In North Korea, a worker's son has to become a worker himself and a farmer's son has to become a farmer. My parents were farmers. Because of that, I used to work at the farms before leaving. I would do farm work and participate in Youth League activities. The Youth League is actually an abbreviation of "Kimilsungist-Kimjongilist Youth League." The Youth League must be joined by all members, men and women – from the age of 16. Membership is not granted by default. There was a brochure called the "Duties and Rights of the Youth League" that we had to memorise. It took a lot of training to memorise all of it. You are granted membership to the Youth League only after passing the test. If you are not very smart, not a student, or skipped school, you cannot join. Then you have to retry the following year. That makes it a year later than all your peers. There are no real repercussions for joining late. But if you're the only one left out

❶ Refers to political institutions such as the Ministry of State Security, Ministry of Social Security, and the Prosecutor's office.

among your friends in class, it's very embarrassing. So people try to join at age 16.

Once joining the Youth League, all student members are made to gather at a weekly "Youth School" that is organised by the league. There are many cells within the Youth League. Usually, it's an elementary group of 10 to 15 members that hold Life Review Sessions together. Attendance is not a must. Life Review Sessions are for publicly reflecting on one's wrongdoings for the week and criticising the wrongdoings of others. The regulations within the Youth League used to be strict, but they appear to have loosened up a bit. After graduating from school, we used to hold meetings called "Life Review Sessions every 10 days" which would be held about three times a month. But I don't think the attendance rate was all that great as people were too busy trying to make ends meet.

Youth League activities consist of many things – one of them being "Inspection Unit" duty. One role served by the Inspection Unit is to regulate immoral activities. North Koreans do not get to make fashion choices. There are unusual clothes among those imported from China. The Inspection Unit will regulate such fashion as a representation of ideological corruption. Inspection Units are formed as a group of a number of people. We carry a badge to show that we are the Inspection Unit. Younger people tend to wear unusual clothes to look different, more so than older people. The Inspection Unit will call out such individuals. There are those who resist the inspection. The Inspection Unit will take away those people and make them take lessons under the name of "Reform Projects." They don't inflict beatings or anything though. There was a time when bell-bottom trousers became fashionable in North Korea. We were not to wear such trousers because of



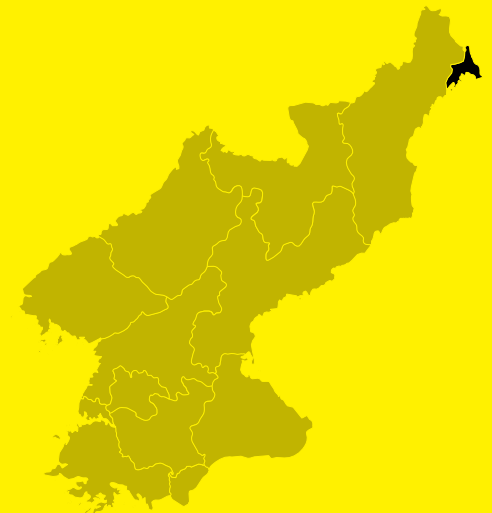
Party prohibitions. Even with the prohibitions, though, there were people seen wearing them. I remember how the Inspection Units went after those people.

Men will usually be a member of the Youth League until the age of 30. If he is good at his job and joins the Party at age 30, he will become a Party member. If not, you will move on to become a member of the “Korean Farmers Alliance.” From there on, you are a member of the Alliance for life. Of course, you can become a Party member if you are doing a good job while in the Alliance. As you see, living in a group is at the core of North Korean lives. In South Korea, one only needs to take care of his own business since there is freedom in personal life. But in North Korea, one is mandated to live in groups from a young age. You belong in a group like the Youth League and the Korean Farmers Alliance where you do as the group tells you to do. To be sure, these groups do not meddle with every element of my private life. But I would be criticised by the group for misbehaviour and such.

It's only been one year since I left *Hanawon*<sup>2</sup> and settled in South Korean society, but I am already feeling many things. For one thing, I feel at ease. I like how freedom is granted as long as my job is finished. The sense of freedom is something I feel a lot here in South Korea. I like being able to go places when I want to have fun. I like how no one calls me after work hours are over. I can drink once my work is done. I can sleep for as long as I want. I can go meet friends. I can drive to places... Being free to go about places makes everyday life so easy. There is no freedom of mobility in North Korea. Back when I was in North Korea, I couldn't leave my hometown even if I wanted to go out and have fun after mealtime. Transportation is bad, and freedom of movement was not given.

<sup>2</sup> An educational institution run by the South Korean government to help arriving North Koreans get settled in South Korean society. Arriving North Koreans go through a 12-week program, and are released to South Korean society upon graduation.

Hello, my name is  
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I was born in Rason.  
I left North Korea  
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Hello, my name is Kim Seong-mi. I was born in Rason. I left North Korea in 2018 and reached South Korea in the same year.

Even in Rason city, a special economic zone, one cannot make money unless they are dealing with foreigners. As you know, the name of the city Rason comes from the merging of the two regions of Rajin and Sonbong. It used to be two different administrative regions, but then they became one under the name of Rason. Then about five years ago, the two regions split again back to Rajin and Sonbong. The region isn't called "Rason" anymore in North Korea. They are referred to by their old names, Rajin and Sonbong respectively. But the trade zones are still operational in both regions. The thing is that Sonbong isn't as developed as Rajin. The gap between the two regions is quite big economically. Most of the investments took place in the Rajin region. There were no big investments in Sonbong, and not much in the way of big industries exist there aside from fisheries. There is a motorway that connects the two regions. One night, I took a car that drove at a speed of 150 km per hour from Rajin to Sonbong. It only took exactly 10 minutes to get there. Regular cities and counties, including Rajin and Sonbong, have covered roads. Outside that area, you will find dirt roads.

I worked as an interpreter in a company that dealt with fisheries. The business was selling North Korean seafood to Chinese buyers. A lot of the transaction was on selling shellfish. We dealt mainly with ark clams (*doljogae*), river mussels (*kaljogae*), Manila clams (*bajirak*), Striped hard clams (*juldaehap*), and *saehap* clams. I don't know the South Korean names for the last two. The seafood would be exported to South Korea too – not directly, of course. A Chinese buyer would take the seafood first to China and then resell it to South Korea. At the end of the day, it's North

Korean seafood making its way into South Korea. But South Koreans don't know that these are from North Korea – because they get rebranded as Chinese seafood in China. As of right now, all trade has stopped due to Covid-19, but North Korean seafood had a distribution network that reached all the way to South Korea through China until recently. My understanding is that foreign exports going outbound from Rason became difficult along with the economic sanctions placed on North Korea. But I believe exports were still being made through Dandong, China.<sup>①</sup> There were some exports being made through Rason, but you had to bribe the customs office first. The volume of trade decreased as a result. It's nearly impossible, so it would be a risk to try it. Ever since the economic sanctions, there were item categories that were restricted, making foreign trade inconvenient in a number of ways. All the North Koreans who used to work in the fisheries trade in Rason are now doing trade with Dandong. They usually make agreements with Chinese buyers over the phone. Trying foreign trade in Rason could mean the loss of all your money if caught.

Rason's tourism industry is targeted to foreigners. I think there have been about 100 thousand to 200 thousand foreigners visiting Rason for business trips and other reasons, recently (prior to Covid-19). I was told that before, there used to be up to 500 thousand visitors. But actually, not so many foreigners come to Rason as tourists. Although I say foreigners, it is safe to say they are almost always Chinese. Unlike some of the other countries, foreign tourists cannot go anywhere they choose to go when in North Korea. They were put under control during the entire period of the tour. A tourist can only visit places where the guide takes them to. Foreigners that don't know so much about North

① A Chinese city facing Sinuiju, North Korea on the other side of the Yalu River.

Korea sometimes go to places that are off-limits. The guides have a hard time trying to stop them. Chinese tourists buy a lot of porcelain and paintings as gifts. They spend a huge amount of money in the casinos. The revenue earned by the casinos is immense.

I heard that the revenue earned in this way through foreign tourism gets spent for Kim Jong-un to retain his seat of power, even when I was in North Korea. It is feasible. You can't say North Koreans live without any complaints. But saying things out loud may get you killed, so no one does so.

North Koreans have a lot of dissatisfaction with Kim Jong-un. It's just that they cannot express it, as Making a political statement in public could mean the end of your family and extended relatives. The son has to bear responsibility for something the father has said. One gets punished for some act committed by a relative that you don't even know about. That's North Korea. Open criticism against Kim Jong-un cannot be found in daily life. It's difficult to speak one's mind even among family. This is because people have been brainwashed from a young age. When I was young, my father said something about Kim Jong-il in my presence. I remember how my mother gave me a stern warning that I am not to speak of what I just heard to people outside the family. But no matter how stupid and brainwashed the people are, their experience makes them feel otherwise.

From the outside, Rason may appear more liberal and open-minded. But it's not all like that. The law has a stronger presence there, as do the crackdowns and restrictions. The state tries to keep the people there more tightly under control as there are many foreigners and foreign goods to be found. I personally

felt the people from Chongjin (in North Hamgyong Province) and Wonsan (in Kangwon Province) were more liberal in their expression than in Rason.

I've been to different parts of the country on business trips. One time, I visited Wonsan in Kangwon Province. I was staying at a friend of a friend's house which I frankly didn't know so well. The daughter of that household would openly criticise Kim Jong-un and the state in my presence. Her father was taking some rest away from work, as he got sick as a civil servant. The daughter would say how "It's the state's fault that my father turned out this way." I was surprised, as these people didn't know me so well, and I could've reported them. It left me with a strong impression as I thought people in Rason couldn't be so bold.

Then when I visited Chongjin, I saw a friend criticise Kim Jong-un in my presence. There was a currency reform that took place in late 2009, known to have been led by Kim Jong-un before he stepped in as leader. People were made to exchange their old currency with new ones. This reform turned out to be a failure, and the rumours said that Pak Nam-gi, the Director of the Planning and Finance Department was executed in public. My friend spoke critically of this, saying that Pak couldn't have led the currency reform all by himself when the real decision-maker is Kim Jong-un. I was shocked to hear her say that, but I could see that people in Chongjin shared similar thoughts with me. Aside from this friend of mine, I could find people speaking under similar implications as I visited elsewhere. To be sure, these were city-dwellers, so it's possible they were more open to these things than the rural population. Beyond that, I feel that most North Koreans nowadays share a level of knowledge of Kim Jong-un's wrongdoings and hold unexpressed dissatisfaction deep within.

People are dissatisfied with being restricted from watching South Korean movies and television shows.

They are upset because the authorities will crack down on anything South Korean, even if the storyline does not contain problematic elements.

The state claims that all South Korean shows are bad, regardless of the content. Also, there is a lot of discontent over not being paid salaries for showing up at work. Work will get you only about 2,000 to 3,000 won a month. That money is not enough to buy a kilogram of rice. Wouldn't anyone be dissatisfied? And if you don't show up at work, you could be sent to a Labour Training Camp or a Reform through Labour Camp. Before, people were fooled by this system without thinking too much about it. But nowadays, even the dumbest person out there knows that this is wrong. People in their 20s will openly express their discontent about this situation when among friends. Teenagers will take it a step further and make sarcastic songs about "land without electricity" to poke fun at the inferior situation in North Korea. This would've gotten them punished back in the day, even if they were children. One example would be a case where someone changed the verse of the song "That Oath" to "Dog Oath." He was imprisoned to a Reform through Labour Camp as a result. I think such levels of expression are not as problematized these days.

Discontent is high regarding Kim Jong-un, but North Korea is in no shape to protest to break out – as outsiders tend to imagine. One thing for certain is that a coup cannot take place in North Korea. The reason is simple. The North Korean system is structured in a way that everyone spies on one other. It is taken for granted that "I spy on you, and you spy on me." You need each other to start a movement, but honestly two people cannot tell what the other person is thinking. It's hard to guess. How could anyone plot to overthrow the government in this situation? There are tens if not hundreds of government agencies, the Ministry of State Security, the Prosecutor's office, and the Ministry of Social Security all watching and out-competing one another. No matter how careful people are in plotting, one person turning their back can be the end of it. In North Korea, a seed is stomped down before it grows into a bud. That's why it's impossible. People here in South Korea and abroad tend to think that outside information flowing into North Korea would develop democratic ideas in North Korean minds and eventually get them to topple the dictatorship. I think that's wishful thinking, not knowing North Korea for what it is. Those people have never lived in North Korea, and so they don't know the North Korean system. Aren't those who say such things speaking their opinions on what they've only heard about? They've never been inside North Korea and lived there. I say it's impossible.

I didn't watch South Korean television shows when I was in North Korea. I wasn't so interested in them myself. We did have a portable radio that was made in China, so I did get to listen to some South Korean radio broadcasts. It wasn't me personally, but it was my family that would listen to the broadcasts intended for North Korean people. I would overhear what was being said.

I remember President Park Geun-hye telling North Koreans to come to South Korea. Back then, I thought a lot of such broadcasts contained falsehoods. So I was sceptical whether what was being said was true, as I listened to the radio. I never had thoughts of going to South Korea even as I listened to these broadcasts intended that way. For one thing, I didn't know so much about South Korea. My living conditions were okay, I was doing good for myself without too many hardships. So I never had the thought of moving to South Korea. Still, I did continue to think that there was no freedom in North Korea. It wasn't the South Korean radio broadcasts, but I always did want to travel abroad.

As I worked with Chinese people, they would tell me about South Korea from time to time. But I wasn't very interested, and so I never initiated that kind of conversation. The Chinese people at work also didn't tell me "South Korea is like such and such." Foreigners on business in Rason are also hesitant about mentioning South Korea, just like the North Korean population. The reason is that foreigners can also get punished for speaking openly about South Korea or criticising Kim Jong-un. Also, if they brought up such a conversation topic assuming the relationship with the other person is based on that much trust, but it turned out the other person didn't like talking about that, it would damage the trust between them. It makes business difficult. So it's best not to talk about such things, and they fear it too. Even foreigners tend to be very ambiguous when it comes to topics regarding North Korean politics or South Korea. Some North Koreans, on the other hand, tend to speak very critically of the state to these foreigners. This is possible because the foreigners who are there to do business in North Korea have no incentive to report on us, their co-workers.

I think the biggest difference between North and South Korea is the freedom of speech. North Korea has no freedom of expression. Bribes will make most things possible in North Korea, but some things are still off-limits. One such thing would be freedom of speech. In North Korea, I do not get to speak my mind. I don't get to take my case to the legal institutions when I've been wronged, as saying the wrong things could get me killed. Also, political power ruled even stronger than money in North Korea. You can beat money with power. You get to do anything if you have a combination of both. Even then, no one dreams of insulting the supreme leader.

I had no difficulty making a living in North Korea. But the biggest reason behind my escape was that there was no freedom in that country.

It's been around two years since I made it to South Korea. No matter what I do, no matter what the neighbour is doing, South Koreans just let us be. This is not the case in North Korea. You can see this in the TV series, "*Crash Landing on You*" (*Sarangui Bulsichak*). Its depiction of North Korea isn't all correct, but it got some things right. Yes, North Koreans do gather around in one place for communal work. But if one person is doing better in such a gathering, the others may get jealous and file a complaint against that person. They may make up untrue stories to accuse the other person. It is of course possible to get away from such accusations with money. But the most difficult part was that I

couldn't be free in my daily life. That's why I escaped North Korea.

In fact, I think the show “Crash Landing on You” has many inaccuracies that might give the wrong impression to South Koreans. For instance, the show depicts North Koreans marvelling at vacuum cleaners and taps for both cold and hot water. Those are actually commonplace items in North Korea. I used those myself when I was in North Korea. Of course, not all households get to have them, but people are aware of their existence. I understand that the North Koreans in the show appear naïve as comic relief for South Korean viewers, but as someone from North Korea, I thought a lot about how it can be considered demeaning to North Korea and its people.

Voice  
34

Reasons for Leaving North Korea

Hello, my name is Jeong Hong-chol. I was born in South Hwanghae Province. I left North Korea in the middle of 2019 to China, and reached South Korea in early 2020.



Hello, my name is Jeong Hong-chol. I was born in South Hwanghae Province. I left North Korea in the middle of 2019 to China, and reached South Korea in early 2020.

I joined the military after graduating from school. I served as an enlisted member (*hajonsa*) for ten years. I started serving as a private and was discharged as Master Sergeant (*sangsa*). I've seen others finish their service as Sergeant First Class (*chungsa*), or in rare cases make it to Sergeant Major (*tukmusangsa*) and lead the company before discharge.

Even after serving in the military, I didn't get to be assigned to a decent workplace. In North Korea, you can still be assigned to a working-class job - even if you serve as an officer and not an enlisted member for your ten-year military service. Even if you serve, there are virtually no benefits granted by the state. I was assigned to a workplace after finishing military service, I didn't go there for a while and became a university student instead. University students in North Korea have a different number of years in their curriculums. Medical school would require six years, while engineering school would take five years, and teaching college would take four.

I haven't been to school in South Korea, but in North Korea, when people go to school and major in a field of study, they don't necessarily intend to pursue a career in that field. In South Korea, students major in business administration and things like that in order to get a job in the company they want. College students in North Korea are not like that. You need money and power above anything else to survive in North Korea. People without a lot of money, such as myself, need a college degree to hold power. To become a Party cadre or a law enforcement officer and to be successful in that career, you need a foothold.

The first step in gaining that foothold is the party membership. It means you have to become a Party member. Next, you need to have the track record of having served in the military. Lastly, you need a college degree. Only when you are in possession of these three credentials are you ready to become a cadre. From here, you need to bribe a little and pull some strings via family and relatives in order to become successful. In a nutshell, college students in North Korea are not trying to build a career related to their area of study, but they are just in need of a degree so they can start their career as a prosecutor or whatever. Your major does not matter. You need a degree, be it from a technical college or whatever. That's why students continue school even as they give away money to their colleges.

College life can be very demanding in North Korea, and I don't mean the academic part of it. You have to be studying too, but there's money to be paid to the school on a day-to-day basis. It's demanding financially. Even when there are no classes held, you still have to give money. Also, college students in North Korea have to be mobilised for work. It is hard work. South Koreans probably won't understand. College students in North Korea take three classes in the morning. The classes are from 10 AM to 1 PM. Lunchtime is between 1 PM and 2:30. Then, when we reassemble at 2:30 PM, we get mobilised to work on flat construction sites and such. It's all work in the afternoons. If there is flood damage somewhere, we are mobilised to be sent there. At the end of the day, college students are only left with those three classes in the morning for their academic studies. They cannot even dream of spending time reading or studying at the library in the afternoon. There is no time for that. It's usually 8 PM or 8:30 by the time they return from work - sometimes at 7 PM, depending on the

workload. If you get home then, you barely have enough time to wash your face and eat. After that, you are too tired to study and you fall asleep soon after. Then at 6 AM the next morning, you get up to get ready for another day of school. Take classes in the morning and take the shovel in the afternoon, laying down cables and other things...

Mobilised work is for all college students regardless of gender. Even with a heavy workload and too many tasks assigned to you, the work needs to get done. It's unimaginable to stop whatever you were working on and return home at the end of work hours like they do in South Korea. Here in South Korea, I saw that people would leave work unfinished at the end of business hours, when in fact they could have spent a little bit more time to get it done within the day. At first, I couldn't understand why people would leave work unfinished like that. The labour regulations are strong in South Korea, while there are no such things in North Korea. You could end work early if you are tasked with a lighter workload. But with a heavy workload, you can return home only when the work is done. I mean you can go home at 10 or 11 PM depending on when it gets done. The task assigned to an individual has to be completed by the individual.

If there is a task assigned to a provincial Workers' Party, all college students in that region are summoned. If the task is to build a flat in the city centre, that's where the students will be sent to. Each college has about 800 to 1,500 students. When the students go out to work, the "College Instruction Department" of the provincial Workers' Party will come to give us the task. After that, the college will divide up the work to each of the departments. My school had five departments. A single department had maybe 160 students. The work assigned to the

department level is then divided up by class. There were ten to fifteen classes per department. The class will assign jobs to each person. It's a subcontract (*dogeup*) system. We used to call them a subcontract system by class, by individual, and so on. We work on these assignments and leave the site when we are done. There is a saying in North Korea that "Our country's subcontract system does a better job than KATO cranes from Japan." Those cranes are known for doing a thousand person's work. We are saying that the system's efficiency is better than that of the KATO equipment. The scary thing about this system is that you might get into a fight with the person working next to you because you can only go home when your work is finished.

You have no choice but to work hard under the subcontract system. It's because you don't get to go home once the time is up. You need to finish the job to go home. If I'm supposed to dig from here to there, it may take me three hours if they made me work according to work hours. But if I feel that the work can be done in 30 minutes if I work hard while others are taking a break, I could soldier on for 30 minutes and roll out when I'm done. There is a reviewer who checks out the finished work. My work is only done when the reviewer is satisfied with what he sees. The workers try to get done with the task as soon as possible without having to get reviewed twice. That's the beauty of the subcontract system. It works in a way that incentivizes people to do work faster. North Koreans won't work hard if they are made to punch hours like in South Korea. Regular workplaces like factories follow work hours. That's why those places don't have good productivity, as people are not motivated and work idly. People show up at work just so that they are not sent to a Labour Training Camp instead. If you think about it, North Korea won't be able to become a prosperous



country. I used to do site surveys while in college. I found out that the manufacturing process wasn't managed properly and all those things.

People are not so discontent even as they do not get paid for hard work. This is because the Kim regime has brainwashed people so much. North Koreans are hardcoded to think that they work for the party and for the state even as they cannot earn a single kilogram of rice or a single penny. They've been brainwashed like that since youth. But as time went on, they went through the Arduous March and the like so that the people started opening their minds.

These days, they don't give us a grain of rice after a whole year of showing up at work. The ration system disappeared in 1995, and so did wages. The only people who are still getting rations are those who work in powerful institutions such as Party institutions and law enforcement institutions. As for the workers in regular factories and corporations, they are not getting a grain of rice after a full year of work. Even as you are assigned to work in another region on Storm Troop duty, you have to carry your own rice to your assignment if you don't want to starve there. Even as you are dispatched on government duties to another region, you have to carry your own food. An assignment usually lasts three months. People will run away from Storm Troop duty, and then get caught and beaten. Ever since Kim Jong-un started promoting Samjiyon as the birthplace of his father, Kim Jong-il, the Storm Troops started coming in from across the country (even from places like Pyongyang and Sariwon) to work on construction – although technically it is the Chinese who are building it for us. Storm Troops will have young people, old people, unmarried girls, and mothers of children without exception.

To explain how people get drafted for the Storm Troops, let's say I was working at a corporation with 100 employees. The Storm Troops supporting the Samjiyon construction site work on a three-month shift. The state sets a quota for each corporation, detailing how many people need to be sent on Storm Troop duty. If I am an employee of one such corporation and it's my turn to go on Storm Troop duty, I have no choice but to go. But if I have some money on me, I could buy someone else's time to send him on Storm Troop duty instead. That way, I get to stay at home for three months. I give three months' worth of food and some extra cash for the substitute, and he would be working there on Storm Troop duty in my stead.

Originally, I was trying to get a job at the Ministry of State Security once I graduated from college.

But since I had family members who had gone to South Korea, I couldn't join the Ministry. I was considered to have a bad background because of my family in South Korea.

That's how I became jobless for more than a year after graduating from college. I was assigned to a workplace, but I didn't go. I didn't like the job. At the time, I had a friend who made it to South Korea before I did, so I spent time talking with him over the phone. I even went as far as to help another friend of his

go to South Korea. But then, soon enough, I was caught by the provincial-level Ministry of State Security. I was sent to the pre-trial process. I really could have been sent to a Political Prison Camp. I was detained for a year – as I passed through the holding facility, the detention centre of the Provincial Ministry of State Security, and then the detention centre at the pre-trial department of the provincial Ministry. It was at the pre-trial detention centre that I found a way out by a miracle – right before the trial. I look back on those days and still cannot believe my good fortune. I made it out last minute. Usually, one does not make it out once detained by the Ministry.

There were no overt tortures happening throughout my time in the holding facility and the Ministry. Getting electrocuted while chained up like in old movies is no longer a thing. But they will beat you if you tell a lie or try to hide something. They will beat you with a club. Beating during interrogation happened in the Ministry of State Security. The Ministry deals with crimes related to South Korea – such as making a phone call to a South Korean or attempting to escape to South Korea. The police station is not involved in these types of crimes. They will deal with ordinary criminals like theft and robbery. Anything related to South Korea gets handled by the Ministry of State Security as the perpetrators are categorised as political criminals. They are traitors, enemies of the state. But since there are so many of them, it's impossible to kill them all. So one must bide one's time and find ways to live – like I did. On the other hand, there are those who are sentenced to ten or fifteen years in Political Prison Camps.

Beatings were commonplace while in detainment. They would beat us up whenever they had the chance. They would use

clubs and wooden sticks. Why the beatings, you ask? Once you are in a detention centre, you are to wake up at 6, tidy up your bed, wash your face, and eat at 7. The meal is called “unhusked corn porridge,” but it's actually baked corn smaller than the size of your fist with some salt. You naturally grow hungry as you subsist only on this kind of food. Your bowels shrivel up. From 8, you are meant to sit cross-legged with your back straight and your two fists placed on your knees behind two or three layers of bars in your prison cell until 10 at night. Inmates are made to sit like that for the whole time except for lunch and dinner time – one hour each. That is to say, you are sitting straight for more than 10 hours a day. You are not to close your eyes, doze off, talk to the person next to you, or roll your eyeballs. The prison guards will use violence if you do so. The prison guards belong under the Ministry of State Security. They are ranked as first and second lieutenants. When they apply the beatings, you are made to step out in front of the bars, so that you will be beaten standing there. The guards do not step inside behind the bars. Wooden sticks with a thickness of a person's wrist are used for this purpose. A person can only sit straight for about one or two hours. His legs start to go numb not long after. If you twitch or change position to relieve yourself of the pain, you are again beaten while being told not to move. They will beat you ferociously, asking if you didn't hear them the first time. Think how it feels to live like this every single day for a whole year. Birthdays, the Full-moon Festival, the Lunar New Year, and other holidays mean nothing there. You are meant to sit tight the whole year around. The pain is unimaginable. Even if the person next to you dies, you are not to look. You will be beaten up for rolling your eyes, so no. You are told to not take pity on the next person even if he is getting

the beatings. No one died during the beatings while I was doing time there, though I was told there used to be many such cases in the past.

The interrogation was usually done by a Major or a Lieutenant Colonel from the Ministry of State Security. They are the interrogators. If I do not tell them what they want to hear and keep to my version of the story or tell lies instead, they will take me to the interrogation chamber. There is a wooden chair inside that room. You enter the chamber in handcuffs. They uncuff you once you sit on the chair, but once you sit on the chair, there is a big wooden plank that goes over your thighs which is locked to the chair. That way, I am stuck in the chair seated. It's one of those chairs that you see in old movies. Those are still in use in North Korea. I cannot stand up or do anything with it. The desk is placed in front of me, and that's where the interrogation officer asks questions. After the interrogation, they have to unlock the plank from the chair so that I can return to my cell. While seated, I have no choice but to take beatings from the interrogation officer. I can't protect myself from the beatings, because my body is fixed to a large chair. They use not only their hands and feet for beating but anything they can set their eyes on – broomsticks for example.

There used to be many inmates who came back from the interrogation all bloody. There is no treatment for the bruises from such beatings. You don't get treatment unless you have a serious disease like cancer. If you are in a medical emergency, they might treat you. The Ministry keeps you barely alive so as to keep you from dying in the process. One could be treated by a medical officer if they were gravely sick from things like diabetes, liver cancer, or ascites and it appears they may not make it till the

date of the trial. They have to take responsibility for death cases happening inside a Ministry facility. But if they send the inmate to trial and he dies afterward, they don't have to be responsible. That's why the Ministry keeps people alive until their trial, no matter what. Once the trial is done, it is none of their business whether the person dies in a Reform through Labour Camp or breaks a leg. They just want to keep inmates within their jurisdiction alive just barely. Once you are in a detainment facility of the Ministry of State Security, they will tell you that you are no longer human. The Ministry folks don't treat detainees as people.

I left because

I couldn't stand the tyranny in North Korea.

It's been a long time since I knew North Korea was a bad place to live. But I thought it was my fate to live that way since I was born there in North Korea. I figured I had to accept my fate and move on. That was my way of living, but then I tried to get a job at the Ministry of State Security after graduating from college. That didn't go so well, and I ended up in prison. That gave me a change of perspective. There were many in prison that were caught while trying to escape North Korea through China. They were caught in Shenyang, Changchun, Changbai County, and so on. Talking with them made me realise there was a whole new world that I didn't know about. They would tell me about South Korea. I had heard about South Korea before, but I didn't know how wealthy the country was. Those people who taught me these things had been in China for at least one or two years

– sometimes more. They told me that they accessed the internet in China, via phone, to learn about South Korean culture. I had a change of mind ever since hearing about South Korea from the inmates. Before, I thought I had to live with what I considered my bad luck – to have gone through ten years of military service, graduate from college, and still being unable to get the job I wanted, not to mention that life was hard. But that wasn't true. Prison life opened my eyes. That's how I felt that I wanted to try my luck one more time, although it was a late realisation.

I was detained by the Ministry of State Security once, so my second-time offence would have meant at least a 15-year sentence. But I wanted to start fresh in South Korea, even if it meant risking my life. Even in South Korea, I believe that first-time offenders are punished lightly and second-time offenders are punished harder. It's the same way in North Korea. They go easy on first-time offenders. If I were caught trying to escape and get sent to the Ministry again as a two-time offender, I would have gotten a 15-year sentence for sure. Even if I did manage to survive all 15 years of my sentence, the Ministry wouldn't let me walk away free. Regardless, getting arrested by the Ministry a second time could only mean death. I risked it all to make the escape. That's how desperate I was. Making a living in North Korea wasn't so hard in and of itself. I had my family members send large sums of money every now and then from South Korea.

Once I was released from the Ministry, I learned of the fact that they had someone spy on me. Knowing it, I was brazen enough to think “spy as much as you like.” I ate and slept as I did before. But I had a feeling that my life was destined for something more. I served in the military bent on doing something great. I would bite the bullet when everyone was giving up in difficult

times. I joined the party and went to college. I went through all that, but still couldn't get the job I wanted. All along, I wanted to live a decent life like others. I decided to start fresh and change my fate. I could manage to make a living in North Korea. I was under surveillance, but that wasn't a huge issue.

There are many reasons why North Koreans leave their country – it could be because of persecution, or lack of freedom, difficult living conditions, starvation... So many reasons. I wouldn't be able to come up with an exact statistic on the mix of how many accounts for which. But I think that people cross the border because they find a lack of something – be it freedom, money, or something else. In short, it's the regime that fails to fulfil that. Even amidst the Covid-19 pandemic and its economic impact, there is still hope in South Korea and other countries that we will be back on our feet, that we will overcome, and the economy will be better – don't you agree? North Korea has no hope, let alone the capacity to have hope. If South Koreans were like North Koreans, they'd probably all fall to the ground unable to get up. But South Koreans appear to have hope that even though the path to beating Covid-19 may be a long one, it can still be overcome. North Koreans, on the other hand, have no hope. They don't hope that someday they will get to have freedom, have enough to eat, or have rice and good clothes in daily life. They simply cannot see a future ahead of them. I felt the same way, and I'm sure all the others who escaped from North Korea would feel the same. They will all say that they crossed the border because they didn't see hope. In my opinion, “lack of freedom” or “difficult living conditions” only serve as an excuse.

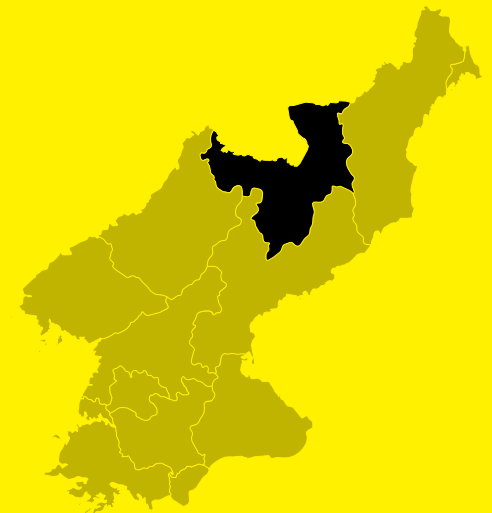
I think people leave North Korea because they cannot find hope there. Such things are hard to capture in statistics, right?

There were more than 200 thousand North Korean women in China. Some have crossed the border in search of freedom, escaping persecution, as runaway criminals, as *kotjebi*<sup>❶</sup> migrants who were just too hungry, and some were told that one can make a lot of money in China but then got tricked into marriage by Chinese traffickers. Some of these women have kids and settle down in China. Some women have abusive husbands with drug and alcohol issues, so they cross the border to escape from marriage... As such, there are an array of intermixed reasons why people choose to cross the border. Do you think it is possible to break this down on a chart and say “this was their reason?”

I think, generally speaking, people leave North Korea because they cannot find hope there – be it about freedom, hunger, or living conditions.

❶ A North Korean term referring to adolescents who migrate without a stable place of residence, surviving through means of begging and shoplifting.

Hello, my name is  
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I was born in  
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I left North Korea  
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Hello, my name is Yang Jeong-ho. I was born in Ryanggang Province. I left North Korea in 2019 and came to South Korea in 2020.

Graduation age in North Korea is 18. I was assigned to Storm Troop service as soon as I graduated. I don't think there are so many North Koreans in South Korea who have worked in a Storm Troop right after graduation. I found that there are many in South Korea who are unaware of the existence of Storm Troops.

Serving in the Storm Troops is all about work – like construction work.

The Storm Troops that I was in required 10 years of service.

There are many different types of Storm Troops.

There used to be far less Storm Troops when Kim Il-sung was still alive. But after that, Kim Jong-il and now Kim Jong-un were in power. With them, Storm Troops have been growing in number. The lack of machinery in North Korea means people do all the work. With so many young people hanging around and so much work to get done, it naturally led to having more Storm Troops. The military is fundamentally different from the Storm Troops. The military is there to defend the frontlines, while the Storm Troops work in construction all the time. I was in the Storm Troop for a ten-year service, and this would be treated as having completed my military service. Storm Troops have ranks

too. The ranks are the same as in the military. That's why the Storm Troops are also called a "paramilitary" (*bangunsa*). It's not military in the fullest sense, but the work there could be more daunting. That's why we call it that. There are many benefits for someone serving in the North Korean military – they get days off on national holidays and other such days. But for a Storm Troop member, 5 days-off in a year is a lot. We don't get Sundays off. I think soldiers in the military get Sundays off, but Storm Troops work on Sundays. We work 365 days a year.

Storm Troop members are made to wake up at 5 AM. During wintertime, it is moved to a slightly later point as the days get shorter. Troop members will first go through boot camp just like in the military. Boot camp training is for 6 months. Although a Storm Troop's main purpose is construction work, training is still necessary. We learn about the code of conduct toward our senior members. We learn how to behave around the officers and the leadership. The young people in North Korea live care-free, and they don't know anything. Even if they graduate from school, they are still wayward kids. If you don't get them trained, they will behave without order, without respect for rank. That's why they go through training, even for a little while. The training academy is called "Technician School." There are lots of these schools in North Korea. The schools are operated at the regiment level since the Storm Troops are so large. There was a technician's school at regiment headquarters. Some 40 trainees would be in a class, although I'm not too sure as we had people going in and out every three to six months. The academy itself wasn't very large. 40 people would constitute a platoon. There is no military training here. We normally learn about safety in construction and how to use certain machinery. But the biggest part of training is,

as I said, code of conduct around higher-ranking members. We also learn about Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il, and Kim Jong-un from time to time. Women serve in the Storm Troops too. They are trained in the same academy. The ratio of men to women is like 7:3.

There was some concept of compensation for the 10 years of Storm Troop service, similar to what we call wages here in South Korea. But it wasn't a lot. I came to South Korea only after serving a few years. I remember I only got paid twice during my years of service. The pay was about 4,000 North Korean won. With that money, you can buy a kilogram of rice. But that pay would come after a lot of deductions – so-called “contributions to the Party Treasury” and whatnot. After the cuts, you would be left with only about 2,500 North Korean won. That's why I didn't even care for the money. It didn't make much difference whether I received it or not. We took the money because it was being given to us. Nobody was eager to get paid, like in South Korea. I did need money while serving, but I would go without food if I had no money and made a living in my own way. One could commit theft and smuggle out construction materials if they had the capability. You could spend time outside once you've built up a level of trust.

The kids in the Storm Troops have it so hard. Life in the Storm Troops is honestly no better than life for animals in Korea. I don't mean certain aspects – In all aspects of life. Starting with food... You get three meals a day – usually corn, and sometimes dark wheat. Corn isn't all that plentiful, because the officers sell off the food rations that the troops receive. We were told we'd be getting 200 grams per person, but it was closer to 100 or 120 grams looking at the meals that were actually being served. The troop receives rations of corn unshelled, and then the aunties in the cookhouse will use a machine to shell the grains of corn.

Even when we are served corn, it cannot be considered fully corn. It's less than a handful served as a meal. I would feel hungry again at a moment's notice. The kids were so young, and yet they could not get much to eat. They would be eating 5 or 10 packs of instant noodles here in South Korea. It made no sense for them to be working all day on 120g meals. It was so daunting. That's why we had kids running away. We had what was called “shop sauce” (*sangjeomjang*) to eat with the main dish. There's a bit of bean paste sauce that goes into a pig's fodder. That's “shop sauce.” Just like how South Korea has convenience stores, North Korea has these shops. The sauce was named that way because they were sold at the shops. The food in the Storm Troops is pathetic. It's salty, bitter, and disgusting. It's literally meant for animals. The seasoning for pig fodder was what we had in our meal. My height is slightly over 170 cm. This is considered very tall by North Korean standards. The average male height in their early 20s is about 165 cm in North Korea. You are already considered a tall person if you're about 168 cm. Women are around 158~162 cm. North Koreans are all short.

There's no time to wash after 5 AM reveille. There are separate kids on guard duty while we sleep. They are dedicated to that job only. We used to just call them, “guards.” These kids are usually from the orphanage. They were orphans. The Storm Troop I was in was a regular troop, which means we had a lot of kids from orphanages. A lot of them would join the troop upon graduation. I think maybe 40% of the kids were from orphanages. The facilities for orphaned children in North Korea were called “orphanages”<sup>❶</sup>, “primary educational institutions” (*chodeunghagwon*) or “secondary educational institutions” (*jungdeunghagwon*) depending on the age, period and the region.

❶ Child-caring Institutions (*yugawon*; equivalent to pre-kindergartens) and orphanages (*aeyugwon*; equivalent to kindergartens).

Anyways, these kids are standing there all night on guard duty to wake us up. They get to sleep during the day. At 5 AM they will start calling out “reveille” to wake us up. We would go to work as soon as we got up without having time to wash our faces.

The first thing we did was morning exercise. We had to get warmed up ahead of dealing with the heavy workload. After exercising, we would pick up our tools to head out to work. Breakfast was at 7:30. A girl would be assigned to carry food from the cookhouse to the construction site. We ate at 7:30 and took a 10- or 15-minute break before getting back to work. Lunch was around 1:30 or 2 PM. We usually got porridge for lunch. It was corn porridge seasoned with salt. It didn't feel right to be eating plain carbs without anything else. There was no fixed dinner time. Sometimes we'd eat at 10 at night. Sometimes we'd eat at 3 AM. We could eat when work was finished. We could go to bed only when work was finished. So we never knew when we would be done, and when we could return. There was no fixed break time during work either. You had to take breaks whenever you can. You could have it easy in the Storm Troop if you have money to pay. But most members there don't come from such households. If you're from a wealthy family, you probably wouldn't have to join the Storm Troops in the first place. Storm Troop members are drafted at random. It's pure luck. You get drafted after you graduate from school. Some parents would be worldly-wise and try to get their child assigned to some other, better position. But if the parents are not as interested and they don't care what becomes of their children, those kids will be made to join the Storm Troops.

We built mostly taller buildings in the Storm Troop. The Storm Troop regiments would be sent to work in regions other

than the home region where the regiment is based. There are many floods in North Korea, so the Storm Troops will be sent to the damaged areas. They will be sent to Chagang Province, to South Hamgyong, and to the southern inland regions. But I've personally never been to the inland regions, on purpose. Once you go on a construction project there, you will have to spend an average of one to three years. It's also harder to run away when you are further inland. I worked in the Storm Troop for three years, but my longest assignment was for two months. A person can only spend so much time away on an assignment. The way to survive is to go out on a project and lose weight and then come back in to gain back weight. Staying on a project for too long will get you in a state of malnutrition to the point where you don't grow in height and get skinny to the point you might get picked up by strong wind. I wasn't the only one thinking of escaping from the Storm Troops. There were in fact a bunch that made it out. That's why they have the guards put in place. If you're caught trying to make a run, you will most likely be flogged. There are also people whose job is to go after the runaways. The size of the Storm Troop regiment is so big that there were too many runaways. So that's why they have assigned personnel to track them down.

I was at Samjiyon doing construction. The flats being built there were mostly three to five stories high but without lifts. Flats have good plumbing and bathrooms like in South Korea. It's not all that different. The difference is that South Korean flats have gas stoves for cooking, while the flats in Samjiyon had everything furnished with electricity. The floors had electric heating too. As a result, they may have to eat uncooked rice in the wintertime because of the power outages. If they had a gas supply running



through the flat, you could buy gas to cook anytime. But they couldn't do that because it's all electric.

I really couldn't wrap my head around this one. There were these flats, finely built.

The stoves were meant to be electric, but there was no electricity to do the cooking.

Oh, by the way, we use the traditional *gama* stoves for cooking. The stoves are designed in a way that they can have metal pots placed on top. The area where the pot is meant to be placed has electric coils. When power is on, the coil heats up to cook the pot. It's not like gas stoves or inductions in South Korea. North Koreans cook using traditional stoves – except they are all electric. The floor heating is all done with electric lines too. Having your house furnished in such a way makes it at least mid-level housing, if not high-class. But what good is this fancy appliance? The residents will be freezing in the cold by wintertime... Samjiyon can get very cold in the winter. The wind alone hurts your cheek. South Korean winters are not even comparable. I don't know how many degrees it is there, but it is so cold. It's lower than 10 or 20 degrees below zero (Celsius). By January it gets so cold that you can barely go outdoors. The power supply is slightly better in the summer. This is because Kim Jong-un cannot completely neglect the Samjiyon region.

Medical treatments were offered when anyone got hurt

from work, but there was no good medicine or equipment. The regiment did have a medic's office. Medicine would be given out, but it didn't help much because of the poor quality of medicine. Getting hurt while working was my problem and nobody else's. A person who's done all ten years of service in the Storm Troops would end up with a body that is broken or unwell. There was not much of what you could call safety gear at work. You would wear a safety belt when painting the outer building, but there were a few people that did fall off and die due to the poor quality of the safety belt. Gears and facilities related to safety are not well-equipped. I see that in South Korea, there are ladder cars that can lift a person up when constructing a building. In North Korea, we have to build wooden scaffolding around a building to climb it. Scaffolds are made with wood planks and nails. Sometimes the nails would fall, leading to deaths.

There's a lot of beatings and hazing going on inside the Storm Troops. Beatings are frequent. I never had to get a beating for something related to work. It's just that I ran off many times, and that got me in trouble. Even if you are treated unfairly in the Storm Troops, there is nothing you can do. Report it? Reporting will be of no use. You can tell the commanding officer and he won't care because he is too busy with his own work. It's your fault for getting beaten, and it's also your fault for getting hurt. The best you can do is try not to get a beating. It is sad.

While men serve for ten years in the Storm Troop, women serve for six years. It is the same as military service. Women will usually serve from age eighteen to age twenty-four. Upon finishing service, you get to become a party member. Being a party member does not change a whole lot in your life. On the other hand, having lots of money does make a big difference.

You could say that money makes all the difference, while party membership makes very little difference. With money, you can do whatever you want.

I know this saying goes in South Korea too, but in North Korea, you really can do whatever you want.

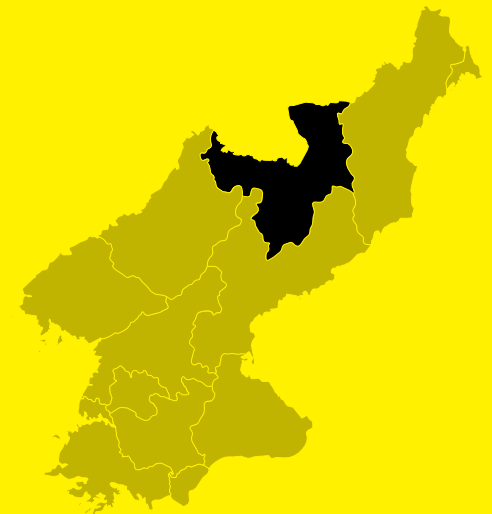
A dead man will be able to live.

This is because with money, you can excuse yourself from a crime. Let's say I made 10,000 yuan in China to return home to North Korea late at night. By then, the police officers are already looking for me. They smell the money trail. When they come, they don't say much. They are aware that their presence will be greeted with money by default. Once these officers come to visit me, they will try to make things complicated by asking me to follow them to the police station. That's when I pull out maybe 500 yuan, and there is no more talking. That's how North Korean society works – it's customary. People are accustomed to thinking this way. Unless it has to do with murder or a large-scale drug business, money does all the talking.

Voice  
36

Corruption in North Korean Society

Hello, my name is  
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My hometown is in  
Ryanggang Province.  
I left in 2019 and  
reached South Korea  
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Hello, my name is Kim Sun-hwa. My hometown is in Ryanggang Province. I left in 2019 and reached South Korea in the same year.

My hometown was a farming village. We had corn, beans, and potatoes. We didn't have so much of the privatised small plots of land there. Land was mostly state property. Farming on state-owned land didn't get us enough to eat. There would be nothing left from harvest when the crop yields were submitted to the state. That's why we had year after year of hardship. People suffer when there's not enough to eat. It's the lack of food that compelled people to start the smuggling trade with China – on top of farming – and make a living out of it. My hometown was adjacent to the Yalu River, but the riverside was fenced with barbed wire since it's so close to China. Even with the barbed wires, there was a separate passageway that allowed for smuggling. Also, the military (Border Patrol) offered protection during smuggling runs. They had a side door open for us. You need to pay them for the help. There was a protection fee.

In my neighbourhood,  
six out of ten people were in the smuggling business.

There were a lot. Most people were in the smuggling business. Obviously, there are crackdowns, but then these people give us tasks. What I mean is that we are asked to acquire something for them. If we get them what they want, we are not turned in. Or they might just take the money and leave. I also took part in the smuggling business as I was jobless at home. I kept the goods at home so that people would come and buy

them. You can think of it as a retail business of sorts. If someone from China wants something, they will send a person over with a purchase order document. Upon receiving the document, I will buy those goods for them. The same person will visit me a second time to pick up the goods. My cut was slightly higher than the others. I made a decent living out of this work. Others engage in the same kind of business, but I think they had a difficult time.

I dealt with medicinal herbs from the mountains. I sold the herbs to China. Smuggling goods from China is too heavily regulated, so I couldn't do that. I would instead sell herbs and get paid for the sales. There were a bunch like *Atractylodes* rhizomes and pine nuts, but I can't remember all of them because there were so many. Pine nuts would cost maybe 39 or 40 Chinese yuan per kilogram. There were many pine trees in the mountains. We plant a lot of those trees. But there weren't a lot of places where pine trees grew. It was just that one place.

I used to watch South Korean television shows while in North Korea. I don't know how many of us were watching the shows. I wouldn't know because we all keep it a secret. Those who watch the shows do so without telling anyone about it. People here in South Korea tend to compare the two Koreas. We have laundromats in North Korea and everything, but we were short on power. Back then, it was taken for granted that electricity was scarce. It was common sense.

I never felt that I lacked freedom while in North Korea. I saw the South Korean TV shows, but I didn't regard it as a reality because it was just a TV show. I thought the shows were entirely fiction like in North Korean movies. I took them as a fantasy, and never thought the life shown there was real. People here tend to believe that North Korea tells its people that South Korea is

an impoverished rogue nation, but I never heard such a thing while in North Korea. The party never told me that South Korea is poor. You don't get to freely watch South Korean television shows. If caught watching, you will be put to death. Usually, they send you to a Reform through Labour Camp. Or, you will have to bribe them with a lot of money – many times more than for other crimes. There is no set price, but you will have to pay at least 20 to 30 thousand yuan. Although I watched South Korean television shows, I didn't feel I was living under constraint because the influence of propaganda was so strong. Also, North Koreans don't have experience overseas, so they assume that life in North Korea is normal.

Then there was an incident that made me want to come to South Korea. It was a few years before I made my escape, when the state confiscated all the pine nuts I had. I was determined to go to South Korea after that. I didn't even approach the Chinese border and I was simply hauling pine nuts on my vehicle, and they took it all. They took what's mine like bandits, and it made me furious. I had the realisation that I couldn't stand living here. I even took the case to the secretary in charge to get them back but to no avail. In North Korea, the state does not return what they have taken.

The reason I chose to go to South Korea instead of China was a phone conversation with a friend I knew who had made it to South Korea. This friend told me that South Korea is wonderful. I used to think that all the nice stories about South Korea were a lie, but then since a person I knew well told me the same thing I began to believe it. So I came to South Korea to see for myself. I started having phone calls with this friend who made it to South Korea in 2018, meaning I didn't know so much about South Korea.

Those phone calls were my source of knowledge about South Korea. There were some households with kids or parents who left for South Korea before that. They would send money over for the family to spend. So I did know that South Korea was a wealthy country, but I didn't know so much about the livelihoods of South Koreans.

Everyone in my neighbourhood wanted to go to South Korea. It's tough living in North Korea. People have to put up with crackdowns and extortions. Even when you want to run your own business, you are made to constantly pay bribes because of the crackdowns. North Koreans talk about reunification. When inter-Korea relations were good, people were giddy about the prospect of reunification. But when inter-Korea relations turned sour, the state would use strong language against South Korea calling it a US puppet.

It's been about 6 months since I came out into South Korean society. There are so many people who are willing to help or hear my story besides my protection officer.<sup>❶</sup> I feel that the difference between life in North and South Korea is that South Korean life has more freedom. You need papers to get anywhere in North Korean society. Travel permits will take forever to get issued if you don't pay a bribe to speed up the process. Bribing is customary, and only then they will speed things up. Regulation is prevalent anywhere you go. Clothing and whatnot... Everything is strictly regulated. You could say it's life under constant regulation. South Korea, on the other hand, is so free. I still can't believe that I'm living a free life. I haven't had any difficulty adapting to this lifestyle. It's so convenient. The language though is a bit different because we speak differently in North and South Korea. So far, though, I haven't been discriminated against or

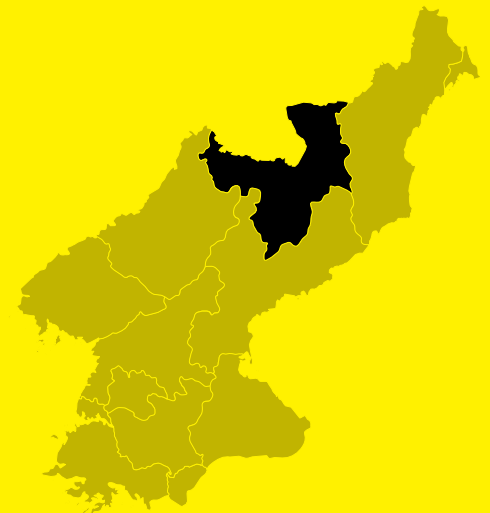
❶ A police officer or a government employee assigned to protect North Koreans who have settled in South Korea.

treated unfairly because of my speech, but I haven't had much of a chance to mingle with South Koreans either.

Voice  
37

Change Taking Place under  
Regulated Society

Hello, my name is  
Lee Jeong-suk.  
I was born in  
Ryanggang Province.  
I left North Korea  
in 2018 along with  
my family and  
reached South Korea  
in 2019.



Hello, my name is Lee Jeong-suk. I was born in Ryanggang Province. I left North Korea in 2018 along with my family and reached South Korea in 2019.

By the time I left North Korea, I had barely graduated from college. It was a three-year program. Regular universities are four-year programs. Unlike South Korea where you can go to a good school with talent, North Koreans have to bribe their way into good schools. If you have a lot of money, you may not be able to go to a university, but you could at least get admitted to a Central University. Although it's a different story whether you can get good grades once you're there. There are many kids in North Korea who study hard and try to go to a good college. If you're getting good grades in school, you could make it to a good college without the bribes. But the students whose grades are not as good will almost always have to bribe their way into college. The vocational college that I went to is not the best school out there. I had relatives who left for South Korea before me, so I had very little chance of success in North Korean society. I took the college entrance exam anyway thinking I could beat the test with my skills, and I made it in. Sure, I could have gone to a better school had I paid bribes... but that's how most things are in North Korea.

Even after graduating from vocational college, I didn't get a job for some time. Once I graduated high school or vocational college, I was certified as an eligible worker. There is a Ministry of Labour in North Korea, where they keep those certification documents. As a graduate, I had no affiliation so that made me truant, so the Ministry started telling me to get a job. Then I had to get employed somewhere without my consent. I had to start working wherever the state wanted to assign me. If I stayed jobless for more than six weeks, I would get registered as

unemployed. Remaining in unemployment status for one year is punishable by a sentence of one year at a Labour Training Camp. The unemployed are rounded up by the state. The implication is that, if you don't work you will be made to work at a Labour Training Camp. So you may not be assigned to the job of your choice, but you will get a job independent of your will. One does get to change jobs. Finding a workplace or getting a corporate job, it's all dependent on your qualifications. By qualifications, I mean having "connections" or money.

It's true that there is no freedom in choosing one's career in North Korea, but that depends on the situation. Let's say I want to get a great job, say like at the provincial Workers' Party office. That, I do not get to choose. There are cadres in the provincial Workers' Party and office worker positions mainly for women. These women are there so that they can support the cadres. They type, print and submit files. It could be considered clerical work by South Korean standards. There is no choosing when it comes to getting hired for these positions. In North Korea, you can get hired to a good workplace if you have money, strong connections, or a pretty face in case you're a girl. But those who are poor, don't get to have such life choices. I think those who say that there is no freedom of job choices in North Korea say so because of these aspects.

You could get just about anything in North Korea with money and bribes. If you want to get into the provincial Workers' Party, you need to go through the Provincial Workers' Party Academy<sup>1</sup>. Even if I don't have any credentials to back me up, I could bribe the "Cadre Department" in the provincial Party academy and get a seat there. You need money to get this done, and this would be quite beyond reach if you didn't have the

<sup>1</sup> Educational institutions located in each province for educating and retraining members of the Party, government agencies, and workers' organisations in the province.

money. Working at the provincial Workers' Party office is like working as a public official here in South Korea – except you don't have to take a test. As I said, one needs to graduate from the academy in order to get a job in the provincial Workers' Party office. I guess you could say there is a test since you have to graduate from the academy first. Enrolment at the academy does not automatically make you a Party worker. When entering the provincial Workers' Party, women are qualified based on their looks. The reason for this is because there are these different departments in the provincial Workers' Party, and these departments need clerks. Clerks need to be at work with male cadres, and so their appearances matter a lot. That's why they only screen women with good looks. But then, you don't need academic credentials to become a clerk. If you're smart or pretty in the eyes of the cadres, you'll get the job.

In North Korea, women only get to wear pleated slacks. You don't get to wear jeans or leggings. It has to be slacks with pleats. Also in North Korea, you could have your phone monitored at a spot-check in the middle of the street. These spot checks are carried out by the Youth League. Women, by the way, are registered to the Youth League prior to marriage. Then after marriage, they are registered to the Women's League. They have what's called an "Inspection Unit" (*gyuchaldae*) in the Youth League that does these. I used to work as a member of the Inspection Unit in school. I wanted to wear those clothes myself, but I was in charge of monitoring the people who wore them. If caught, you are escorted to the Youth League building. There your trousers are scissored below the knees so that they are beyond repair. If you have dyed your hair, they will cut that too. I once had my hair dyed, and I used to pull up the hood of my jumper

over my head in case I saw an Inspection Unit from afar. I was so sick of it all. The trousers can be very expensive, and they would still tear up a fine new pair of trousers... It's not like they were going to get me a new pair.

But you wouldn't be sent to a detention facility for your clothes. They only regulate clothing out of formality. They do so because it is Kim Jong-un's orders. There are no punishments per se unless you are caught watching South Korean television shows. North Koreans watch a lot of Chinese television shows as well. Most of the foreign shows are from China. There is a difference between shows made in North Korea and in a foreign country. For one thing, there's the difference between capitalism and communism. China may say that it's a communist state, but you can see it is capitalist from their TV shows. Chinese and South Korean TV shows deal with love stories between a man and a woman. North Korean shows, on the other hand, only talk about the "Great Leader Kim Jong-un" and such.

I think that USB drives that are smuggled into North Korea do change minds.

I am young, so I wouldn't know what's in the minds of people in their 30s and 40s. But my friends and I watch South Korean television shows and movies to emulate the romance and entertainment shown on screen.

Before, you'd have people talking behind your back if you were seen holding hands outdoors as a couple. But recently, around the time I was leaving North Korea, there were people holding hands and interlocking arms. Also, I was told that these days when friends hang out, they say "do you want to grab a beer?" This wasn't a thing before. I heard about this from a friend who made it to South Korea very recently, and I told her that I don't recall ever hearing that being said when I was back there. This friend left North Korea maybe 2 years after I did. Those 2 years have already created a lot of change. I think it could be the South Korean TV shows that make people want to imitate that lifestyle. When the "*Descendants of the Sun*" was popular there, it was very popular among young people in North Korea to imitate the way South Korean soldiers speak in the show. I didn't imitate that because it felt awkward. My mom also didn't like that way of talking, and she used to ask what that was all about. Anyhow, young people imitate life on television.

I used to imitate South Korean makeup. We have a lot of lipstick from China coming into North Korea. I started seeing people with softer-coloured lipstick on – shiny pink. I really wanted to try those myself. So I would visit a cosmetics shop and try those colours, but I would just leave it as it is after finding out it wasn't really my colour. Almost nobody puts on red lipstick like they used to in the old days. I think people are following South Korean culture in the way of TV shows. But I feel so bad for ordinary North Koreans. They don't get to wear what they want, say what they want, watch what they want on television. I used to freak out when I saw a police officer here in South Korea. Even now, as I listen to South Korean music, I get confused and start worrying about getting inspected.

In North Korea, I saw people take *bingdu* instead of medicine when they had a cold. Opium is known to be addictive after three injections in intervals. They say that opium will make you feel good, and so you take more opium. That's how we got so many opium addicts. *Bingdu* and opium make people feel good, and I think that's why they do it. In North Korea, *bingdu* is also used if you have a cold or if an elderly person has high blood pressure. In North Korea, children do drugs too. I had a mother and daughter who would do so together. This is common in my hometown. Almost everyone is doing drugs. There are so many of them. If your child is old enough, they join their parents in doing drugs.

Recently, there have been so many people doing drugs. I wonder if this will bring ruin to the whole society. Young people, especially those that are younger than me, are especially into drugs. We are seeing too many kids doing drugs in North Korea these days. They are too young and too susceptible to such things. Given this reality, people worry that the country might decay into chaos. North Korea controls drug use and punishes offenders. A person caught doing drugs can be sent to a Training Camp. Even if caught, you can get away without punishment if you have money. Houses that sell *bingdu* do so with prosecutors or policemen involved in the business. They offer protection. They produce one or two kilograms of *bingdu* at a time, an immense quantity, and package it for sale. These productions are done in the Hamhung region. I've been told that even high school students take *bingdu* in Hamhung.

Between South Korea and China, I feel a closer affinity to China as I could see the Chinese side of the border being born and raised near the Yalu River border. I've never lived in China, so I personally want to visit there as a tourist. I've been around

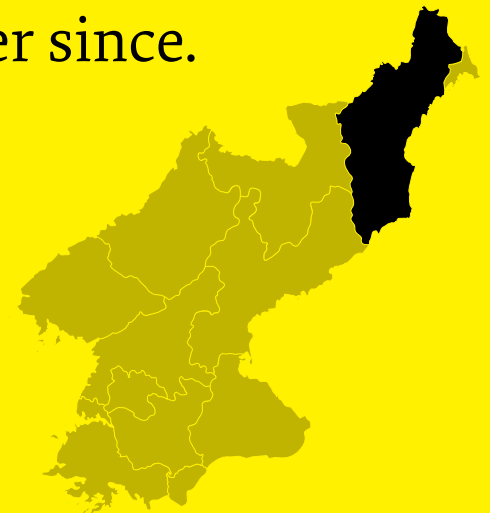


it for so long, so I want to go there one day. On the other hand, I was ignorant about South Korea to the extent that I remember discovering that South Koreans eat kimchi, just like North Korea, while watching their television shows. Maybe that's why I feel closer to China. I want to visit there someday. It's not just me, but my whole family wants to travel to China which they could only see from afar. I think this is because we feel closer to China.

Voice  
38

Repatriation and State Surveillance

Hello, my name is Lee Hyong-suk. I left North Korea in the middle of 2018 and reached South Korea in the same year. I was born in North Hamgyong Province, and I lived there ever since.



Hello, my name is Lee Hyong-suk. I left North Korea in the middle of 2018 and reached South Korea in the same year. I was born in North Hamgyong Province, and I lived there ever since.

I tried escaping once, a few years before I made it to South Korea. I was staying in China when I got caught in an inspection and sent back to North Korea. I had to live a prison sentence at a Reform through Labour Camp. Because of my history of having been to China, I was put under surveillance. They wanted to monitor me in case I ran off to China again. I had a State Security officer monitoring me, as well as a State Security informant. The informant is a regular citizen who is told by a State Security officer to spy on people like me in exchange for tax cuts. An informant is taking on his duty to spy on other people because of the economic benefit. A State Security officer will often ask the informant, in private, to look out for someone or report when you see anything suspicious about the person. Tax cuts are similar to how taxation works here in South Korea, but not really. It's just the state taking money with different kinds of justifications.

In principle, I wasn't supposed to know that I had a snitch on me, but I did find out about it by chance. One day I was walking down the street, and I saw this woman smiling at me. She gave haircuts to men at a warehouse. I had no idea why she was smiling, as she didn't know me. I just walked past her without questioning why. A few days later, I received a guest at home who was also under surveillance by the Ministry of the State Security. I got some food from the market to treat this house guest and was on my way back home. I was walking upstairs because I lived in a flat building. It was there when I bumped into that woman from the barbershop. I thought to myself, "what is this woman doing here?" She looks at me and says hello. I tried to walk past her after

greeting her back, but then she asked me if I was having guests at home. Let's just say she wasn't very smart about what she was doing. It was then that I was certain she was an informant for the Ministry. I asked her, "What's it to you? Why do you care?" And she said that she was just curious about who was visiting. For me, that gave away what was going on. So I went ahead and asked her directly whether she was sent by a State Security officer. And she denied it, saying that's not what this is about. I told her, "Go tell your officer. I don't enjoy this. Do a better job at surveillance." The woman who was supposed to be spying on me was clumsy enough to confront me with questions. I had my suspicions, but her questions gave me a clear picture of what was happening. Later, I told the State Security officer about that woman, asking whether she was being told to spy on me. The officer was clearly taken by surprise, and he asked me where I was getting this from. So I snapped back, saying "You should get a smarter person to get the job done."

In North Korea, it's common for the Ministry of State Security to have citizens spy on others.

Those put under surveillance are mostly people like me – people who have been to China.

In my hometown, there weren't all that many people that had been to China. It was far from the Chinese border. It's

a three-to-four hour's drive to the border. There were maybe a handful of people who had been to China in my town. That's why surveillance was even stronger on people like me. I had a police officer, a State Security officer, his informant, and the People's Unit leader watching me. I had surveillance at the workplace too. It wasn't the company itself that was spying on me, but the secretary of the Youth League or the Secretary of the Corporation would visit me often. In this way, they would have someone else spy on me instead. The police station didn't bother me too much. It's mostly the Ministry of State Security. The police station will interrogate people rather than spy on them. They interrogate people that are found at fault. Suspicious people are handled at the Ministry of State Security. Anything that is even mildly political is handled at the State Security Ministry. It is the job of the police station to arrest criminals and to handle civilians who get in a fight. It is the job of the Ministry to spy on people like me.

The People's Unit Leader only gives out warnings but not direct surveillance. I was the only person in the People's Unit who was under surveillance. At first, the State Security officer didn't make the People's Unit Leader spy on me. I had some family issues, so my neighbours knew that I was having a difficult time psychologically and economically. Perhaps out of suspicion that I could have a change of heart because of my hardship, the State Security officer told the Unit Leader to start spying on me. Usually, they are told to "watch out for" such and such a person. A People's Unit Leader receives instructions not just from the Ministry and the Police, but also from the party. They are directly under the command of the district offices. District offices come under the People's Committee, by the way. You can consider

these as district People's Committees, which come under the City Committees which fall under Provincial Committees. People's Committees are administrative institutions. They are like county or city governments in South Korea.

There are members of the People's Unit who are directed by the police station to watch over other people. I don't remember what the official name was, but we called them "police spies." These are not police officers. I think we also called them "police watchers," or just "spies." These people are not always doing surveillance work but make a report to the police station when they see something suspicious about a person. I remember hearing that they write a daily report of some kind at the police station. My understanding is that there's at least one person who does this in every People's Unit. We have a rough idea about who might be the snitch, though I'm not so sure about the People's Unit that I was in.

There were 28 households, and there was no spying on anyone. Maybe they keep a lookout for escaping residents in the border regions, but not in my region. Also, I don't know so much about ground houses, but people living in a flat such as myself didn't really interact with the neighbours so much. Once you close the door behind you, you're pretty much on your own – similar to South Korean society. What makes it slightly better than South Korean society are the People's Units that hold these meetings for the neighbours to keep in touch – although the meeting agenda deals with little more than tribute demands from the state. Still, everyone gathers up for these People's Unit meetings. We would see familiar faces in these meetings with 28 household representatives. They call out attendance, so you get to know who lives where - Chol-su and his household at Floor 3, Room 18. Yong-

hui and his household at Floor 3, Room 19. But you only know their faces, and there is no interaction between households.

North Koreans cannot live outside organisations. Everyone belongs to some organisation. I was a member of the Korean Workers' Alliance. Every once a week, we would hold a "Life Review Session." It was usually on Saturdays. Annual Life Review sessions would be scheduled on a specific date. I didn't participate in the Life Review Sessions so much after I became a grownup. "Mutual criticisms" were a thing back in school. In school, I would target my criticism at classmates that were outcasts or that I didn't like. I would stay watchful of his flaws throughout the week in preparation for Saturday's mutual criticism session. When the session is held on Saturday, I would criticise the classmate based on my findings from the past few days. The target of the criticism would be caught off guard, and we would get into fights once the Life Review Session was over. This happened ever so often.

Even during mutual criticisms, I've never heard anyone getting criticised for slanderous actions against Kim Jong-un. I did see a lot of arrests and public trials for people who had seen South Korean television shows – although these were not mutual criticism sessions. The individual taken into custody is detained at a detention centre at the police station or at the 109 Permanent Committee's office. Upon retrieving all the evidence, they will eat you up. Then, a public trial is held before turning the culprit over to the regional police. In my hometown, it was usually the sports stadium where the public trials were held. The accused numbered from a minimum of 10 to sometimes over 30 individuals. The spectators numbered in the hundreds and thousands. Everyone had to sit in at a public trial. The announcements were made

through the People's Unit, telling us when and where to come out since there was a public trial to be held. After the public trial, the accused was sent to the police station for additional interrogation and to receive a sentence. How a public trial works is that they will announce what the accused are charged of out loud to the crowd, saying that it is a criminal offence or that the person is under arrest for that reason. Then they cuff him again to escort him out. They are not so specific as to tell us what the sentence is.

The reason they hold these public trials is so that they can strike fear into the crowd, lest they be also criticised in public. It's fear mongering. It is to show that anyone can be subject to punishment. I stood in a public trial myself after being repatriated from China, so I should know. They made me stand in front of the crowd and criticised me for being a traitor and for damaging the greatness of the state through illegal border-crossing.

There is no freedom of expression in North Korea. It is impossible to criticise the party or Kim Jong-un. It is unthinkable. Some things can be said within the family – like how a certain policy needs to be revised sooner or later. But we couldn't direct the criticism to Kim Jong-un or the party. We cannot do that even among family members, in case anyone's listening.

There is a saying in North Korea -  
"The walls have ears."

You never know  
who might be standing by  
to catch whatever you're saying.

People are very cautious over such topics, even if you are with family, because you never know who is keeping watch outside your doorstep. You cannot even say the name, Kim Jong-un. You always refer to him by the titles “Great General” and “Great Leader.” But still, if I saw someone talking badly of Kim Jong-un in the streets, I wouldn’t report him. It would get him killed. The punishments are severe. Instead of a death sentence, criticising Kim Jong-un or the party will get your family sent away forever – to a Political Prison Camp.

I had a friend I knew from school. Her parents were both sent to a Political Prison Camp while this friend and her older sister were in military service after graduating from school. The problem is that this friend doesn’t know what it is that got her parents sent away. The reasons are not explained to family members when they are sending someone to a Political Prison Camp. By the time this friend and her sister came back from military service, they had no home and no parents. The friend had a step-sister, who thinks it might have had something to do with her father carrying a newspaper of some sort. There were apparently people asking questions about it. Just like that, their parents were gone overnight. I think the daughters were not sent to the Prison Camp, based on the judgement that there was no reason to extend the punishment to the children. Also, the fact that they were daughters and not sons must have been part of the equation.

Voice  
39

Ever-strengthening State Control

Hello, my name is  
Lee Sun-ah.  
I am from  
Chagang Province.  
I left North Korea  
in 2019 and reached  
South Korea in the  
same year.



Hello, my name is Lee Sun-ah. I am from Chagang Province. I left North Korea in 2019 and reached South Korea in the same year.

My hometown is a farming county in Chagang Province. There are farmers, and there are peddlers. It borders China by the Yalu River, so there are people who make a living off of smuggling with China. There are various ways of life there.

The Yalu River that borders the Chagang Province runs deep and wide.

It is difficult to make a river crossing to the Chinese side.

Because of this, I have not yet met a single person from my province here in South Korea. The Tumen River border or the river flowing near Hyesan city is of a width and depth that a person can wade across, but it is much wider and deeper near Chagang Province. Even if there were someone from my home province who made it here, it must have been through Hyesan.

There were many in my hometown who participated in the smuggling trade. We smuggled out plantstuff and fruits to China such as pine nuts, beans, red beans, *chamnamul* herbs, pickled mushrooms, and magnolia berries. The network of stores is so well developed these days and there are many stores in the cities. Since the Chinese trade got cut off, people from the farming villages will sell their crops to buy life necessities. There are those who have a business of reselling such crops in

the marketplace. Certain Chinese products like life accessories, factory-manufactured goods, and clothes are either produced or manufactured in places like Phyongsong or Kaechon in North Korea. There are people who specialise in reselling these goods. A lot of the shoes and clothes are manufactured in North Korea. Imports from China consist of home electronics, life accessories, and oil – things that cannot be manufactured in North Korea. All raw materials technically come from China. For manufacturing shoes and anything of the like, the fabric and other ingredients come from China.

By the time I was left, my hometown wasn't wealthy, but people would get by - foraging berries from the mountains, farming, or running their own business. But I was told recently (early 2022) from friends that things have gotten much tougher than in 2019, which is when I left North Korea. I used to be in the foreign exchange business in North Korea some time ago (in 2009). Things got very hard right after that period, and it was difficult to maintain a living. But I hear that things are worse nowadays.

The money that we send to our family back in North Korea is now all blocked. Smuggling trade with China is entirely prohibited. It is a total lockdown situation, and the foreign currency and food circulating within North Korea are surely not enough to get by. Although North Korea is a farming nation, its terrain is mountainous. And now that we have these different channels blocked, people will struggle trying to make a living purely out of what they have. The lockdown makes things harder. An open border will allow food to come in through the smuggling trade with China, and you could trade foraged berries in North Korea with foodstuff or currency from China. This will allow for

some circulation. Even though officially, nothing is in circulation between China and North Korea, there were illegal circulations taking place. This gave flexibility for people to survive on their own without the government having to pay them money or rations. Now that this is blocked, North Koreans must be struggling to survive.

The smuggling trade was still ongoing in 2019. Money from South Korea was received by the family back then. Even the people in charge of policing those activities would be asking for their share, so that both sides could profit. Now that they've blocked everything, there is no foreign currency. Without foreign currency, there's no foodstuff and no circulation of goods. It's a deadlock where food prices and prices of other life necessities continue to go up. I've been told it's a situation where there are no goods to buy even with money, making it harder for everyone.

So, I support the U.N. providing food to North Korea. I'm in agreement, but I think they shouldn't just stop at giving food to the North Korean government. I don't know how this can be done, but the U.N. should find a way to make at least 20 or 30 percent of the food to be handed directly to the people – although I assume it won't be easy for the U.N. to have a presence in the distribution process. Once they hand it to the government, none of it goes to the people. There are storage chambers in preparation for war, and that's where they pile up all the food. It's for wartime supplies. In the way of rotation, the year's harvest goes into storage and the old grains are taken out. If there's rice coming in via the U.N. or from another place, the rice goes into wartime storage first to be used out of necessity only before the other rice rots away. There is no guarantee that all of the rice coming to North Korea from abroad will go to the hands of the people – maybe a portion. But

I absolutely do not support aiding North Korea with cash. Giving cash is no different from paying them to make nukes. It's better to give foodstuff. Food they won't exchange for anything else.

They say that wiring money from South Korea to North Korea is near impossible nowadays. I was told that the people who used to be in the cash wiring business have all been arrested. That was January or February last year (2021). They had a big crackdown where they arrested about 3,000 people. As a result, we have no one left to play an intermediary role. They were all punished and sent to places like Reform through Labour Camps. The connections have been all severed. Well, there are one or two people who are still in the business. I don't know all the details, but I heard the Ministry of State Security offers them protection in exchange for the names of those who receive wired cash. These days, it's very difficult to fulfil a cash wire without having connections to the Ministry. Among the 3,000 that were arrested, there were civilians, soldiers, the soldiers' families, and brokers and smugglers who were in the business from before.

For those convicted, the level of punishment differs depending on the crime. In North Korea, they don't interrogate criminals by showing them the evidence they've found – as they do in South Korea. Instead, they question about whom the convict was partnering with, whose requests they were taking, and so on. They are told to make a confession on paper. If one's confession shows 20 cases of criminal activities, they will get a sentence in accordance. The sentence can be 2 years for someone with 6 acts of crime, while 3 years for someone who has committed 20 acts of crime – something like that. It also depends on what kind of money the person was handling – whether the money was for a family to survive in difficult times or if it was compensation for

some illicit information.

Most North Koreans who have reached South Korea are here because they had difficulty making a living back there. That's why South Koreans tend to think that everyone from North Korea left because of that reason.

But the way I see it, North Koreans that have escaped the country recently since 2015 have done it so that they can escape their lives stuck in a closed country - in search of freedom, for the future of their children and themselves, more than just survival.

If you have a child growing up in North Korea, it is apparent that the child will live that way forever since North Korea is a closed country. If you're earning a lot of money there, you wouldn't worry so much about survival. But then the majority of people flocking to South Korea nowadays are parents who worry for their child's future. I didn't have it so bad in North Korea myself. But even though my generation can make ends meet, I saw that the Kim Jong-un era was worse than Kim Jong-il's - that the standard of living dropped so miserably. So, I did it for the children. I convinced myself I had to go to South Korea whether I make it or die trying. As I came to South Korea, I saw that I wasn't the only one. There were many others sharing the same reason for leaving.

Those who spent a long time in China before coming over

to South Korea are among the group of people who crossed the Chinese border during the Arduous March after Kim Il-sung's death, or those whose livelihoods became difficult after the monetary reform in North Korea. There were people dying from starvation back then, so they figured it would be worth crossing the Chinese border or die trying. A lot of them got married in China and made a living there before coming to South Korea much later. But the people coming to South Korea nowadays do so because there are too many restrictions and control over life in the Kim Jong-un era, so they don't see a future ahead. You could say they come to seek freedom, in a sense. Now we have people who change their minds because of their children. I met a number of families like that as I was coming to South Korea. They are coming to ensure the future of their children. North Korea is a country where one cannot imagine travelling abroad. I could bear living like that in my generation, but it is too grim to think that my children will live that way.

When in North Korea, I couldn't imagine myself travelling abroad, but I thought perhaps I may be able to visit China since it was right in front of my eyes. As I left North Korea, I went through China, Laos, and Thailand, and reached South Korea via plane. That's when I thought it was a good idea that I made this choice for my children. It was a difficult trip, but my children are able to roam free. There are many that come to South Korea for that reason.

Frankly speaking, it's easier to make a living in North Korea. To be exact, I mean that you can make good money and live a comfortable life in North Korea if you can read the trends and are quick to act. When I first came to South Korea, I had to get a job and then work a full month to get paid. Then I pay for bills -



housing, maintenance, phone, etc. and I am not left with much. Month by month, living is difficult. But living in Korea, I can see that even if life is hard at the moment, if I lay a foundation for my children, they will be able to live free. That's what matters. Life is not all about money, is it? Here, everything is so free, and people get to do what they want. Young people get to enjoy themselves while they are young. That is not possible in North Korea.

After Kim Jong-il's death, it was Kim Jong-un who made a sudden appearance and started visiting villages, taking commemorative photographs, and visiting children to portray himself as a benevolent ruler. It seemed at first, he was relaxing the rules. But then the rules got tightened all of a sudden. Before, it used to be the Ministry of State Security that was powerful, but now there's the Workers' Party institution on top of the Ministry, the police, and the prosecutors. The party institution is the strongest of them all. The chief prosecutor, the Minister of State Security, and the police chief all cower before the party institution. The party is at the top. The party institution was still powerful back in Kim Jong-il's time, but they've gotten stronger and are imposing stronger restrictions. Seeing Kim Jong-un meet the U.S. president and visit China, people felt that there were jobs to be created and money to be made from the interactions and negotiations. But after Kim Jong-un's trips abroad, the party started reminding people not to get delusional – in their lectures held twice a week. They would remind us of that on multiple occasions. They said the U.S. and China are both hostile nations.

It may appear that China and North Korea are on good terms, but domestically, the party propaganda tells North Korean people to see China as an enemy. It's obviously worse with South Korea and the U.S., but they don't want to have people fantasising

about China. Nowadays, they don't even let us watch Chinese movies and TV series. They used to let us watch their TV shows back in the day, but not anymore. For instance, there are TV series with subtitles in South Korean language. But now it's not even just the South Korean subtitles, but the North Korean subtitles too. This is because the living standards are so much different between North Korea and what is portrayed in a Chinese TV series. They are afraid that people might start dreaming about it. For a South Korean series, people are sentenced to one year at a Reform through Labour Camp for every hour that they've watched the show.

Access to foreign culture is also blocked. Watching foreign TV shows would mean that people are accepting the culture, since they get to know that people in other countries live in a certain way.

It's been a long time since North Koreans found out that South Koreans and Chinese have it better. For instance, North Koreans didn't have a coffee-drinking culture before. Now North Koreans drink coffee and tea. They have adopted the South Korean drinking culture of going for "first round" and "second round" when drinking. But only a few people can adopt that lifestyle. Watching the shows would get people aspiring to what they see. They might feel resentment and leave North Korea to head to South Korea. That's why such things are prohibited. Nowadays, people can get arrested for watching even Chinese

TV shows – regardless of what kind. Just one year before I left the country, there were 5 kids in maybe second-grade of middle school who were arrested for watching “Butterfly Lovers” – a Chinese TV series. Two of them were sent to a Reform through Labour Camp. One was sentenced to ten years, and the other to eight years of reform through labour – just for watching the show. That didn’t stop people from watching such shows, but they make sure they don’t get caught. I watched such shows when I was in North Korea. If just one person is caught, she will start spilling name after name of who influenced her. Even then, it wouldn’t be all of those names that get arrested. The people who can slip away will do so while the poor and powerless will be arrested. Everybody watches the shows. They all do. It’s just that the people who get caught will be caught in a pickle.

Comparing Chagang and Ryanggang Provinces, the standard of living is higher in Ryanggang – especially in Hyesan city. Also, I was told that in Ryanggang Province the gap between the rich and the poor is larger. It’s not so evident in Chagang Province. This is because, in Chagang Province, there are people working in munitions factories for a living. One person may have a job in the munitions factory while the spouse may have a sideline job such as doing business at a marketplace. Perhaps that’s why the rich-poor gap is not so bad. There is a gap, to be sure. But it’s not as bad as the other provinces.

There are many that just get by in North Korea. These people work as porters or as day-labourers in other households. The small amount of money they make is what they spend to buy food for the day and feed kids at home. There are so many people that live like the homeless and beggars in South Korea. There is no state support or care for the elderly or the *kotjebi* children. They

do have orphanages and nursing homes in operation. Orphanages are for captured homeless children, which the children find any excuse to run away from. It is because life there is too restricted, and the children are treated badly. Those children used to live free. They are pitch black, unable to wash or feed themselves, but they prefer to roam free, I think. As for nursing homes, one needs to be qualified to be able to get in. You have to have made some big contribution to the country, and you are not supposed to have more than two sons. There are these conditions you need to meet. My understanding is that there are not many elderly people who can meet that bar. There are these large buildings serving as nursing homes and orphanages in each province and region. They don’t get supported directly from the central government and are made to be built and operated locally – by province or by region. North Koreans consider it a great honour to have Kim Jong-un come down to your region for an inspection. I used to think that way in earnest when I was there.

Opium is not used much in Chagang Province. Opium is mostly gone, now that people are forbidden to plant it. There are some elderly people who still grow poppies in small quantities in the mountains or some unseen location. *Bingdu*, on the other hand, is frequently consumed. Opium is consumed by a small few, so maybe about 0.1% of the population would be smoking opium. *Bingdu* can be said to be relatively easy to obtain, so a lot of people do it. Anyone can buy *bingdu*, given they have the money. You could say pretty much everyone in the North and South Hamgyong Provinces as well as Hyesan in Ryanggang Province has smoked *bingdu*. The situation in Chagang is not nearly as bad, as you can say maybe 70% of the adults may have smoked *bingdu* once in their lifetime. But I’ve never seen anyone who

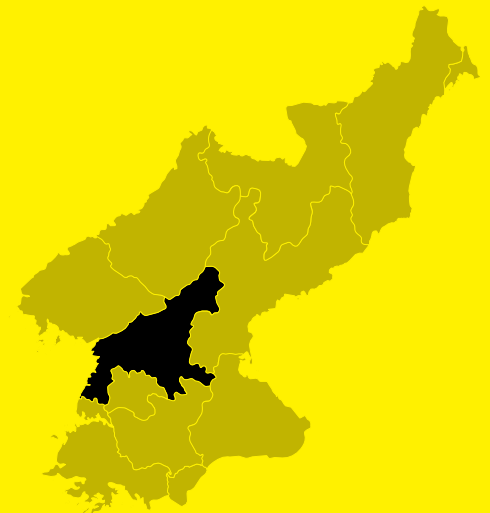
could be considered a drug addict. Most of them are one-time users who do so out of curiosity. The elderly may use *bingdu* as medication when they have a stroke or paralysis. Turns out you can treat paralysis with it. *Bingdu* is taken in a different way when used as medication.

The people in Chagang Province started using drugs from the early-to-mid 2000s. North and South Hamgyong Provinces had a lot of drug usage from before that. Drugs are expensive, so there is an economic side to it. Drug use does tend to go down when life gets hard. The state also placed restrictions on drug use. People tend to think twice, since the punishment can be death. Before, people used to share drugs among themselves. But now, with the crackdowns, they do drugs in secrecy. That was how things were when I left.

Voice  
40

Undercover Informants

Hello, my name is  
Jang Ok-yong.  
My hometown is  
in South Pyongan  
Province.  
I left North Korea in  
late 2018 and made  
it to South Korea in  
mid-2019.



Hello, my name is Jang Ok-yong. My hometown is in South Pyongan Province. I left North Korea in late 2018 and made it to South Korea in mid-2019. I lived there for a long time, but then I had to move to North Hamgyong Province due to some family business.

I once worked as an informant for the Ministry of State Security while living in North Hamgyong Province.

I was in charge of collecting intel without letting anyone know about it. I was a spy. I remember being told to report on the civilian attitudes toward Jang Song-thaek's execution. It was an order from the Ministry. I did a lot of reporting on how people felt about it. Most of the people were in agreement with the execution. The cadres said that it was a bold decision, saying that the Kim family cannot have bad apples. Jang Song-thaek was married into the Kim family - but since he was executed for some wrongdoings, people said it was a good thing. I didn't hear anything negative being said about the execution. My job was to spot negative statements being made among the people and shed light on those. But I didn't hear any. Instead, people were aligned with the execution saying that those executed were corrupt. A summary of my intelligence report would have been that the execution was a good idea.

The reason I could become an informant for the Ministry was because my family had a good upbringing. Plus, I'm from another part of the country. On top of this, I didn't have any

direct family members who had fled to South Korea or China. My record was clean, and so were the people around me. I was good with people, so I had a lot of intel I could source from the network of people I knew.

I used to have separate interview sessions with the State Security officer. Each region in North Korea has an assigned State Security officer. The officer would visit my house every now and then. I'm sure there was another informant who would report on me. It was one of those days when the officer first said he wanted to talk to me - alone. I felt something was off. But in North Korea, one must be on good terms with people like State Security officers and police officers - especially if you were in the merchandising business such as myself. You need travel permits to visit another region, and you can have them issued with ease if you have good connections. So, when the officer wanted to meet me in person, I thought I should at least hear what he had to say. It was most unexpected when the officer offered me a job. You never know when you might get in trouble throughout your life, and by working for the Ministry you could be free of consequences. He also told me that he could issue travel permits on his own accord since I was a travelling merchant who needed to be on frequent trips. I understand that in South Korea, you can travel anywhere as long as you have the money. But in North Korea, you need to have a travel permit. Anyways, that was the deal. As a businesswoman, I felt the price was right. And so I agreed. Afterward, I learned what I had to do. After a year, they gave me a code name. it was so that I could work undercover without others knowing about me. I was technically a spy.

The first thing I learned was to write case files. I was told to write the time, place, people, and what had happened in a

detailed report. The Ministry regularly provided me with pieces of paper for me to write on. I had to get training in the Ministry a few times, under the guise that I was travelling somewhere for business. I had to sign an oath, of course. I was mostly active from 2010 – by the time Kim Jong-un came into power. I was active until I left the country, and even my daughter didn't know about it. I could cross the Chinese border because I felt that I would have another chance to live even if I got caught. It gave me courage.

In North Korea,  
there is no way of knowing who is spying on whom.

I was an undercover informant myself,  
but no one around me knew  
I was spying on people.

It would have been the end of me, had my identity been revealed. I spied on my family, on friends, on everyone near me. If they found out about it, I would have been severed from all human connections. That was all the more reason to be careful. I had to act discreetly. But then there are those who openly spy on other people, as Ministry informants. They are ordinary citizens too.

Being in the informant business for so long, you start to develop a hunch. You get a sense when you see another undercover informant. Because, just like me, they get a lot of

visitors at home. Also, it's rare for people to be travelling outside their region, so most are not familiar with the due process. Travel permits are hard to get. You need to go through the travel office, the People's Unit leader, the police officer in charge, etc. Money will expedite the process, but that only means that you need to go through all these complexities to get a permit without money. Those who look like they might be undercover informants tend to get travel permits easily, just like me. I would also see the state Security officer visit the person's home from time to time, just like how he frequented my home. Seeing all this made me think that she must be doing the same work I do.

It is customary to meet face to face with a State Security officer to get verbal instructions. I had a mobile phone and a landline at home. The officer would call me via the landline. He would tell me where and when to meet him. The officer was working from a place maybe 3 to 5 minutes away from my home. His office was inside the People's Hospital. I would pretend to be a patient making a visit to the doctor when I was meeting the State Security officer. The place is designed in such a strange way. State Security officers have their offices located in ordinary public facilities and institutions instead of having one inside the Ministry building. Mine had his room inside a hospital, and only undercover informants like me knew of this. I would visit there every month to get instructions. Sometimes, there was an urgent need to submit a quick report. Then I would use the postbox placed near the office room, where I would slip the document in and leave.

Instructions vary depending on the year and the occasion. If the occasion is 15 April (Kim Il-sung's birthday), I have to collect civilian attitudes related to this occasion. If it is 16 February

(Kim Jong-il's birthday), they require civilian attitudes on that. Close to where I lived, we had buildings for the county-level Farmers League, the Women's League, and the Youth League. I was also told to collect rumours that may give us leads to a corruption case by frequenting a restaurant that the people there patronised. Instructions to collect civilian attitudes will be made around major holidays, but the task is different every time. Around Kim Jong-un's Birthday on 8 January, for instance, we are made to collect intel on whether anyone appears dissatisfied with the celebrations. If we spot someone saying, "Our leader is young. How come we celebrate his birthday?", we will report that person. The Ministry is asking for such information.

There was another file that I received in maybe 2015. It was an updated version. I kept the file in my home wardrobe. It contains all the necessary instructions required for us to do our job. It's something we should know at all times. There was a lot of information, such as a "civilian report on workers sent abroad." As I went through the file, I started to realise that everyone around me had to be put under surveillance at the end of the day. At some point in time after reading that file, I started growing a distaste for the undercover informant work.

The files listed my family as having been put under surveillance.

Spying on friends and relatives was nothing out of the ordinary.

All this was quite beyond me. Strictly speaking, all those under a surveillance program were meant to be put in jail. What shocked me the most was something else. There was an instruction that said, "Keep a close eye on those among ordinary citizens who express discontent with the republic for being an isolationist regime and a dictatorship." Looking at it made me think, "Wait, does that mean the regime admits itself to be an isolationist regime and a dictatorship?" Receiving that file in 2015 gave me ideas. I was in the undercover informant business for so long that it started to confuse me.

I like to read books. I used to read on the subject of history while in North Korea, including the isolationist policy of the king regent Heungseon Daewongun of the former dynasty. There are many books in North Korea. One can buy books with money if they want. It's just that people don't care so much about books. But if you have a love for books, you can buy them for your own reading pleasure. I had some spare cash which allowed me to buy books with ease. Korean history is taught differently between North and South Korea. North Korean history speaks badly of Yi Seong-gye, the progenitor of the former dynasty, for becoming a king himself. They mention Heungseon Daewongun for his isolationist politics. We have books on Empress Min and on Jeong Bong-jun. This is why the word "isolationist" left an impression on me – because I knew about history.

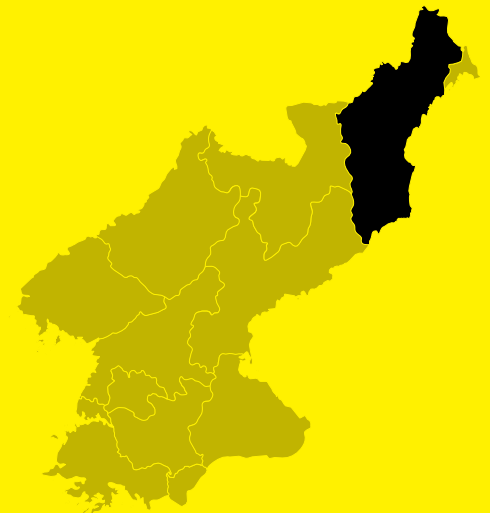
People have no discontent with Kim Jong-un. They take him for granted. People are brainwashed from an early age that the Kim family must continue its lineage, and that they are great men. There is no discontent on that part. Instead, people do say that our country must also go through reform and change. They do express discontent at having to live that way forever. But the

people are told that the situation is caused by the U.S. and South Korea. The people, trusting their government, believe that the U.S. and South Korea are to blame for the hardships they face. This way, they are not particularly dissatisfied with the regime itself. But I started having different thoughts as I could access a variety of information as part of this surveillance work. Later, I started wondering if the hardships were a result of the regime being a dictatorship. My diligence in the undercover informant work got me ideas and questions which led me to have a change of heart regarding the country. That became the impetus for me to escape.

Voice  
41

Prolonged Stay-over in China

Hello, my name is  
Kang Min-ji.  
I was born in North  
Hamgyong Province.  
I left North Korea  
more than 20 years  
ago, in 1999 to  
be exact. I entered  
South Korea in 2015.



Hello, my name is Kang Min-ji. I was born in North Hamgyong Province. I left North Korea more than 20 years ago, in 1999 to be exact. I entered South Korea in 2015. I spent more than 15 years in China.

There was an incident that made me decide I had to leave North Korea. I fell ill with tuberculosis in the late 1990s. I was very sick back then. I had to be carried across the border as I left the country. I lived near the border. A 40- or 50-minute walk would take me to China. Back then, it was common for people to visit China and return on the same day. It was right around the time when rations stopped. Even with the ration stations empty, there was a separate spot behind the station where you could get some rations. That's how I managed little by little, but that's also how I got sick and constantly had a common cold. I got many penicillin shots, but after a while, I had to visit the hospital to learn that I had tuberculosis. There was a separate ward for tuberculosis patients. It was on a mountain about a 10-li climb up the slope. It was called a "tuberculosis clinic." Patients are treated there separately because of the contagions. That clinic was for the more serious patients. Some would end up dying. They would give me a pill every time. That's when things got difficult for me because I was selling off household property to get treatment.

That village had so many people in the smuggling business that you could say the smuggling trade happened every other day. That way, we had better access to outside information than the people living in inland regions. We listened to the radio too. I don't remember what broadcasts we listened to. I think we listened to South Korean radio most of the time because the radio could pick up the South Korean channel. Those radios were all from China. The Chinese have such tiny radios. I remember how

I used to pick up different things from my friends' conversations even though I wasn't interacting so closely with them.

Going to China puts you at an advantage – economically and otherwise. I cooked a nice meal for the officers at the Border Guards to ask for a broker to let me cross the Chinese border. I also promised them I will give them at least 100 Chinese yuan if I make it to the other side. That's how I got to China. I did so because I couldn't get treatment in North Korea. One pill per visit wasn't going to get me anywhere. Once I made it across, I could get proper treatment thanks to a friend who introduced me to a doctor. It took me about a year to get better.

I stayed in Yanbian when I first left North Korea. I crossed the border from Saebjol County (present-day Kyongwon County) which neighbours Hunyung and Onsong to the north and Rajin (present-day Rason) to the south. I assumed there would be something on the other side once I crossed the river from Saebjol. But the distance was much further than I thought. I had to cross two more dikes. I only reached the Chinese side by dusk. By luck, the first house that I went to had a friend I knew. The Border Guards that were helping me told me to find a house with a thatched roof. So I went into the first thatched-roof house I could find, and it was occupied by a North Korean woman married to a Chinese man. I happened to know the woman. I didn't realise it until I saw her there. It had been about 2 years since she had made it to China. That's how I was saved. I couldn't believe my luck. As soon as we recognized each other, she asked me what brought me there. I asked back, what she was doing here. I was shivering under clothes soaking wet at the time. It's a small world and you never know it. I was so amazed, and thankful.

I moved to Hunchun in China and saw that there were



many people like me who had made it across. I spent about three years in Yanbian. The reason I stayed there was to make money and support my family in North Korea. I sent my family small amounts of money about three times before I had to leave for Qingdao. It was in Yanbian, though, where I saw so many North Koreans. There was a big church in Yanbian. I lived in a small shelter that was operated by the church. I could get medication and treatment there for about a year and a half.

One day, I had to leave with the church people who told me we were going to Yantai. They told me to pack all of a sudden. I couldn't help wondering what it was all about. Now that I think of it, I think the church was sending people over to South Korea after gathering a certain number of people. But since leaving North Korea, I hadn't thought of going to South Korea to that point. I was just trying to get treatment in China and head back to North Korea. Back then I was simply trying to get by with whatever I had in my means, so I wasn't really thinking of going to South Korea and starting a new chapter in life or anything like that. As I was recovering, I felt I had to save some money for myself before heading back. That's why I started cleaning work at a nursing home run by the church – trying to save some money. But the church had plans for me to go to South Korea. That's how there were two of us from my church who headed out. I knew nothing about my companion. We took a train ride to Yantai.

Once on the train, I saw that we had tickets for a sleeping car. I heard that there are less inspections on sleeping cars. I think the idea was to pay a little bit more for the tickets and take the safe route. As I looked around in the sleeping car, I saw that there were about ten men and women – all North Koreans. But we all pretended to be strangers. We boarded the train at different

stations but it turned out we were all North Koreans in a single train car. That's how I knew we were all headed the same way. We arrived at Yantai and transferred to a ship. We were told to get off the ship at 15-minute intervals, so my companion and I decided to get off last. We got off the ship to find no one there other than the two of us. As it turns out, only the two of us were saved from the inspection. All others had been caught by the police. As they were getting off the ship, that's where they were arrested. I wasn't arrested as I was the very last person to get off the ship. My other companion was a man. We split paths there and then. I went to Qingdao, got married, and spent many years there. I attained Chinese citizenship after more than ten years of living in China.

I didn't stay in China for all those years after my first escape. I was repatriated once, in the early 2000s. I was caught in Yanbian and was sent to the Tumen Border Guards. There was a holding facility. I saw that it was a very large facility. They were all North Koreans there in great numbers. I stayed with the Tumen Border Guards for 14 days before getting repatriated. They didn't send all of us over at once. I was sent to the Onsong customs office (in North Korea). Upon arrival, I was sent straight to the holding facility in Onsong. I spent about two months there. The time spent there differs for each person. If the people from your home region show up quickly enough, you will leave the holding facility earlier than others. I asked someone leaving the facility to send word to my family since they were doing well. That person was actually not planning to stop by, but their car broke down somewhere near my home, so she did end up sending word to my family. That's how my family learned where I was held and bribed someone in the Social Security Ministry to escort me out. I could leave the holding facility quickly because of this. Otherwise, I

could have spent another three or four months there. I returned home and got interrogated in my hometown. The interrogation was done by the Social Security Ministry.

I never saw or experienced any beatings after repatriation. But they had some spectacular curses to throw at me. I would be cursed for not standing up straight. I had a tougher time than the others because I was wearing jeans when I was being repatriated from China to North Korea. Jeans are comfortable. That was my only pair of trousers, and I was repatriated to North Korea while wearing them. As a result, the police officer would curse at me every time he saw me. And it was really something... They would curse at me because jeans are American. They didn't take away the jeans or make me wear something else. Anyways, they made me stand like that and asked me about the trousers I was wearing. I told them they were jeans. Hearing that, they criticised me for wearing them and started throwing curse words about the U.S. Jeans have been taboo in North Korea for a long time now. but I didn't think through my choice of clothing as I was getting repatriated, so I was wearing whatever I had on me.

But in fact, I wore jeans as work clothes in North Korea. My hometown was in the border region, so a lot of the goods came in from China, which means it was more open-minded than some of the other regions. These taboos had less of an impact in my hometown compared to the inland regions where it's simply unacceptable for someone to be wearing jeans. There was this difference in attitudes between people from the border regions, as compared to people from the inland regions. I felt it too. The inland people were not knowledgeable about foreign cultures or information – for obvious reasons. People only started crossing the Chinese border and engaging in the smuggling trade from

the 1990s. The trade was booming in the 1990s.

In China, I saw that there were many people from North Korea. It was that way in the town where I lived in the 2010s. The Chinese families that live with these women from North Korea had a tendency to think that the women might run off to South Korea. That's why the households with some money would create Chinese IDs for the women. I had a Chinese ID which allowed me to live in the country. There are some North Korean girls who work hard and live a decent life in China. But they are the exception, not the norm.

North Koreans in China want to come to South Korea if they can, but are unable to find help.

They cannot find a broker who would arrange that.

I never saw a single North Korean man living in China. It was all women. There is an ethnic Korean neighbourhood near the Mudanjiang River in Heilongjiang Province. They even have a department store for ethnic Koreans in the city centre. From there, the street stretched from the 3rd block to the 11th block which were all occupied by ethnic Koreans. I intentionally lived away from that neighbourhood, though. I lived in the Han Chinese neighbourhood that was way down the street. I didn't want people talking about me. But at the end of the day, I had to

move to the ethnic Korean neighbourhood because of my child's school. Once I moved, I found out that there were so many North Korean women... so many of them. But I kept away from them because I figured it would be better if we didn't know about one another. They were there illegally, you see. If the Chinese police caught them, they would've all been repatriated to North Korea. They all live according to luck.

I didn't have a Chinese ID while living there. One time, I was visited for the census survey. It was around the time when my child was still crawling on fours. A police officer came to visit me and asked me for my ID. I said I didn't have one. He asked me about the child's father. I told him that my husband went to South Korea for a job. My husband in China was an ethnic Korean. We lived away from each other at the time. So, I told him frankly about my situation. The police officer didn't say much about it. He didn't arrest me but told me to leave his district. So, I had to move out. I moved to another region, a rural village. I think I must have moved maybe 12 times in China alone.

Anyways, I found that there were many North Korean women in China. There probably are still more. I saw too many of them in China, so don't get me started on how many there are in Yanbian alone. People usually cross the Chinese border because of their difficult lives. In my parent's generation, there were those who went to visit relatives who were living as Korean Chinese citizens in China. There are those who leave behind North Korea due to economic reasons, but the friends I knew left for other reasons too. At the end of the day, interacting with China does widen your horizon as you experience new things. Then there are people like me who listen to the radio and think there is more to the world. You get the sense that the world thinks of North Korea

as a pathetic country. But I didn't know this when I was in North Korea. North Koreans don't know. The current lockdown in North Korea is a related matter. They restrict the number of hours for watching television too.

Most of the others in China were victims of human trafficking.

It's usually the demand for manpower that drives Chinese people to traffic North Korean women into China. Some women are sold to Chinese bachelors who couldn't find a spouse.

A North Korean woman's fate changes depending on where she is trafficked to. But most women become victims of human trafficking in full awareness of this. This is because these women do not have IDs in China. Recently, I met someone here who left North Korea around the same time as I did. She also spent a lot of time in China before reaching South Korea. She told me that she was trafficked to Kunming in southern China. And this person had forgotten almost all of her Korean – perhaps because she had spent so much time in Kunming. She couldn't speak at all. That was the result of her 20 years in China. She forgot Korean, but she also spoke broken Chinese. Anyhow, she could make sense of what we were saying but couldn't say anything in return. Most people who are trafficked across the Chinese border will settle in China in similar ways.

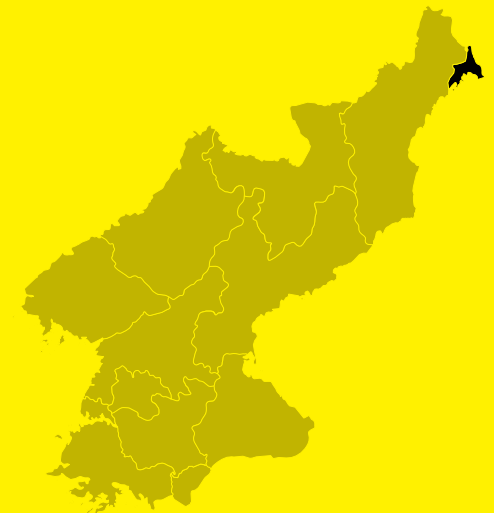
But I was lucky. I was repatriated once, but then I made my way back to China. I met my husband my second time in China, had my child, and lived there until 2014 and 2015 taking care of the kid's education. But there were many people who struggled so much that even I took pity on them. Even so, you still get to keep the money you've earned in China. But there is no money in North Korea. Having a job won't get you money. It's no different from unpaid work. The pretty pennies you get after a month's work will get you only one or two kilograms of rice. These days, rice prices have gone up so much in North Korea, I hear. No matter how difficult your life can be in China, it is still better than living in North Korea – by far, without a doubt. You get to eat your fill in China, to say the least. I'm sure other people from North Korea will have some harsh words to describe the situation in North Korea and other stories to tell.

You see, I experienced repatriation back to North Korea while in China. But even after being repatriated, there were no beatings or torture. When I was at the holding facility, I saw seven children who were caught in China trying to catch a plane to South Korea. They all got seven-year sentences in Reform through Labour Camps. Looking at the boys, I saw that their hair was standing on its own – because of malnutrition. I was so surprised, seeing such a thing for the first time. I mean their hair was standing up towards the sky. I was told it can happen when you are malnourished. They gave us porridge there. People will eat the food they are given even if it's unhusked corn. They will eat food that's gone bad because it's the only thing they can eat, and they will have to be sitting upright for the whole day.

Voice  
42

A World without Opposition

Hello, my name is  
Kim Kang-dae.  
I was born in Rason.  
I left North Korea  
in mid-2017 and  
reached South Korea  
in the same year.



Hello, my name is Kim Kang-dae. I was born in Rason. I left North Korea in mid-2017 and reached South Korea in the same year.

Unlike other regions, the state continued rations in Rason. There were a lot of benefits provided to Rason, being a special economic zone. A person working there would get 3.6 kg of rice and 12 kg of corn every month. But such rations are not enough to feed one person. The wages you get from the workplaces at Rason were higher than in other regions, so it made things slightly better.

An officer (*jidowon*) is like a civil servant here in South Korea. We don't say civil servants in North Korea, nor do we select them based on test scores. It is the state that assigns these officers. South Korea hires people based on certificates and tests, but North Korea doesn't have anything like that. It's the Labour Department under the People's Committee that assigns all the jobs. For instance, municipal Workers' Party officers are usually retired military officers by default. You don't get to choose your assignment like in South Korea. Of course, if you're a party member, you could bribe your way through. Officers working at the Municipal People's Committee have more power than an average citizen and they are treated better. That's why North Koreans refer to party cadres as squeezing the people.

My monthly wage before leaving North Korea was around 40,000 North Korean won. That's very high compared to other regions. A friend of mine who worked as a train conductor in Ryanggang Province, on the other hand, would get paid 1,800 won. That was a 20-fold difference in wages between me and my friend. While I received wages and rations from my workplace, it wasn't enough to feed my family. To come up with a minimum cost of living for a family of four living in North Korea, other than

in Pyongyang, you can start with a daily consumption of 800g of corn flour per person. For a family of four, you will get a monthly consumption of 96 kg. The price of a kilogram of corn flour in 2017 was 1.80 Chinese yuan. One Chinese yuan was equal to 1,250 North Korean won, so that means a family of four requires at least 216,000 won for food alone. This is to say that the wage and rations I was getting was not enough for a single person, let alone to provide for a family of four. Consider how this is coming from me who lived in the city of Rason, whose living conditions were second best only to Pyongyang. You can imagine what it was like for the rest of the country.

There has been no change in the human rights situation between the reign of Kim Jong-il and that of his son, Kim Jong-un.

Now that you mention human rights, I do recall one thing. It was maybe 2013 or 2014 when *Rodong Sinmun* published an article denouncing how the nations of the world speak of human rights and meddle with North Korea's domestic politics while not being able to take care of their own problems themselves. That's how I learned of human rights for the first time. My wife also told me that she heard about human rights during the pre-trial procedure at the police station. She was detained for investigation for about 6 months because she was charged with some crime back then in 2015. There was word spreading among the inmates there that the police cannot beat up people like they used to because the world makes a fuss about human rights. In North Korea, a

person detained for investigation or found guilty is treated as less than a human. Such a person is treated like a dog. Beatings are customary. But by luck, such words were spreading by the time my wife was in, and my wife never had to take a beating during her detainment. I was told that the beatings at the detainment facilities became less prevalent at the time.

I don't think the pre-trial and trial process in North Korea is a fair system at all. Once detained at the police station, a person is pressured to come up with false confessions of a crime that he did not commit. The methods are beatings, keeping them from sleeping, and not giving them enough food. I've never experienced these myself, but I saw someone getting beaten during interrogation while working at the Municipal People's Committee. They would apply blow after blow without mercy, using hand and foot. As for the food, they do provide three meals a day. But what they give out is unwashed and unhusked corn. The quantity is less than two segments of a person's finger. It's served as a porridge with rotten radish leaves and a few grains of salt. It's gone after a few spoonfuls.

I was detained once for saying something wrong. One day I was visited by a friend who asked me for money. I kept telling him I didn't have any, and we got ourselves something to drink. We both got drunk and started fighting. My friend kept asking for money, and I don't remember much, but I must have said that I'll run off to somewhere far away – maybe China – if he continued to bother me. My friend told another person in the town about what I said, and I got reported in the end. For the next week, there were four people from the Worker's Inspection Unit who kept watch over my family in secret. A Worker's Inspection Unit is a team organised out of people picked from different

workplaces by the Ministry of Social Security or the Ministry of State Security. They are made to regulate civilians and even spy on them. I didn't realise I was being spied on at the time but only found out once I was arrested. I was also forced to make false confessions while under detainment.

I've never seen anyone called a "lawyer" in North Korea. I was told that they exist in the code of law, but I could not get any legal representation by an actual lawyer. It is the prosecutor in charge of the case who makes all the decisions. At court, the judge simply reads out what the prosecutor has decided upon investigation. There is no adjudication by the judge leading the trial process and assessing the appropriate sentence. The judge will literally read out what the prosecutor has submitted word for word, and that would be it. Two minutes before the court adjourns, there is a formulaic discussion held between the prosecutor, the judge, the lawyer, and the jury.<sup>❶</sup> But everything has been sorted out by then, and they are just putting up a show like staged actors. Once this is done, the sentence is made. In the course of the trial, one does not get to meet a lawyer, let alone seek help from him. The lawyer only makes that one appearance in court, and that's it. Others have had similar experiences. South Koreans must wonder how that can be possible, but anything is possible in North Korea. It's a complete farce if you ever saw one.

In North Korea, it is not possible to oppose Kim Jong-un or the party. We don't say such things among relatives or with our own children.

❶ Articles 4 to 6 in North Korea's "Court Composition Law" states that any citizen with voting rights is eligible to become a jury member, and that jury selection is made through voting. In reality, only party members are found to be eligible for jury duty. Juries only serve in name only, since opposing the party's decision is punishable as an offence to the state.

If there was someone saying those things among family or relatives, I'm sure people won't hesitate to report it. The system in North Korea is made in a way that makes everyone keep watch over each other. There is a saying that one out of every three people is an informant to the Ministry of State Security. It's a well-known fact. The reason I say so is because my father was an informant to the Ministry himself and spied on neighbours for about 30 years. I didn't know about this at all for those 30 years. As such, you can never tell who is watching you and when. In such a society, it is impossible to criticise the government or organise a demonstration like in South Korea. There are, to be sure, protests held in North Korea. All protests are orchestrated by the state to make statements against the U.S. or South Korea. I was once part of a protest against former presidents Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye of South Korea. At the time, North Korean authorities were spreading propaganda saying that South Korea and the US intended to invade our country and that they disgraced our great leader. When such a protest is to be held, everyone has to gather in an outdoor space like a sports field - the military, the police, the regional branch of the State Security Ministry, regular citizens, and workers alike. Roads are blocked, and we have tens of thousands of people protesting. I had to be there because my workplace made me, according to the party instructions. But anything outside these staged protests, like protesting against the government, is unimaginable. It gives you a cold sweat just thinking about it. The kind of political propaganda that was used in the time of Kim Il-sung is still in use today in North Korea.

The reason North Koreans cannot even dream of protesting is that there are many limitations. For very minor transgressions, you will only be summoned by the Party Committee where they

will denounce you as an ingrate. But anything beyond that will be reported to the Ministry of Social Security or the Ministry of State Security. One miscalculated wording can get you arrested, so people don't even try. There is so much at stake that people won't make an attempt to organise a protest or make public expressions of discontent. A North Korean is indoctrinated about the party and the Kim family from kindergarten. The indoctrination continues for a lifetime. The indoctrination continues at the workplace. Once brainwashed, a person cannot think otherwise. It takes a genius of a person to be able to have subversive thoughts in North Korea.

I think Kim Jong-un is a worse dictator than Kim Jong-il. Kim Jong-un executed his uncle, Jang Song-thaek. He also assassinated his brother, Kim Jong-nam - although I only learned of this after coming to South Korea. People in North Korea still don't know that Kim Jong-nam is dead. If North Koreans found out, they would be livid. The unthinkable has happened. I was more enlightened than the other North Koreans about these circumstances because I could hear radio broadcasts from South Korea with a foreign-imported radio while in Rason. Radios in North Korea are fixed to only certain frequencies, but foreign imports let you channel through different frequencies, so you could listen to South Korean channels. I started listening to South Korean broadcasts to check the weather when I went out fishing in the ocean, but then I got in the habit of it and it changed my mind.

There is a rumour among North Koreans that those who escape to South Korea will be used by the South Korean government for a period of time and then killed afterward. There are many in North Korea who still think South Koreans are dirt

poor and homeless. People in the border regions like Ryanggang and North Hamgyong Provinces know something about South Korea because they've seen their TV shows through the USB drives smuggled from China. I'm assuming maybe more than 90% of the people there know about South Korea. People living further away from the border, on the other hand, are less aware of South Korea. This is because they have no access to information about South Korea. In 2017, I met with a relative of mine who knew nothing about South Korea despite being in his early 30s. One day, I was drinking with him at my place and cautiously told him that South Korea is a wealthy nation. My relatives didn't believe me. He thought it was preposterous. It was natural for him to think that way since nobody talks about South Korea to begin with, because the simple statement about South Korea being wealthy can get you in trouble when heard by the authorities at the Ministry of State Security. People try not to speak of such things, and try not to get curious.

Voice  
43

Hardships of North Korean Women

Hello, my name  
is Kang Jin-ok.  
I was born in  
South Hwanghae  
Province. I crossed  
the Chinese border  
in 2017 and made it  
to South Korea  
after about a month  
travelling across  
the country.





Hello, my name is Kang Jin-ok. I was born in South Hwanghae Province. I crossed the Chinese border in 2017 and made it to South Korea after about a month travelling across the country. My hometown is very close to South Korea. It would take about a 2-hour boat ride. I used to live in my hometown but then moved to Ryanggang Province before I left the country.

A poor couple in North Korea may live with their in-laws in a single room connected to the kitchen. The whole family has to sleep next to one another since it is so cramped. But they all manage to have a living – have children and all. The state doesn't provide housing just because you are a married couple. You need to save up money for a house by running your own business or some other means. Before, people used to live in houses provided by the state. Most of the houses that people inhabit today used to be like that. But after the Arduous March, those houses started to become private-owned. What used to be government housing started getting traded between individuals as they became private property. Before, you couldn't trade real estate without state permission, but now you can without much problem. Each house comes with a permit document saying that the house belongs to such and such, but individuals can buy and sell houses privately. Once the deal is settled among individuals, they will go to the government agency in charge of housing and report the transaction. They bribe the agency to get the document modified.

I had a difficult married life. There were seven people in my household including my parents-in-law and three sisters-in-law. Early in the marriage, the state still used to provide rations. We received husked wheat for rations, but that wasn't enough to live on. Once I gave birth, I had to nurse the child on top of cooking three meals for the family. We never had enough to eat. If there

wasn't enough food to go around for everyone, I would stay outside with the child until the meal was over. After returning, if there was some leftover food, I would eat that. If not, I would skip the meal. Things are different now. Unlike South Korea where you have both working men and women, it is the women in North Korea that do all the money-making. These days, it's all women working in the marketplace. Men rarely earn a living. Women became more empowered, as they are the ones bringing food to the table. Now men are looked down on if they are not worthy men.

Even so, North Korea treats women harshly. The state mobilises women through the Women's League to get them to do public work. Women must make a living and do public work at the same time. Men are mobilised too but the Women's League gets the job done and is easier to mobilise, so women tend to be subject to more mobilisation. You need the daily income to feed the family, but mobilizations here and there will make life difficult as it keeps you from earning a living.

While women's social status improved, there is still a tendency to disrespect women.

Men do not treat women with respect. At home, women struggle to earn a living wage, while men don't offer help. Instead, they are giving women a hard time by drinking, mistreating women, and causing violence. In South Korea, women can get a divorce in such cases, but divorce is not easy in North Korea. Divorce is not easy even with bribes. Among women, we say

there is no greater misery than to be a woman in North Korea. We lament our fate, saying that there cannot be another country that mistreats women and makes women do their bidding. The frequent mobilisation by the state is itself a mistreatment of women. Men get mobilised too, but women are mobilised more frequently through the Women's Union. It's because they have no respect for women.

In North Korea, a woman cannot report her husband for domestic violence.

Men will get drunk and beat their wives as they please. The man next door would also get drunk and beat his wife every day, without end. It was too much. I couldn't take it to the point I went over to curse at him, shouting "You son of a bitch! You dog! How about you take some beatings yourself? Go to sleep if you had your drink. What entitles you to beat up a woman like that? She didn't get married to you just so that she can take the blows. You animal!" In North Korea, there are many men who get drunk and become violent. The women cannot think of reporting their case. Reporting wouldn't change a thing. Reporting is not done by phone, but one needs to visit the police station to get it done. North Koreans rarely have landline phones at home, nor are there many people with mobile phones. It's not like South Korea, where everyone has a mobile phone. Only after coming here, I realised that North Korea was a pathetic country. Anyhow, the police stations do little more than take bribes. Even when a police

officer sees domestic violence happening on the spot, he would only criticise the situation and move on. There is no other way. Of course, they will arrest men for rape. But they will be discharged with a bribe. Only those powerless without money will go to prison, and you can get away with most things with a bribe. After living in both North and South Korea, I feel that South Korea is so much better for women.

In North Korea women are afraid to be outdoors at night. For one thing, it's not as bright as in South Korea. Without streetlights, it's pitch dark. Streetlights, once installed, will be stolen by people in no time. Children throw stones at the lamps. South Koreans don't behave that way because they grew up in an orderly society, but North Korea is not like that. North Korea is lawless, so people live lawless lives. If there are trees lining the street, people will uproot them to use as firewood. Tree planting has continued but so has people taking the trees. There is nothing left intact as a result. In South Korea, that kind of behaviour will get you reported, but North Koreans do not have a culture of doing so. They will take crops from another person's field during the night. Trees planted in the mountains will also be taken for firewood. Ryanggang Province is exceptionally cold, so you need a lot of firewood. In winter, water can freeze indoors. In the morning, you might find the lid frozen onto the pot so that holding up the lid will pull out all the contents. It's the kind of weather where urine will freeze in an outdoor latrine.

In North Korea, women have to earn a living and do household work. Nowadays, people are more open to change, so there are some men who take care of domestic work or help out. Women would work at the market stalls until 11 or 12 at night. That's when the stay-at-home husbands, having finished cooking,

walk out to their wives' stalls to bring back the wares. If you don't bring back the wares, *kotjebi* children will steal everything during the night. That's why men have to come out for protection. A woman being alone makes her an easy target for theft. Men are more open-minded and tend to participate in housework more than before. That's the only way they can make a living. The state has songs for women, telling us "Women are flowers"... but there are no women's rights.

Women leaders are not completely absent in North Korea. There are one or two. Also, the committee chiefs of the Women's League are all women, which is not saying much given it's a women's organisation. Central Workers' Party cadres all consist of men, but women have no complaints – let alone think of it as a source for complaint.

If we see a woman leader in North Korea, people don't argue over whether a woman can make a good leader.

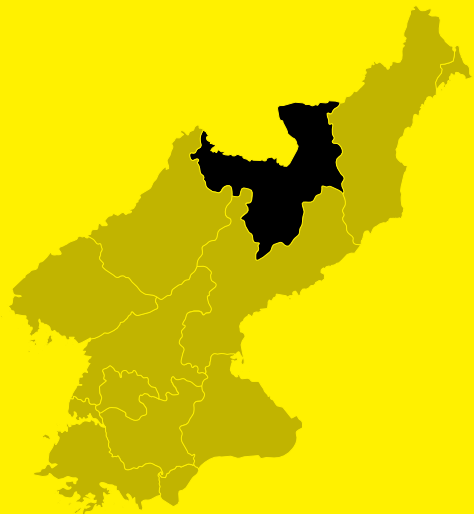
They are more interested in what she did for the country. Man or woman, a leader has to have achievements to keep the people from complaining.

It's not so much that people have a difficult time accepting a woman as a leader, but people have a difficult time accepting someone without any accomplishments. There is no culture

in North Korea that prohibits women from taking leadership positions. We care more about achievements than gender. Men take orders from women cadres, depending on where they work. If she knows what she is doing, everyone will follow orders. North Koreans don't think that it is inappropriate for a woman to stand out.

North Korean society is still not open-minded enough that people will talk badly of an unmarried couple walking hand in hand, even if they are grownups. Even a man and a woman having a conversation out in the open will get you reprimanded for "dating in broad daylight." There are no places for dating in North Korea. Dating happens at night, in quiet alleys, and at home. People will make a fuss about dating in a crowded place, so you don't have a particular place to take your lover. There's family at home. The more you think about it, North Korea is such a pathetic country. Pyongyang is livable, but everywhere else is beyond chaos. Houses are barely standing. "Pathetic" does not do it justice. At the Chinese border, the buildings that are facing China are covered with clean roof tiles. But it's beyond pathetic when you look at it from the North Korean side. It's a poor disguise. China has nights made as bright as day and clean houses. North Korea is far behind.

Hello, my name is  
Lee Eun-suk.  
I was born in  
Ryanggang Province.  
I left North Korea in  
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China in a matter of  
a few months.



Hello, my name is Lee Eun-suk. I was born in Ryanggang Province. I left North Korea in late 2019 and reached South Korea through China in a matter of a few months.

I wasn't of working age back in North Korea, so I didn't have a job. For women, 55 is retirement age, and the state system called "elderly care" (*nyeonrobojang*) will let you retire. Men retire at age 60. It's just that you retire from your workplace, because you still have to do public work like "communal mobilisation" (*sahoedongwon* or *noryokdongwon*). In principle, you don't have to do any work because you are no longer of working age, but you still have to work in reality. North Korea assigns school children to public work from the first grade of primary school. The elderly people are no exception. Communal mobilisation starts from that early age and lasts until you reach 65. If you are younger than 65 and you are living in a residence somewhere, you are subject to mobilisation. Upon hearing the directions of the district office chief that there is an assignment to be handled for the day, each household in the district must show up at the place to get work done. All young people must be there. Mobilised work won't pay you. It is completely unpaid labour.

As a result, no one is hard at work. When the road is damaged after heavy rain, each district is tasked with the repair work by segment. The district will call up people in the morning. So many people can be seen heading to the site. They all work on their assigned segment. Within a segment, the work is divided up according to the People's Unit one belongs to. People there pretend to work just for show until it's time to return. This is because nobody is paid for the work. Then the road crumbles again in the next rainfall, and people are once again made to work – only to pretend to work. It's like this every time. For

mobilisation work, such as road repair, each person is expected to bring his own tools and safety equipment. It's usually the People's Unit leader who does the orchestration. He assigns each person to bring the shovel, the pickaxe, and the large sacks depending on what they have at home.

After spending 60 years in North Korea, I saw that things are so much different in South Korea. When I was first staying at the rehabilitation camp, I felt it wasn't so much different as I was living in confinement. But once I came out to society, I felt so much better. For one thing, the roads are so clean and organised. There are crosswalks with lights that show how much time I have, and everyone waits for the green light to cross and stops at the red light. North Korea doesn't have that. There are crosswalks in the city centres, but there is usually a police officer giving out signs to cross – as seen on TV. The officer will try to catch anyone crossing the road to try to get them to pay a fine, so people prefer to cross the street where there is no crosswalk at all. They look both ways to see if there are any cars coming before running across.

In South Korea, drivers look out for pedestrians. In North Korea, pedestrians have to look out for cars. Even if the driver is at fault, he will get angry. If a car bumps into a passing bicycle rider for instance, the driver will pull over to yell at the cyclist and knock down the bicycle to the ground, before hitting the road again. Dirt roads remain uncovered, and street signs are a rarity. People cross the street based on instinct. Cars don't slow down in crowded pedestrian areas. If they have to hit the brakes in front of a person to avoid an accident, the driver will make a scene by stepping out of the car to yell at the pedestrian, threatening to kill them. Then I came to South Korea to find cars avoiding

pedestrians. It was surreal. One day I was walking out of an alley and saw a car approaching, so I stopped in my tracks. But the car also waited until I finally crossed the street. This was completely new to me. In North Korea, there are shops lining up both sides of the street and people cross these streets in a leap of faith because they can't find a crosswalk.

Children in North Korea grow up hearing that “children are kings.” From a young age, people are made to think that a world under capitalism is a world full of bandits, murderers – a horrendous place to be. They feel the same way about South Korea. When my daughter made it to South Korea before me, and gave me a call, I scolded her for going to such a place, that she shouldn't be there and run away to someplace else. This is because my impression of South Korea was that it was a place of horror. But now that I am in South Korea, I feel so much safer. In North Korea, we used to say children are like kings, but it's nothing compared to how things are here. Driving down the street, you have a warning telling you that you are in a safety zone for children and that you must slow down. That astonishes me. Nothing could be a better contrast to how things are in North Korea. It's all words in North Korea, and nothing is put into practice.

In North Korea, there is no culture of protecting children at all. Crosswalks are rare, and cars don't slow down when they see children. If children stand in the way of cars, they are told to get their parents.

A driver might go so far as to hitch the child to the car to make a scene in front of the child's mother – arguing about how the child nearly caused an accident. Cars should slow down on pedestrian streets, but there is no such thing there. It is frightening to have children. Only after coming to South Korea, I realised that it was absurd.

School teachers will flog children at school. The school will ask children for money. Under the pretext of “springtime cleaning” or “classroom supplies,” the schoolmaster will instruct the teachers to do so, and then the teachers will tell the students how much to bring in cash. The student without that kind of money at home won't go to school the next day. Noticing the absence, the schoolteacher will send for him via another student. If the student does manage to show up at school, the teacher will flog the child. Parents back in the day used to have multiple children, so they didn't necessarily visit school for that kind of thing. Nowadays, most parents have just one child. When they learn of the child being flogged at school, they might confront the teacher and get into an argument.

There are many students in North Korea with many absences. These days, there are only about 3 classes per year. With fewer students and many teachers, you get maybe 20 students per class. Only about 15 will show up for school while the remaining 5 will be absent. As for the 5 absentees, it's like one child will be absent today, but it could be another student the next day. Since the school keeps asking for money, those students who can't comply will skip school for many days. So the attendance rate would be close to 15 out of 20 students in a classroom. There are also students who skip school because they have to do housework or earn income. If the mother is gone for business to a place

far away, the children won't have anything to eat - so they skip school. How can they go to school without anything to eat? The school doesn't feed them at all.

Primary school classes usually start at 8 in the morning and last until 1 or 1:30. The kids come home for lunch. After lunch, the kids can do extracurricular studies or go out to work on school chores. They make primary school students work. The school makes them. They may be made to plant grass around the school ground or pick weeds. I've found that South Korea is very different.

Children are still made to work in North Korea. Nobody finds it odd that children have to work.

It's been that way ever since. The parents don't find it odd that their children are made to do chores at school. Expressing complaints like that will get you stigmatised. If there is a complaining parent, the school notifies the parent's workplace. If I told a teacher that I won't send my child to do chores so that she can focus on her studies, the teacher won't take it and raise the issue to the principal. The principal will notify the party commissioner of the factory I work in. Every district and every corporation has a party commissioner, who will call me to question my ways. That's why children in primary school and middle school must do chores. Children work with gardening tools, in the same way that grownups carry their shovels and pickaxes. The school will assign some work manageable by

children such as clearing space for a training field. For primary schools, classes are held only four or five hours before noon. In middle school, there are four classes before noon and two more in the afternoon. After class, it's time to work on the chores. There are extremely few days where there are no chores to be done. It's public work required by the state but without any compensation. It's completely different from how it is in South Korea.

I have a friend who's heard from people back in North Korea recently (mid-2020). They say that they are unable to do anything during lockdown. Sending money over to North Korea now takes a great deal of caution. These days, smugglers and people with family members in South Korea are in danger. In particular, those who make phone calls abroad can be in big trouble if caught. If you are caught alone at least, you could bribe the inspector to excuse yourself.

Even the State Security officers who are enforcing the crackdowns are currently not receiving any rations from the state. Law enforcement officers are better protected by the state, but even they receive just five or ten days' worth of rations for that one person only. This makes it difficult for them to take care of their family. A State Security officer goes on patrol with a wiretapping device to intercept phone calls of smugglers like me. They live off bribes paid by such perpetrators. But if you are caught in a group or in public, there's no way out. Any one of those people could make a confession that bribes were given in exchange for a release, based on what they saw that day. That's why the officer on patrol will make no excuse when it comes to group arrests, even if bribes are offered.

Usually, a State Security officer holds a wiretapping device in his pocket or in his bag. They also disguise themselves as ordinary

citizens. I've seen an officer wearing a farmer's hat and working clothes to pretend to be a farmer. If a phone call is being made nearby, the wiretap device will sound off. The officer will spot the location based on those sounds. These days, it's so dangerous to make phone calls that people will climb up a mountain to make a call. Mountains in North Korea are all developed into crop fields, so there are no trees on the mountain. That's where people make the calls. The officer also knows which way people head out to make calls. If he hears the device sounding off after a person has crossed his path, he knows where to look. He uses the device to overhear what is being said over the phone. The officer can tell whether it was a woman talking or a man talking, so the officer will stop the person walking back after the call. The officers are often in disguise, so the unsuspecting person will be caught off guard. Only in disguise can the officer catch a lone perpetrator, and only then can they be paid. That's how State Security officers make a living. They too have figured out a way to survive. There is nothing in the way of legal order in North Korea. The officers, in a way of maintaining their performance records for the month, arrest those who do not pay bribes while releasing the ones that have. Law enforcement officers are all the same. It is not a society that is governed by the law, but one where survival is guaranteed by money. To not have money is to die.

The biggest difficulty we face in adapting to South Korea is language. There are a lot of loanwords used in South Korea which hinders us from communicating better. I think it's a matter of time for me to adapt, though. There is no difficulty in following rules. I wasn't engaging in illegal activities back there to begin with. I think hard work pays off in South Korea. People can live because they are paid an honest salary. That's why I don't think it's

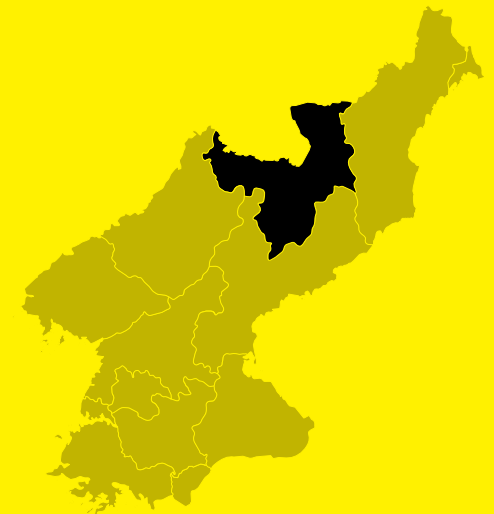
worth the trouble for us to get involved in illegal activities here. I get paid for the work I do, and I can live off the money I am paid.

I do get a sense that South Koreans are not as amicable toward us recently (mid-2020) because of the individual who defected back to North Korea and because of the balloon propaganda sent North. But I think it all depends on how we behave ourselves. It's up to each individual. I think the North Koreans living here can remind ourselves of how city folks in North Korea also had a tendency to look down on people from the countryside. I'm sure similar forms of discrimination exist here in South Korea, but that doesn't concern me. I think we should behave ourselves, and not get wound up by that. I haven't been outside on my own much since I came to South Korea, so I don't have much experience getting discriminated against. Rather, people tend to be very kind when I ask about bus stops.

Voice  
45

Art Censorship

Hello, my name is  
Kang Eun-hyok.  
I lived in Ryanggang  
Province.  
I left North Korea in  
the middle of 2017  
and reached South  
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Hello, my name is Kang Eun-hyok. I lived in Ryanggang Province. I left North Korea in the middle of 2017 and reached South Korea later that year.

Institutions and organisations in North Korea hold a lot of art events. For instance, there is a whole lineup of various artistic activities in celebration of 16 February, Kim Jong-il's birthday, the biggest national holiday in North Korea. There are these "circle performances" or "artistic performances" which are all censored by the state. These performances must be flawless. Each organisation conducts its own "circle performance." This is done by institutions, by art groups, and by workers' groups. The party or the worker's leagues may or may not have a dedicated group of performers. However, even without a professional group, your institution will still have to engage in artistic activities. Ordinary office workers or blue-collar workers will do the job.

We have a well-developed art and culture program in North Korea. Ordinary citizens get to watch as long as they buy the tickets. On the contrary, there are certain programs you are required to watch. It's almost mandatory. Each organisation has certain programs they have to attend. It's usually about lionising the Kim family, about their greatness. Everything is viewed in groups in North Korea.

In North Korea, art functions as a tool to maintain the regime.

As a result, there is no freedom for artistic expression.

The Propaganda Department gives out directives. They will say for instance, the direction of art for this coming 16 February is such and such. They will inspect whether art activities are taking place within that defined scope. They will inspect to see if the art is in line with those standards, compliant or non-compliant, and whether it should be banned or censored. Naturally, there is no freedom in art.

When freedom is mentioned in art, it is referred to as "capitalist ideologies making their way into art."

That's why there is no freedom. Art constitutes a part of the party's propaganda machine – meant to execute the will of the party.

They have a way of censoring art. They will first start with getting submissions over what art will be performed. Then they go through the approval process – telling them what works and what doesn't. The result of the censorship will tell them what should be taken out and what should be fixed. And if you make that same mistake twice, it would mean punishment. One-time mistakes are not punished. Propaganda projects in North Korea are referred to as groups for indoctrination. Indoctrination of the ideology is of primary concern, so they don't arrest you for making one mistake. We are given opinions if something is wrong or misstated. We abide by those opinions – no matter

what. It is the responsibility of the party institution to make such corrections. It's the party institution's job to be giving us opinions for correction. The opinions are delivered to you and your Party institution. No one is excluded from a Party institution in North Korea. In that way, they are controlled by the party institution. If they fail to make corrections there, it is the party institution that will undergo punishment, so you are made to make meticulous corrections.

There haven't been any cases of punishment for not following the party's instructions. That's because the programs are handed down to us in advance, and there are censorship reviews that take place to prevent such cases from happening. It is designed to prevent such cases. The party institution will detect and respond to the smallest blunder. Failure to do so would mean the Secretary of that institution losing his job. They have to keep things watertight. It's all very meticulous because it means life or death for them. That's why we never have such cases.

Artists in North Korea are budgeted for. In North Korea, there are two systems – budgeting (*yesanje*) and self-supporting accounting (*doknipchesanje*). The Propaganda Department is operated under budget. If you perform well within budget, you are paid more according to merit. But the government money is not enough to make a living. The current North Korean system is out of balance. Being an artist back in the day wasn't so bad. One could live off the money received from the state, but that is no longer possible. The reason why it's no longer possible is because, for a start, the rice prices have gone up. The monthly salary gets you less than a kilogram of rice. As a result, the artists make their living by working at the marketplace in the morning before heading to practise for the performance in the afternoon,

for instance. North Korean livelihoods overall depend on the marketplaces being permitted. That's the overall situation.

The state cuts off ties from the outside world and calls for self-sufficiency without outside support. North Korean people are not allowed to have different opinions about this. This is because there is a perception that such thoughts will have a liberal influence on people's minds. There are controls in place to stop people from having such thoughts by means of indoctrination projects. North Korean people are made to think that the rest of the world is as poor as they are. Watching South Korean and Chinese television shows, we assume those are mere picturesque depictions and not real life. "Pie in the sky" – so to speak. Many people watch the shows and think that they must have been made with people like us as the target audience. We, North Koreans, are thinking from our perspective only.

North Korea has its own propaganda targeted toward South Korea.

In the same way, we assume South Korea made these shows for propaganda purposes. So people think the shows are all lies and no one actually lives like that.

In my opinion, it is impossible to have North Koreans stand up against their government – as South Koreans so often say. Simply saying the wrong things will get you arrested in North

Korea. The party institutions will detain you for a start. One cannot bear the harsh interrogations. So, such things are left unspoken as you can never trust the person standing next to you. Even if you did have such thoughts, you'd know that saying them out loud will get you killed or get your family in trouble. So, they try not to even have such thoughts - because it affects your family. That's the biggest problem.

North Koreans' last words are often about their remorse for leaving this world behind while not having served the Great Leader better. 80% of the time, they will say so in earnest. The reason why they say that is because they truly believe that those people believe that the existence of society as they know it, their whole world is configured like that. They assume it's the same everywhere. They cannot think outside their confinement. People who have made it here to South Korea will send money to people back north. Those who receive money will ask us over the phone how we manage to live in a capitalist society. They will say that even as they receive money from us. They will take the cash because of their difficult situation, but at the same time, they feel bad for us living in South Korea assuming that life must be horrible under capitalism. They take pity on the people doing fine in South Korea. This happens even as they receive the money. This results in a strong dissonance in their minds.

The members of the State Security Ministry are also always asking for more money from South Korea. They get a share of the wired cash in the process.

Such a form of bribery is called “sending one's greetings” in North Korea. They make some extra money this way. Some people actually refuse money from South Korea. Instead of accepting the hard-earned cash that the family or relative is sending over, some people tell them there is no need to wire any money because they are doing okay. There are in fact such people. That is to say, they understand nothing about the situation outside North Korea. These are the kinds of people that take the lies of the Propaganda Department at face value. Most North Korean people are like that. Yet, they still worry about making a living. When life gets tough, we think about living in the woods like the lawless band of men we know from folklore. We imagine ourselves catching fish, farming crops like potatoes, and foraging berries. It's a struggle for survival.

Since the “Reactionary Thought and Culture Denunciation Law” was passed in December 2020, those who distribute goods and content from South Korea or other foreign countries can receive severe punishments. Similar punishments did exist in the past though. It's almost as if nothing has changed. There is a long sentence for watching a South Korean film or an American film. The unfortunate thing is that those caught watching South Korean shows got the harshest punishments. It was so before, and it still is now. It's just that recently, the severity has increased. They used to send people off to Reform through Labour Camps for watching South Korean shows in the past. But watching American shows didn't necessarily mean getting sent to the Labour Camp. You could be detained and fined. The level of punishment was not as strong as what the new law stipulates – such as a Training Camp sentence. If previously one could be sentenced up to 5 years for watching a South Korean show, and

1 year for watching an American show, now the sentence for watching South Korean shows would be execution at gunpoint. Watching an American show could get you up to 10 years in a Reform through Labour Camp. So, it's just that the punishments are harsher, but they were there before.

The way I see it, I think the authorities are on edge. They must feel that they can't let things be. The level of punishment differs so drastically from the past. The state feels that change is taking place due to outside influence. If you are the ones running the country, you'd know before anyone else does from the outside. If I raised dogs in my house, would the next-door neighbour know them best? Or would it be the other villagers? Neither! The dog's owner knows best. The owner knows which ones are the troublemakers, which one skips meals, and so on. It's the same way with North Korea. The central government knows best. They see what is happening among the people, and so they go on to strengthen the punishments.

There are intricate systems designed to understand the situation there. The reports are made through the State Security officers, the residential police officers, and then there are the "core" informants. We call them cores (*haeksim*) in North Korea, also referred to as spies. There are a few households like that within the People's Unit. That's how they get reports. The People's Unit Leader is almost always an informant. There are reports coming up through these channels. We had a saying that Kim Jong-un could hear a pin drop in a rural village. I think nowadays they are trying to get a closer grip on the situation. Back then, Kim Jong-un could have said so out of his own desire since it was earlier in his regime. But now, I'm sure he has a more accurate understanding of the situation with data amassed in large

quantities – allowing him to get the watchmen to compete with one another. There are these different organisations providing reports - the police, the State Security officers, and the party institution – compiling them together will show even the smallest irregularity. And when he does see a small irregularity, it spells trouble. That's why people try to stay in line. They keep even their own family members under control - to stay safe, to stay alive.

Nobody in North Korea believes their country is in crisis.

Nobody inside North Korea thinks that way. It's because of education. People are made to think that we are not going down, it's just that we are under difficult circumstances. The saying goes that, "the path of following the Great Leader is an arduous one." They believe that after the hardships, good times will come. A lot of people still think that way. Think about it. Day after day, they sing to us and make us sing. Wouldn't you be brainwashed? Of course, you would. Well, there are probably some that don't believe, but the great majority do believe. That's the overall situation.

In North Korea, there is no internet as we know it. There is this thing called the "Kwangmyong Network", but it's just for academic stuff. It forms a network, but it's not really a network and more of a propaganda tool. There is no internet. We're not supposed to have the internet. The internet will allow people to collude with one another. It is North Korea's strategy to destroy

and disconnect those connections – connections between the people. Rather, the party organisations may be in connection with one another...

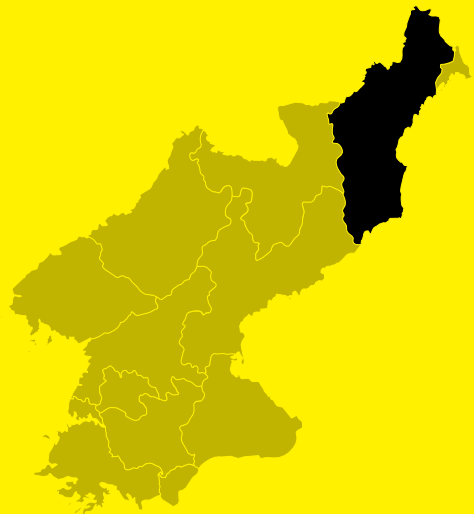
I was told people here request North Korea to allow internet access. The North Korean authorities are not monkeys. They know why the request is being made, and they will never allow it. They will probably snort at the suggestion. Insiders in North Korea will hear that and sneer at the stupidity of the outside world – “To believe that we will do as they say, how stupid could they be?” They will never allow it. It’s their lifeline. The first step is to keep people away from the internet.

If an internet connection made its way into North Korea, I think... Maybe North Korea could change. That is ‘if’ an internet connection finds a way, but that’s never going to happen. Blocking out the internet is their top priority. The North Korean government knows that allowing internet access will be their downfall. Because of this, even those who deal with propaganda are made not to watch or listen to South Korean content. They make them restrict others though. It’s not like the cadres at the top get to access the internet either. Those who do get to access the internet are the top leaders and the agents assigned to hostile actions against South Korea. These agents are probably thoroughly indoctrinated, but they are also trained in a way that tells them what they see are enemy activities. And so, they are made to see things from a perspective where they are fighting against such things. They wouldn’t think of any of it making its way into North Korea. In North Korea, we use the term family clans (*gamun*) in a narrow sense, which includes the clans of Kim Jong-un, of Ri Sol-ju, of Hyon Song-wol, and such. I think members of such privileged clans may be able to access the

internet. But I don’t think even the Chief of the Reconnaissance Bureau gets to access the internet freely.

The internet is for a limited number of individuals only. North Korea knows that even a small hole, a niche in society cannot be left outside its grasp. North Korea is not run by a gang of imbeciles that could be easily toppled, as South Koreans tend to imagine – although I’m sure not all South Koreans think that way. Wouldn’t it be great if the internet just naturally found its way into North Korea that way, North Koreans would have easy access to information. That way, we can immediately consider that to be the first phase of reunification.

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I lived in North  
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I left North Korea in  
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I entered South  
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Hello, my name is Lee Gwang-chol. I lived in North Hamgyong Province. I left North Korea in the middle of 2018. I entered South Korea in early 2019.

Where I used to live, people basically take up farming as a common side job. They clear the mountain of all the trees and work the land to grow corn or beans. As a result, my hometown had no trees on the mountains. That is not to say that anyone can start working on a small plot of land freely. It takes money to do so. The Ministry of Land and Environmental Protection has a forestry department. They are in charge of managing and monitoring the mountains. Each forestry ranger has specific mountains defined as their area of supervision. If I want to start a farm on one of the mountains, I will go talk to the ranger and bribe him to get it done.

The state tries to plant more trees as the mountains are bare with no trees. The people are made to plant a tree every second square metre on their private plots. They grudgingly oblige, but since they make such a minimal effort in digging up earth and planting trees, about 80~90% of the trees will die. They do plant a lot of trees in the first place. We celebrate “forestry day” (*siksujeol*) in mid-March, where people are made to plant trees in the mountains – from middle school students to elderly people in their 70s. After about a one-week intensive period, a schedule is set up for people to go plant trees. When planting trees, one must receive the receipt (confirmation sheet) from the ranger. It is necessary to have a confirmation sheet detailing how many trees were planted on which mountain. Only then can you use the land.

The trees to be planted are bought from the ranger or from the sapling field at the forestry department. A sapling will cost

5 won or 10 won. Even if it's only 5 won, trying to plant it over a 100-pyeong area would mean a great many trees. It adds up to no small sum of money. In this way, we plant the trees that we have bought. We plant them, but still, about 90% of the trees will die. We do not take great care in planting the trees. Those people are there trying to plant crops and live off the harvest on that land. They don't take care of trees that much. They would go so far as to pull out the trees to let them die – because they intend to plant crops where the trees are growing. If the tree lives, you can let it be for a year or two. In year three, however, the trees will get denser and start to create shade that prevents the crops from growing. It also takes more work to cut down a thicker tree. But if you're not careful and you get caught, you will be sentenced to jail. So what people often do is pull some of the roots out from the ground in a discrete manner when it's a budding sapling. It's hilarious now that I think about it. Just counting the number of saplings, we plant so many of them year after year. Trees beyond imagination. If all those trees were to live, I'm sure North Korean mountains would be no less green than South Korean mountains.

I joined the military after graduating from school. I served for a few years but then fell ill. I was granted “medical discharge” (*gamjeongjedae*) and was discharged from the military. Being granted “medical discharge” is one way you can finish military service in North Korea. That's how I was discharged. Then after a while, I spent some time treating the illness and got better, so I was registered under the “Welfare Program” (*sahoebojang*). Welfare Program is basically for those people who can't work to be able to live on welfare. A person on a Welfare Program can be considered a disabled person. There are polio patients and such patients from a young age. Then there are people who got

injured from physical trauma, people who got crippled – perhaps they were beaten by senior members of the military like myself. There's a similar category called “light labour” (*gyongrodong*) which is people who are not completely unable to work but have difficulty working with other regular people, so you have them work on something lighter in small groups. They are referred to as being under “program no. 56.”

I was on a Welfare Program. This is a position that is granted to those with money. Those on the program don't have to work, can stay at home, and get treatment. I made a visit to the hospital every quarter during the time I stayed at home. All results showed as normal, meaning I was no longer ill. As you know, it's the government that runs everything in North Korea – corporations and enterprises. But since working there doesn't get you paid, people have a side job at home. So, I bribed the doctors and pretended to be a patient. Then I lived off my own business at home. I foraged herbs in the mountains since I was put on the Welfare Program. There were houses that paid me for the herbs in the busy county centres. I used to trade herbs there at wholesale price. After that, I became a phone broker.

I believe beatings in the North Korean military were bad during Kim Jong-il's time. But it has gotten somewhat better since Kim Jong-un came into power.

Now higher-ranking soldiers can be punished or worse, discharged for beating a lower-ranking soldier. Cadres don't beat

us so much. It's mostly the senior ranking soldier who will beat a junior ranking soldier. Hazing is part of the culture, like in the South Korean military. It's probably worse in North Korea. Much worse. Anyways, I was beaten to the point I fell ill and was returned home. The beatings decreased after Kim Jong-un came into power. My discharge took place right before that. It was right between the two Kims – before the succession. There were a lot of beatings when I was in the military. But then I heard that things had gotten slightly better when I asked other soldiers who were discharged due to illness after I was.

In North Korea, they say there are facilities that take care of the disabled. But these facilities only exist for show and they don't really offer much help. Everyone lives by their own means. Nothing is provided by the government. The government does give out so-called "relief," but the money is less than the price of one sweet. That's the money I get in a month. The reason it became this way is that North Korea was doing well back when Kim Il-sung was Premier. Back then the government regulated the price of goods by calling it "fixed pricing." Fixed pricing is different from market prices. The same product that is rated at 1 won fixed price would sell at 10 won in a market. And it is this fixed price system that persists to this day. That's why it's like that. I have a relative who worked in rail networks for decades. His monthly pay was 5000 North Korean won. 5000 won would get you less than a kilogram of rice. That's his monthly pay because they pay him at fixed prices regardless of what the market prices are. That's why people have something on the side, along with work assigned by the state. People breed farm animals or have some small plot farming going on at home. Also, collective farm workers are different from regular workers. Farm workers need

the entire family assigned to the work, but the working-class husband will have a job at a workplace while the wife can stay at home taking care of the household.

Getting injured in the military may get you the title of a "Honourable Military Serviceman,"<sup>❶</sup> (*yeongyegunin*) but you need money to be recognized as such. Everything in North Korea is about money and bribes. One cannot be discharged with honour for getting hurt from the beatings, but for showing acts of sacrifice for your comrades in service. For instance, if you were injured trying to protect your fellow soldiers in a collapsing flat building that was under construction. You need to have displayed some selfless act for the benefit of others in order to qualify. Even then, you may still be discharged with a "medical discharge" if you do not have money to pay. You need your parents or some relative in a high position to be able to qualify. In North Korea, it is the government that runs almost all the workplaces. Party secretaries or managers of a 200~300 men workplace will be sent to a relatively easy-going assignment for their military service. If they get injured while serving, they come back with an honorary discharge. A lot of them become assigned as drivers for generals. If they get in an accident by no fault of their own or by their own mistake, they can be discharged with honour by having their documents say they were injured during a mission. Bribery is involved in the process.

There are benefits for soldiers who have been discharged with honour. The benefit is that these people will rarely go to prison for committing a crime. Unless you are committing some heinous crime against the state, you would be detained for one or two days at the police station at most. But there are no pension schemes for honorary discharge. No one is getting that kind of

❶ A veteran who was discharged with honour because of a service-connected disability or illness.



money in North Korea except for maybe high-ranking officials or pilots. No one can survive without a side source of income. The government does not provide.

I was granted “medical discharge” due to the beatings in the military, but that doesn’t mean I get to ask the state for compensation.

I could be sent to jail for filing the wrong claim. I couldn’t claim anything.

A sick or wounded soldier will probably get an X-ray shot at best at the central hospital of the military division. Then after two or three months of treatment, they will discharge you if they don’t see progress. Even after I returned home, I couldn’t report or tell anyone about how I was injured from the beatings. I had to bear it myself. If I wanted my case heard, I would probably have to go to the party institutions, and those guys don’t want your problems. They will just erase the case at their level. There’s this thing in North Korea – like sending a message or fear mongering. For instance, they will execute one person to put many others in fear. They keep people from trying to escape in the same way. There’s also propaganda where, like I said, a sacrifice for others gets reported from the county party level to the provincial Workers’ Party to the central Workers’ Party – so that it gets published in the news. Then that person will get to have a better future for himself, with lots of benefits.

When it comes to hospitals in North Korea, they have ultrasound and X-ray devices in the provincial hospital in Chongjin, North Hamgyong Province. They have CTs but no MRIs. I needed a doctor’s opinion from a provincial hospital in order to be put on the Welfare Program, so I travelled to Chongjin. There was a request form I got issued from the county-level people’s hospital to get the final examination at the provincial-level hospital. Obviously, they try to send you back to work by giving a passing score on the examination – because there are so many unemployed people already who are not working. Also, the hospital would be found at fault if they misidentified someone in their examination, so they usually go ahead and mark patients as having been fully treated. That’s why one must bribe the assigned doctor to say that you are still sick. In rural villages, they buy and sell medication without a doctor’s licence, but in concentrated city centres and towns, one has to be licensed to sell medicine.

Regarding the recent drug issue in North Korea, people tend to smoke a lot of *bingdu* or opium. Generally, it is about 70~80% of the population. Children in primary school and kindergarten do drugs as well. It’s not that the children buy the drugs themselves. They see their parents doing it and simply follow that example out of curiosity without knowing whether it is good for them or not. The children know where the parents keep the paraphernalia used for smoking *bingdu*, so when the parents are out the kids will try to light it on fire and imitate whatever it is they saw. With *bingdu*, you light it on fire and inhale the smoke. It’s so commonplace that even children will do it. That was how things were by the time I left the country. The state has strict rules prohibiting usage. Even so, it is only those without money who end up in prison, and those who sell drugs as a serious business

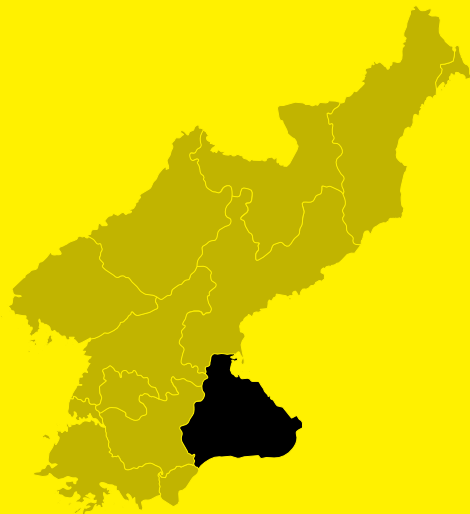
(a few hundred grams at a time) will only receive maybe a two-month sentence at a Labour Training Camp. They can't pardon a criminal as not guilty, so instead they give out a two- or three-month sentence at Training Camp, where one can then bail oneself out with money. You will then go on to spend your time at home, relaxing, and show up at the Training Camp on the day of your discharge to pick up your certificate papers showing that you did your time in the Training Camp.

Most of the *bingdu* used in my hometown was from Chongjin of North Hamgyong Province. I was told that there was some being manufactured in Musan of North Hamgyong Province by the time I left. I don't know too many details about this. Basically, it is the three cities of Hamhung in South Hamgyong Province, Chongjin of North Hamgyong Province, and Wonsan in Kangwon Province that produced *bingdu*. They say, in the past, Sangwon country used to produce some too. Opium is consumed in Hyesan of Ryanggang Province. As a result, as the police in Ryanggang Province were conducting heavy crackdowns on opium, a lot of the poppy farming took place in North Hamgyong Province. Counties there such as Musan, Yonsa, and Hwadae will have potato fields in the mountains with poppy plants planted in between the potatoes. Potatoes blossom in white flowers and so do poppies. It is a trick to hide the poppy among the potato flowers. They also have a plot of poppies planted in the middle of the corn field. Opium costs about 8 to 10 Chinese yuan per gram. But it would sell at 15 or 18 yuan at Hyesan. People who work in the mines of Kapsan County of Ryanggang Province have to work all day crouched inside the small mineshafts. After work, they would be aching all over, so that they would get medicinal acupuncture. Opium is prevalent in

Ryanggang Province, while Musan in North Hamgyong Province and other such places would consume a lot of *bingdu*. The price of *bingdu* and opium differed from region to region. But I found that the price of opium in some regions can be twice what is found in other regions, while the price of *bingdu* won't vary that much. *Bingdu* was actually more expensive in Musan. Drugs aren't all that cheap and affordable to ordinary people. And yet, people still do drugs.

I had heard of human rights in North Korea. It's usually when the government makes a statement in response to another country mentioning North Korean human rights – usually the U.S. or South Korea. The statement will say that it is the U.S. and South Korea that violates human rights, and that they have no right to criticise us. Then they will take action against it, firing a rocket or a missile in response. The newspapers would also mention human rights from time to time. There is a corner in North Korean news broadcasts on television where some professor, researcher, or journalist makes comments on other countries like South Korea, but never North Korea. They would come up with some analysis of the situation there, for instance, how there is a protest at *Gwanghwamun* Square, and that the protest is due to the government not providing something. But there was no such thing covering North Korea. It's always about another country being at fault. And when another country says the wrong things about North Korea, a statement would be made as a response.

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South Korea.



Hello, my name is Jeong Yu-hun. I was born in Kangwon Province and lived there my whole life. But then in early 2021, I left North Korea and arrived in South Korea.

I left North Korea without any research on what South Korea was like. I left North Korea for economic reasons. I had a difficult time making a living. There was maybe a 2,000 won stipend I got from work. In North Korea, we used to call this living expenses. But that money did not allow for us to make a living, so I left. To be honest, I wasn't in a situation where I had to risk my life trying to escape North Korea. I was rather sick of having to stay at home all the time. The Covid-19 restrictions were keeping me from going anywhere.

I witnessed  
Covid-19 quarantine in North Korea.

In Kangwon Province, those with fever symptoms were quarantined during the Covid-19 pandemic. But I don't think there was anyone diagnosed with a fever before I left North Korea. I was never tested for Covid-19 while in North Korea. There were no such things – just a temperature check. People tended to stay indoors if they were feeling feverish. There were no suspected patients while I was in North Korea. But there were people who had symptoms similar to the common cold and died from it.

Covid-19 quarantine started in around February 2020. That's when the state started informing us about Covid-19. From then they started telling us what Covid-19 was like – that it was a dangerous disease and that it was a threat. They told us that

people were dying in masses and also about how people were dying. We could learn about such things usually from television. KCTV (Korean Central Television) was on from 3 PM to 12 midnight, but the information related to Covid-19 was on all the time. There were no breaks. Here in South Korea, I've found that there are commercials between the shows. That's how frequent the messages related to Covid-19 would air in North Korea. They would remind us about Covid-19 from February 2020 onward. The state repeatedly emphasised how we had zero patients within North Korea.

Then they would show dying patients in places like Brazil. There was like a 5-minute segment for world news after the regular broadcasts. We were told what the Covid-19 situation was like in other countries – how many people were infected, and so on. The segment used to only show things like sports events. But they started showing us Covid-19 statuses of other countries during the pandemic period. What North Korea does best is that they add quality subtitles to such footage so that it can be understood in context for the North Korean viewers. They add lots of emotions to the translated subtitles. People are crying out “I want to live” in the subtitles, and this is constantly shown on screen. They show footage of patients coughing out blood to raise awareness on the dangers of Covid-19. Such broadcasts would be repeated almost daily.

They would also announce the Covid-19 situation in South Korea. The broadcasts would tell us how many Covid-19 patients there were, that the numbers were rising, and so on. In particular, they would talk about the spread of infections in the Gangwon Province of South Korea – meaning that it could spread to the North Korean side since South Korea's Gangwon Province is

bordering North Korea. At the time, Kim Jong-un could be seen proudly announcing that there was not a single Covid-19 patient in North Korea. He would express gratitude for the people, in tears. Viewers would watch Kim's tears and start crying with him. We took these broadcasts at face value, believing that there must be no Covid-19 patients in North Korea since that's what the broadcaster said.

Looking back,  
I think it was nonsensical to assume that  
there was not a single patient in the country  
when the proper tests were not being conducted.  
All we did was a temperature check.

Disinfection measures for Covid-19 continued to be covered in some of the lecture sessions as well as on TV. I attended these sessions at work. I think the sessions were held daily in 2020. At work, I was told of disinfection measures for Covid-19 every day. Every morning we would go through the repertoire with everyone gathered at work. There was some party directive related to Covid-19, which should be the basis for doing things – for instance, checking your temperature three times a day, how you should be applying sanitizers, and so on. There was a thermometer at work which we used to check for fevers three times a day. As for the sanitizers, you can make them by boiling salt water. You are to connect two lead plates with a wire and connect each plate with a cathode (+) and an anode (-) before boiling the water. The water is cooled down and used to wash

hands in small amounts. We had to use this solution for washing hands at the workplace. We were made to wash hands with the sanitising liquid anywhere we went, not just the workplace. The quarantine stations would give out sanitising liquids so that we could sanitise at home. Quarantine stations were around prior to Covid-19, but they didn't do much. But then, I found that it took up disinfection work during the Covid-19 pandemic. The workplaces made their own sanitising liquid for internal use.

Masks were worn from February 2020. Starting from February, they wouldn't let us enter anywhere – even our workplace – unless we were wearing masks. An Inspection Unit would be standing in the streets in 100 metre intervals making sure people are wearing masks. Usually, it would be the Inspection Unit from the Women's Union that would be standing on guard. We had to wear masks outdoors as well as indoors. Masks had to be bought, and they were sold by private individuals – in marketplaces and such. There were fabric masks made by individuals, and there were single-use masks like the ones we have here in South Korea. Some of the single-use masks were imported from China. People called them “UN masks” for some reason. I think they were called that because the masks were for medical usage. A single mask would cost about 1,500 won to 2,000 won. The price wasn't too expensive – it felt affordable. But that doesn't mean I bought one every day.

Masks were commonplace.

You could get as many as you wanted as long as you had the

money to pay for them. There wasn't anyone who couldn't afford masks because of the cost. Because the state mandated mask-wearing, everyone would have some kind of a mask on – even if it meant they made a fabric mask at home. I recently (early 2023) made contact with someone in North Korea who told me that masks are still worn. Now, there is even a curfew. There was no curfew when I was there. I believe the curfew starts after dinner time.

Around June or July 2020, they prohibited people from travelling between different counties. We were made unable to move outside our place of residence. This went on until the time I left North Korea. There was also a new form of guard post called, “Covid guard posts.” These guard posts would be manned by people from the “Covid Permanent Committee” meant to carry out inspections on others. This permanent committee is also a newly created organisation. Just like the other permanent committees, the Covid Permanent Committee is an organisation consisting of members drafted from different places – like the law enforcement institutions. For instance, the committee may consist of one person drafted from the Ministry of Land, another from the police station, and so on. They are truly powerful people. I'm sure the committee is still in place if Covid-19 still exists in North Korea. If it is gone, the committee is probably also gone.

There were people who violated the travel restrictions, but they didn't get punished. They were held at the guard posts and turned back. There are stories circulating in South Korea about how North Korea had executed people for violating quarantine measures, but that's not how bad things were where I lived. I don't know if this is true but I've heard that there was some CEO of some big trading company in North Korea who was maskless

inside his car, which was against the rules. He was caught by a member of the Women's League but ignored her telling her she is in no position to tell him what to do. I was told that this man was later fired from the company. A friend of someone I know got into a fight with a member of the Women's League because they kept bothering him to wear masks. He used physical violence and was sent to a Training Camp for that. But I've never heard of anyone getting executed so far.

There were no cases where a whole region was locked down for reasons of fevers or other symptoms while I was in North Korea. Maritime activities were also off-limits at the time, and there was someone who snuck out to sea. He was caught and his family was put in quarantine – unable to move beyond his front garden. They had a bunch of “off-limits” posts placed around his house. I guess it was because they suspected that he may have contracted Covid-19. Anyhow, he was treated like a criminal for that. His family had to be put under house arrest. I don't know what the punishment was for the man, but he was cuffed and sent to a Reform through Labour Camp via car. I figured he was being sent to a Reform through Labour Camp because they usually cuff your hands when you're being sent there. They don't cuff people for regular interrogations. But if a person is seen wearing a handcuff, it means that he is being sentenced to reform through labour. I know about this so well because I had also snuck out to sea at the time. I wasn't in the same team as this man was. I was with another team. I naturally found out about what had happened to him because his team got in trouble for that. Fortunately, I wasn't caught, but my team had to pay a large bribe to save ourselves.

Bribery wouldn't necessarily exempt us from punishment,

but our team managed to be exempt because the fact that we had been out at sea was known to one or two people only and it wasn't the talk of the town. If word spread and everyone knew about it, we wouldn't have been able to do anything about it at that point because we'd have to silence all those people. At the end of the day, the wealthy and powerful manage to not get arrested, while the powerless people do get arrested. From what I had felt at the time, people who had violated the quarantine would be sent to a Reform through Labour Camp. I'm not so sure about Political Prison Camps. I am only aware of reform through labour sentences. But then, I don't know so much about Political Prison Camps in the first place. But I don't think they would send people to a Political Prison Camp for not wearing masks and violating quarantine procedures – unless you picked up some beached South Korean items or something.

People were really scared of Covid-19 at first – myself included.

There was a movie depicting people dying from the disease, so most people took it seriously all along. There was a Chinese movie or a TV series called “*Heroes in Harm's Way*” (最美逆行) which depicts Chinese people volunteering to save lives during Covid-19. There were scenes of people dying from Covid. This was distributed on a USB drive with North Korean subtitles. People raised awareness of Covid-19 by watching this film. The video file had a “Magnolia” mark on it, meaning that it was approved by the state authorities.

Unlike other diseases, North Koreans reacted differently to Covid-19. There was Ebola and the avian flu before that. But North Koreans didn't even care to know what those were. People would talk about Ebola and the bird flu, but it wasn't like we were eating a lot of chicken anyhow. We simply did not care. We would put up a poster on the doorway that said "Prevent Avian Flu" and that was it. But Covid-19 was taken very seriously. People see it as something else completely. Even so, I think it must be altogether different from how South Koreans reacted to it. But as time went by, I think there were some who thought it wasn't such a big deal after all.

South Koreans seem to think of Covid-19 is a big deal. North Koreans, on the other hand, do not have much willingness or ambition toward life in general, and they think they might get sick and die, but life isn't all that great anyhow. Maybe it was because this was before people actually experienced Covid-19. North Koreans try to make the most of the present, so that they eat well and live well for the day even if it means that day is their last day. North Koreans do not think that masks are necessary for preventing diseases. They prefer not to wear them, and only have to wear masks due to the mandatory requirements. In South Korea, people wear masks willingly on their own accord so as to prevent themselves from getting sick, right? North Koreans are not like that. People only wear masks because they are told to by the state. Some people would have holes punched on their masks for smoking. This shows how people were not particularly afraid of Covid-19 to the extent that they felt wearing masks was necessary.

The way I saw it, the North Korean authorities were brutally strict in their responses to Covid-19. We had to go through a

temperature check at work at least three times a day as a default. They were once when showing up at work in the morning, once during work, and once before punching out. If one's temperature was over 37 degrees Celsius, they would be diagnosed as having a symptom. Aside from the temperature checks, we were made to spread the sanitising liquid everywhere and wash our hands with it. But the liquid is very bad for your skin because it is salt water. I tried not to get the liquid on my skin. It would be distributed to each household in large quantities but there were people who would just throw it away – because they had too much of it. We did stack up the liquids because we wanted to appear compliant with the state telling us to practise sanitization.

There was unfair treatment during the quarantine process to be sure. The Inspection Unit would halt maskless people in the streets and humiliate them. Being a young male, all they would do to me is to simply tell me to wear a mask. The women were held behind to hear a scolding, unable to continue on their way. In order to avoid such a situation, one needs to at least give some sweets and say sorry. But there weren't any beatings or anything. It's just that North Korea does not respect human rights in all areas. Everything they do is made mandatory. But I'm actually not too sure where the boundary of human rights lies. Disinfection measures for Covid-19 were mandatory in North Korea but so were South Korea's measures – so it's hard to compare. Also, I don't know if I can say one is better than the other.

The food situation was in a dire state before I left the country. I wasn't having too much difficulty myself, but I was shocked to see the food situation worsen around me. It was what made me want to leave North Korea. There were those that had to sell their own house in order to get food. There were so many

people who would sell off their belongings. Home electronics would be sold as used items. This only got worse in 2021. Getting enough to eat was definitely harder in 2021 compared to 2019. The funny thing, though, is that rice prices never went up. Everything else – goods coming from China – had their prices going up.

The reason why I think North Koreans are starving to death now (early 2023) is because their channels to make money have been blocked. It's not a matter of fluctuating rice prices. The real problem is that people are barred from making money. Without money to spend, people have gone jobless all of a sudden. You need income to be able to spend. All spending without any income is the problem. I think the situation is much tougher now than it was in 2021. I think there will be many deaths caused by starvation if the situation continues. It was bad enough when I left the country, so things must be horrible by now. I'm sure things will be alright once the travel restrictions and the trade restrictions with China get lifted. For one thing, the price of goods will go down, and the people would be able to go out to sea for work. I don't know if maritime activities are permitted now. It was very much restricted to the point that we couldn't catch a glimpse of the sea by the time I was leaving the country. Most of the merchants who used to travel between regions couldn't do so from 2020. Some still could, though. They were probably people who had registered themselves to a corporation. They are backed by the state.

There has been a lot of talk among South Koreans surrounding the “Reactionary Thought and Culture Denunciation Law” recently.

I had heard of the act while in North Korea.

The law was passed while I was still there. The atmosphere was dampened since the law was introduced. People in my age group tend to watch a lot of South Korean and American movies, and this law prohibited us from watching those. People were laying low for about a month after the law was introduced, and we thought maybe things would return to how it was before. But then, there was someone arrested in Kangwon Province. This kid had a job at the post office. She was caught by the Ministry of State Security watching South Korean movies. If one person gets caught, they will confess a whole bunch of names as they explain where they got it from in the interrogation process. There were maybe three or four people caught and detained for interrogation as a result. They were arrested in late December 2020, and I wasn't able to hear anything about those people until I left the country. When they launch something new in North Korea – let's say a new law – they will start with catching someone in violation of that law. They will give out harsh punishment to that one person to serve as a lesson. I'm sure those caught at the time would have faced harsh punishments. I think the law frightened most people that had a habit of watching South Korean movies and TV series.

When the law was first introduced, the state notified people about it. They held some kind of a lecture session, where we were told to write down the law. I wrote it down as I was told and brought it home. The intent was for the whole family to see what I had written down. We were made to post it on the doorway – so that we may read as we move about in the house. I believe

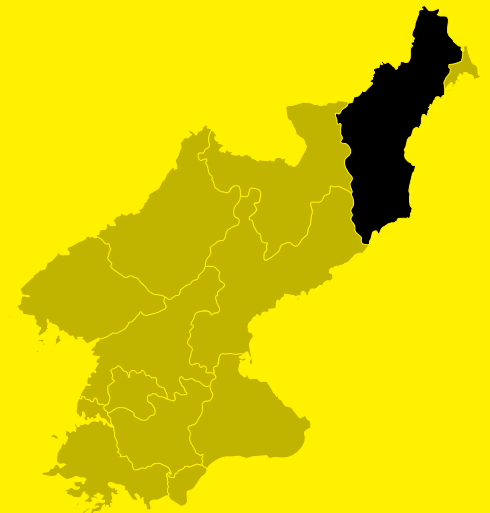


these kinds of things are basically ordered by the Ministry of State Security and conducted per each People's Unit or some other organisation.

Voice  
48

Early Phases of Covid-19 Quarantine  
in North Hamgyong Province

Hello, my name is  
Shin Geum-sil.  
I was born in  
North Hamgyong  
Province.  
I left North Korea  
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South Korea.



Hello, my name is Shin Geum-sil. I was born in North Hamgyong Province. I left North Korea in the middle of 2020 and reached South Korea.

I was staying at home without work when I was in North Korea. That is not to say that I had a workplace where I paid them my share. I was just jobless. Usually, joblessness would get you arrested in North Korea. But I had someone I knew in the People's Council, so I was being protected. That's why I could stay at home. It's not that I was jobless from the start, but I spent about two years after graduating from school working somewhere.

By 2020, I had actually lost all hope of coming to South Korea as all roads leading out of North Korea had been blocked.

Then one day, I was visited by a friend of mine. We talked about one thing after another, and he told me that he planned on leaving North Korea, and he wanted me to come with him. I told him that I didn't have that kind of money and that I had given up on leaving – since it usually takes a lot of money to be able to leave North Korea. This friend told me not to worry about the money and asked me if I wanted to go. I asked him how it could be arranged, and he told me that his mother had made it to South Korea quite some time ago. When he had a phone call with his mother, prior to Covid-19, and told her that he wanted to go to South Korea, he was told to come out to Yanji, China. His mother should be able to arrange everything from there on. I agreed to

the plan without thinking twice. I left home the very next day.

We left North Korea without a broker. My companion had lived in that region, and had military experience. He had guts. He told me that he had the routes all figured out and told me to follow him, so I simply walked behind him without thinking too much. Later on, others were surprised to hear that we had crossed the Chinese border without a broker to assist us.

There was no Covid-19 in North Korea before I left the country. The state was also reporting that there were no cases. But as you know, Covid-19 is said to have swept across the country last year (2022). I heard from a North Korean who had experienced the symptoms, and I was told that it was just like the common cold. I still haven't been able to contact my mother via phone ever since I left North Korea. But I have friends who have been able to make contact with family back in North Korea, and they were able to hear about the Covid-19 situation there.

Let me tell you about the Covid-19 quarantine in North Korea, as I experienced it. We started wearing masks in late January 2020, while I was in North Korea. We were restricted from being outdoors without a mask. The restrictions were put into practice by the People's Council, and there were Inspection Units in the streets. Inspection Units from the Women's Union and College would inspect clothing, but they started inspecting masks too. There were single-use masks, which I think might have been a little expensive for an average North Korean. You only get to use those for a day, right? As a result, people wore a lot of fabric masks. Single-use and fabric masks could be acquired from the marketplace. Fabric masks could be washed and reused many times. The price ranged quite a bit – from 1,500 North Korean won to 10,000 won per mask. The ones with pretty designs were

expensive. There were already masks worn by people who worked in clothes factories, but most of the masks came in from China.

While the borders were closed, there was a good stockpile of masks that were imported for the winter season. People used to wear masks in the winter before. It can get very cold in the region where I lived, so we had some demand for winter masks. But with the Covid-19 pandemic, wearing masks became a thing of everyday life all of a sudden. Maybe that's why I couldn't see anyone with a cold – because everyone was wearing masks. I was told from medicine peddlers that cold medicine did not sell that year. Masks were inconvenient to wear, but they prevented people from catching colds.

The state also distributed items for disinfection measures. I think the hand sanitizers took the form of a tablet. Each household was provided with these tablets which were meant to be mixed with water for washing hands. We were told by the state to wash our hands often. There were these stations in North Korea called “quarantine stations” (*wisaengbangyokso*). They had personnel come out to sanitise the buses everyday. I didn't know what liquid it was, but they would continue to spray the liquid. Without it, the buses were not allowed to operate. North Koreans are good at following orders coming from the higher-ups.

The state also notified us regarding quarantine measures. There is only one party in North Korea, which means there are Party cells that form a pyramid structure. When the directive is made from the upper echelons, the message is surely transmitted to the lowest levels. The same message is passed on to the students and the Women's Union members too. It's an organic transmission – the People's Units, the schools... They are all the same.

The state continued to offer training on Covid-19 disinfection measures.

For instance, we would be taught what symptoms a patient has when infected with Covid-19. Then there were inspections taking place at work – members sent from the People's Council, or some organisation would come to pick workers at random and ask questions about the training. They would ask for instance, what you would do when you don't feel so well. If the worker failed to answer correctly, the managers would be in trouble for that. There was also a new organisation called the “Covid-19 emergency quarantine unit” or something, consisting of 4~9 members. There is a contact point designated per each sector and per each workplace. The organisation couldn't come to inspect every day, so they would often do interviews via phone call. If it was close by, they would visit in person to ask questions related to the training. People would be punished for not knowing the right answer. This was done very rigidly. Failure to practise disinfection would be punishable by two or three days at Training Camp, I was told. The longest sentence would be about ten days.

There were also restrictions over transportation. They wouldn't let people travel beyond their province. One could not travel from South Hamgyong Province to North Hamgyong Province, for instance. A lot of such restrictions took place due to Covid-19. It was only possible to travel inside the same province. They also prohibited groups of over three or four people from forming. It was difficult to travel to another province in the past too, but it got even harder with Covid-19. It's not like in South Korea where you can just decide to go somewhere and leave.

One needs to visit an administrative office to get all the papers stamped and go through the police station and what not. One has to go through a lot of trouble to travel.

Looking back, quarantine in North Korea was not state-of-the-art. They didn't have much. The few doctors that we had were made to patrol a designated area every day for each of the People's Units. They used to attach some disinfection material on the doorknobs too – only for them to get dirty after a few days. Seeing that it wasn't working as planned, they would take all of them off. They also utilised posters in large letters for each household telling us how we should prevent Covid-19. It was a mandatory requirement for everyone, so there could be no exceptions. Every gate and entrance to the house would have these posters attached. It is so that the posters serve as a reminder.

Compared to North Korea's response to other epidemics in the past, Covid-19 was dealt with using tighter measures.

People took Covid-19 very seriously.

This is because while North Korea didn't have Covid-19 back then, there were news broadcasts showing the situation in China and the US. There were tolls of those infected and dead in the tens of thousands. All of this would be shown on the 8 PM news. Watching the news and seeing Covid-19 spread into the world, we could tell that Covid-19 was a serious issue.

My thoughts on North Korea's quarantine practices are that they may be a bit forceful but it's the only possible way – given how the country does not have state-of-the-art technology. If they didn't enforce strict measures, they wouldn't be able to get anything done. There is no medicine, no vaccines, not even a whole lot of medical equipment like they have here in South Korea. There was not a lot of gear for doctors to wear. As such, the state had to keep people from forming groups, stay under a certain number of people, and shut down all schools, kindergartens, and colleges. They made sure people were not gathering in groups at all. When seen in a group of four or five people outdoors, you would be made to disperse. The elderly and the children were said to be especially vulnerable to Covid-19, so kids under the age of ten were prohibited from being on their own. They had to be accompanied by parents when outdoors, and otherwise they couldn't be outside. Children tend to be more vulnerable toward diseases, right? Even as grownups were allowed to be outdoors with masks on, children were prohibited from being outdoors even if they wore masks. That was how things were by the time I left North Korea.

It was a brief period of time when I experienced North Korea's disinfection measures for the Covid-19 pandemic, but I heard about people starving to death due to food shortages once the lockdowns took place. I didn't see it for myself, but I was told that this happened mostly in the countryside. There were struggling people in my home county too. There is no word for “going on a diet” in North Korea – at least not where I lived. By the time I left North Korea, we still had three meals a day regardless of how tough things were. I was told, however, that people in North Korea only eat two meals a day. Prior to Covid-19,

there used to be some handicraft work – sewing and knitting – commissioned from China. People without jobs would take that work to earn maybe 5,000~10,000 North Korean won. But I think this has all been shut down. I believe such opportunities have been shut down. As such, even those meagre earnings of 5,000~10,000 won a day are now gone. This is the situation now that nothing moves in or out of North Korea. The situation got even tougher with what little opportunity we had now gone. That's why I am sure there are people dying of starvation in North Korea. They won't reveal it, but I'm sure there are. The agricultural sector is also struggling as time goes by. As for the price of goods, rice prices didn't soar that high while I was there. But the price of sugar, cooking oil, and food additives nearly doubled. But then I was told recently that the price of rice also jumped very high.

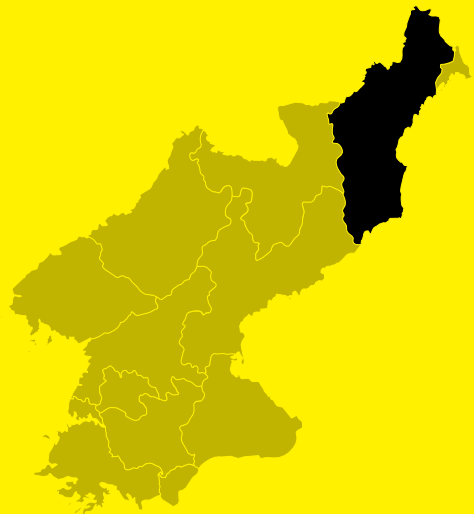
North Korea pays attention to statements made by the international community.

I was told that North Korea does not downright ignore such criticisms. It doesn't live in remote isolation after all. North Korea in the past used to commit terrorist attacks in other countries, but nowadays it seems to look after itself more. That's why I think it's important for the international community to raise its voice on human rights issues to North Korea.

The upper-class in North Korea is not unaware of these issues. It's the ordinary folks like us that are ignorant. The high-ranking people cannot be that ignorant. They simply choose

to close their eyes and ears because they are scared of Kim Jong-un. The man killed his own uncle. How can you not be scared? You get executed for dozing off in his presence... They cannot speak up because they fear him, but they know. Even so, I'm sure those in high-ranking positions want the regime to continue unchanged. They can afford to live without having to do work. It's not like in South Korea where a politician can be publicly humiliated for one misconstrued expression. In North Korea, people do not know enough about what goes on among those in power to be able to criticise them. The upper-class can continue to have a good life as long as they win Kim Jong-un's favour. And they won't want a war. Because those who have do not wish to lose what they have stockpiled. I think they could be scared of reunification. They will have to let go of everything they have. The people are keen on reunification, but those in power are probably not so keen.

Hello, my name is  
Kim Min-seon.  
I was born in North  
Hamgyong Province.  
I left North Korea in  
the middle of 2018  
and reached South  
Korea later that year.



Hello, my name is Kim Min-seon. I was born in North Hamgyong Province. I left North Korea in the middle of 2018 and reached South Korea later that year.

My hometown is located in the southern part of North Hamgyong Province. It is difficult to escape from the country when you are living in the southern region of the province. One has to make it to the Chinese border to escape. I crossed the Chinese border through Hyesan in Ryanggang Province. People living in the southern part of North Korea have to make it to the border to be able to escape. One must make it to the border towns such as Hoeryong, Musan, or Hyesan.

I need a travel permit in order to travel from my hometown to the border regions. As my mother had fled to South Korea before me, my files would mention that my mother was “missing.” A missing person in North Korea is most likely staying in China, so the state assigned a police officer to spy on me. This is because they suspected that I could attempt to follow my mother whenever I had a chance. It was very difficult for me to get a travel permit as a result. But in North Korea, money solves everything. I bribed the police officers, and they escorted me to Hyesan. What these police officers did not know was that I was planning on going to South Korea. I made up an excuse saying that I had to go to Hyesan to tend to some business. The officers will take the bribe and pretend they don’t know anything, since they are also struggling to make ends meet.

The police officer didn’t escort me by car or anything. I had to travel through Kilju in order to travel to Hyesan from my hometown. There were no issues in getting myself to Kilju since we were travelling over a land route. But things got harder as I travelled from Kilju to Hyesan. There were many police

officers on the train to Hyesan, as it was a border town. Upon boarding the train, I am made to show my travel permit. But since I had no permit on me, I had to bribe an officer as I was boarding the train – telling him that I do not have a permit but I need to get to Hyesan to pick up some cash there. The police officer covered for me, saying that I can stay in one of the train cars that he is supervising. Once he does that, all the other officers assigned to that part of the train will think, “I should cover for her since she’s with him.” It’s a problem if only one officer does it, but most officers out of the five stationed there are providing cover for someone else. So they turn a blind eye for one another. I think there were maybe ten officers boarded on that train.

Police officers are meant to be people who protect and serve. But in reality, they only use their position for making money.

When someone is caught doing something wrong, the police officers find them at fault to meet their quota or take bribes from the person. They do not see themselves as serving the country. It has been a long time since such notions existed.

I don’t believe I’ve ever seen a police officer protect civilians and maintain safety. There are many people in North Korea who get drunk and start fights at night. The police officers do show up to stop the fights and bring them to their local police station. But even in that process, they try to make a profit out of the situation – getting a pack of cigarettes from those taken into custody, to

say the least. There are many police officers who live like that. I think most of them do.

There is this thing called the “109 Permanent Committee” in North Korea. They are the ones responsible for finding out whether there are South Korean TV series or movies being distributed – inspecting what is stored in people’s video tapes and USB drives. The 109 Committee visited my home as well. When the committee visits a flat complex, it does not knock on every door, but picks a few households to visit. The 109 Committee does not ask before their visit. They simply step in without prior notice. The committee will be knocking on your door saying that they are the 109 Committee. You are meant to open the door for them. Not opening the door for them is not an option. Once the committee finishes inspecting the very first household, the household will start telling the neighbours that the 109 Committee is making the rounds and that they should hide their belongings. Hearing that, I would start tidying up the house. Then when the 109 Committee finishes inspecting my house, I also tell my acquaintances to get rid of your USB drives and what not since the 109 Committee is making its rounds. We all look out for each other in this way. The 109 Committee members gather up themselves, while we also look out for one another. We all have mobile phones to communicate that some activity is taking place somewhere.

There would be maybe five to seven members of the 109 Committee showing up for an inspection. But these people do not move about in a single group, but would be inspecting in pairs. There was a pair that came into my house. I’m guessing they’re not supposed to act as a single person because one person may take bribes and pretend they didn’t see anything, even if they

spot a South Korean movie at my home. They usually come as a pair. But even when they do come as a pair, they might turn a blind eye to South Korean movies. They step into my house and start searching all over. They search not just the TV but even the USB drive to see what is stored in it. If it turned out that I was in possession of a South Korean TV series, I would go to jail. When it comes to that, rich people will bribe their way out of inspections while poor people will head to jail.

I had neighbours who were caught by the 109 Committee. Some of them were my friends. I was also caught once. A friend of mine got caught watching South Korean video footage. It wasn't a TV series. The police officers gave my friend a piece of paper, asking my friend to write down what she had watched to that point, with whom, where, etc. They told her to write the same thing repeatedly. She told me that she cannot help but write everything down after the 10th or 20th time. That's how she ended up writing my name on it. I had to leave home and stay hidden in Hyesan for a while.

The police sometimes use beatings during interrogations. I think my friend snitched on 40 others. My name was among them, but there were other friends who were doing military service at the time. The fact that they've watched South Korea movies was made known to their superiors and they had a difficult time during service. There were public criticism sessions too. There would be a gathering of young people with the accused made to stand at the centre of the crowd. Then the youngsters would be made to criticise the person. They use very strong language in these sessions. The funny thing is, though, that there is probably not a single person that had not watched South Korean shows among the criticising crowd. I was in Hyesan at the

time, so I was not present on site. But I remember my mother and friends telling me to never come back since I could get in trouble.

I only found out about this in South Korea, but I had never heard of LGBTI<sup>❶</sup> people when living in North Korea.

North Koreans are not aware of such a word to begin with.

I first heard about it after coming to South Korea and it was all very new to me. I spent a lot of time talking with friends in North Korea, but we never came across such a topic. Sexual minorities would be an alien concept, but there may have been some homosexual people in North Korea now that I think of it. It's something beyond the regular imagination in North Korea. North Koreans are too busy with their lives to care for such things, and they tend not to think of anything out of the ordinary. This is because their lives have been prescribed in that way. Their lives are restrained on what to do and what not to do, so they cannot think of anything outside that.

As for religion, there were a few people who would read religious materials even though there was no freedom of belief.

❶ An abbreviation for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex.



Some of them would end up in prison. Most of the time, it's Christianity. They are caught reading the Bible. I did encounter the Bible once in North Korea. A family member of mine was in possession of some South Korean videos, TV series, and books (in mobile text format). Back in those days, you only had to plug in a USB drive into a mobile phone to access those files. This was around 2010. It was when North Koreans started carrying mobile phones around. The state didn't know so well about such things, so they let them be. Naturally, I listened to South Korean music, watched movies, and did all sorts of stuff with my mobile phone. But then after a few years, the state placed restrictions on all of those things, perhaps because they found out about what was going on. Now it is no longer possible. Anyways, back then, I read a book stored in my mobile phone, and considered it very strange. I deleted it right away. Now that I think of it, that was the Bible. I didn't even know what the Bible was back then. I was reading it without thinking, and the words were rather strange. I didn't read so much of it, because it was rather dull. I couldn't figure out what the book was trying to say. I only read a part of it, thinking that this was a type of book I've never seen before.

I believe there are Christians in North Korea. One time, while I was in Hyesan, my friend's husband got arrested. He was arrested for possessing a Bible. Back then I didn't know what the Bible was, so I simply considered him mad. But now that I think back, I think he believed in God. This was back in 2015 or 2016. If you are caught being religious, you would be sent to a Political Prison Camp. Being religious is dealt with as a more serious crime than watching South Korean movies. One shouldn't be watching South Korean movies in the first place, but reading the Bible is just something else. The act is interpreted as an even

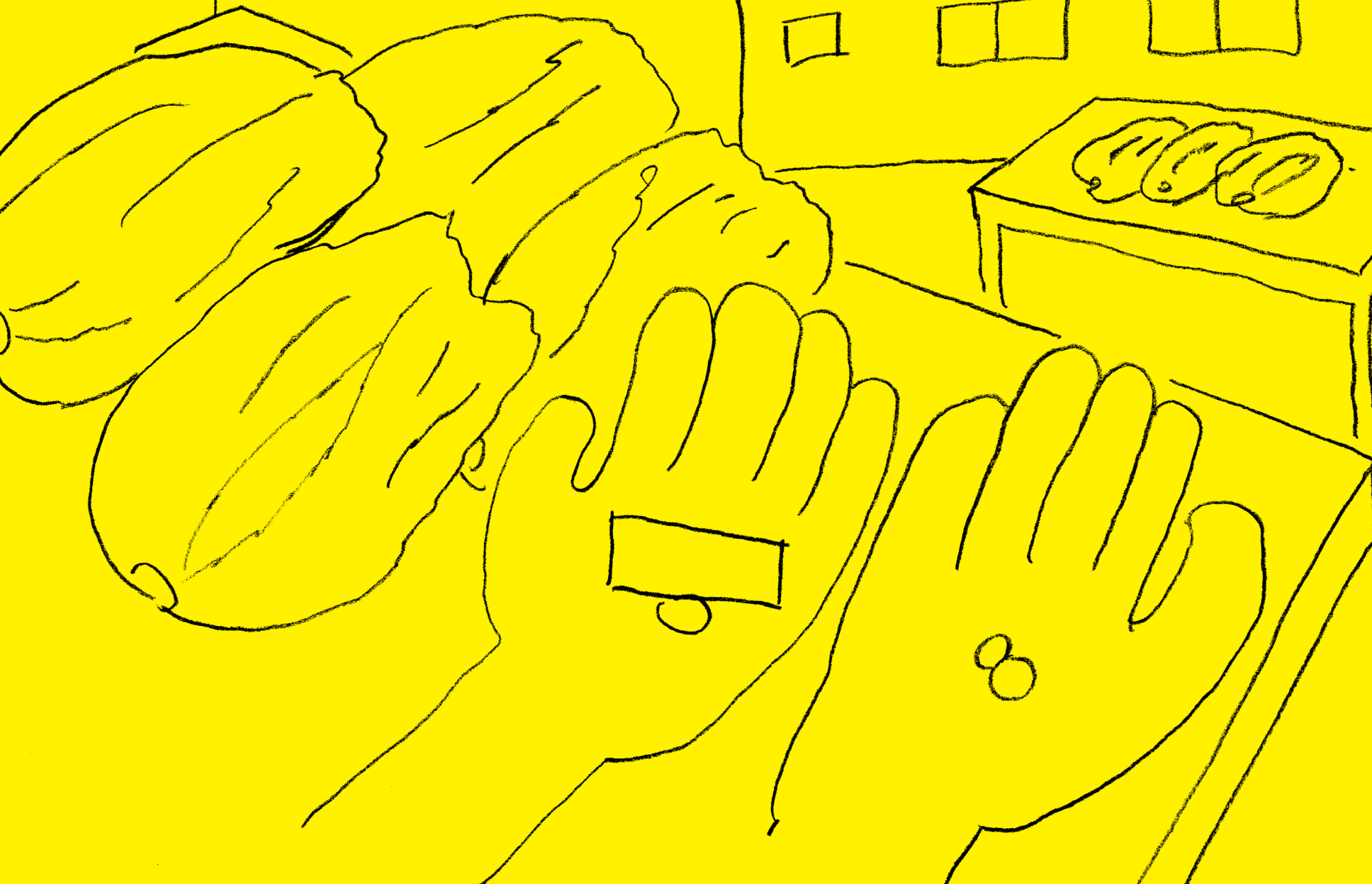
worse offence. South Korean TV series and movies are banned because they fear that it may have a bad influence on the minds of young people. Believing in a religion, on the other hand, is seen as something worse – another level of corruption. This is because North Korea is a country where people are meant to worship Kim Jong-un. But by reading the Bible, those people are worshipping God instead. It is this understanding that drives such criminals to be punished in harsher ways. They deal with religion more seriously because it could come to asking them to choose between Kim Jong-un and God, simply speaking. Those who have read the Bible are either sent to the Political Prison Camps or sentenced to death, from what I know.

I've heard many things about Political Prison Camps. I've heard that it is very difficult to get out once you're in, and that it's located in a deep valley somewhere. I also know that there are many that starve to death, and that the level of hard labour is severe. I think it's better to be sentenced to death rather than to be sentenced to a Political Prison Camp. Perhaps, if one has a chance of escaping from a Political Prison Camp, it might be better that way. But unless that's the case, I think the death sentence is better.

A political prisoner is treated differently from other criminals. They are treated worse than murderers. They are seen as having a corrupt mind. Other crimes might have been committed for economic reasons, but the crimes committed by political prisoners are treated as high treason, basically. One time, my father told me where Political Prison Camps were located. But I can't remember anymore. Grownups would talk about such things. I would hear snippets of it when I was around. I heard about Political Prison Camps mostly from my father, so I don't know so much aside from that.

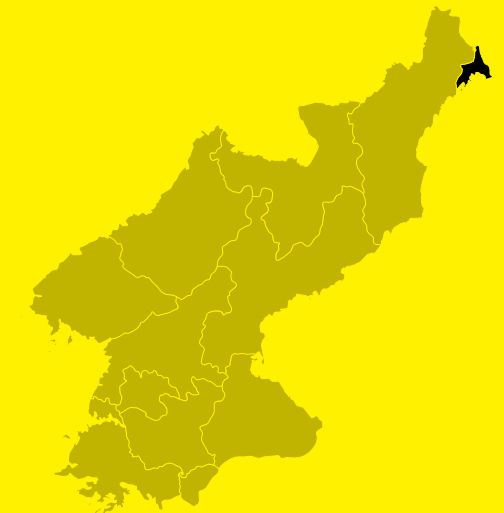
The Self-reliant  
Economy

as a Free for All



50	Kim So-hyang	Rason Special City	515
51	Ryu Hyon-suk	Running a Restaurant	525
52	Choe Ju-hyok	The Construction Industry	533
53	Kang Hyok-gil	Private Smuggling vs. State Smuggling	539
54	Ko Eun-hui	Bribes, Wealth, and Capitalism	545
55	Kim Myong-hui	Transportation in North Korea	555
56	Ju Hye-mi	Forecast on the Food Situation and Information on Political Prison Camps	562
57	Park Eun-jeong	Brokering Cash Transfers between North and South Korea	575
58	Oh Jeong-seon	Living in North Korea with Disabilities	583
59	Lim Hyeon-sun	Smuggling at the Centre of the Commercial Economy	590
60	Kim Su-ok	Meat and Food Culture	597
61	Park So-jin	The Coal Trade	602

Hello, my name is  
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in Rason.  
I left North Korea  
in 2016 and reached  
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same year.



Hello, my name is Kim So-hyang. I was born and raised in Rason. I left North Korea in 2016 and reached South Korea in the same year.

My hometown Rason is a special economic zone. We have state-owned corporations along with “joint ventures” that are based on joint investments between foreigners and North Korean authorities, and then there are “foreign-owned businesses” that are run by foreigners themselves.

I worked at a foreign-owned business for some years, before quitting to do my own business. Foreign-owned businesses are mostly run by people from China. There are some Russian-owned enterprises, but they are few in number – maybe one in a hundred. I never heard of a business owned by a foreigner other than from China and Russia. I’ve heard that Rason has some 500 foreign-owned enterprises and an even greater number of joint ventures.

There are joint venture companies in most industrial sectors – beverage, shoes, canned seafood, and more. Joint ventures may have a Chinese person sitting as CEO, but there are more companies with a North Korean in that position. Joint ventures don’t pay regular wages like in a state-owned corporation. Since there is no freedom of occupation in North Korea, those who get to work in these joint ventures are often assigned by the state. People who come from a good background or those with “connections” will get the job. They had a wage system, but it would be only about 50 to 300 yuan a month depending on the role and the company. The reason why people with good backgrounds prefer joint ventures, even with little pay, is that the job is easier than in a state-owned corporation. The pay itself is also better than working for a state-owned business. Two weeks’

work at a state-owned corporation will get you only 5,000~10,000 North Korean won. Joint ventures offer better conditions all in all compared to a state-owned corporation, so people coming from good backgrounds will prefer to go there than to get a job at a state-owned business. Even with the meagre salary, they would prefer a joint venture because of the workload.

Then there are foreign enterprises in many sectors. A great many of them are restaurants (serving Chinese food), hotels, casinos, gaming arcades (for gambling), and shops. I’ve spent many years working in these foreign-owned restaurants, hotels, and game arcades. When I worked at hotels, I used to deal with immigration office work related to foreigners. There wasn’t a particular name for my role or position. You could think of me as a regular office worker by South Korean standards. All the guests were foreigners. We didn’t have any domestic guests. North Koreans were prohibited. They couldn’t stay even if they paid. Rason, in particular, is a very difficult place to get into if you are from another part of the country.

The hotel that I worked at had dozens of rooms. A day’s lodging would cost about 50 Chinese yuan. Most of the people staying in my hotel were all there for business, so there were many long-term tenants. By long-term, I mean they would stay there for months, maybe years. They move back and forth between China and North Korea. These are Chinese merchants who travel between China and North Korea. They will pay anything from 1,200 to 2,000 yuan a month. The hotels were all so crowded with almost no vacancies. This was the case for all the other hotels – not just the one I worked at. In Rason, there are many hotels and restaurants that serve Chinese customers. There are more than 300 hotels. North Koreans get to stay at some of the

hotels if they are a cadre – “Rason Hotel” for example. Casinos in Rason were doing so well to the point that it was said that casinos make up 80% of taxes being paid by the top 500 corporations located in Rason. The casino at the “Emperor Hotel & Casino” there used to be bustling with guests back in the day.

Getting a job at a foreign-owned enterprise is not for everyone – even if you have a high school diploma. You need more than 1 year of experience. The foreigner (boss) has the right to hire whoever he wants. Of course, it’s always possible for a candidate to be turned down after running a profile check at the police station. This is because the employee has to be working with a foreigner. But it’s nothing like in South Korea where jobseekers submit resumes for the companies to hire. North Korea has a government agency similar to the Ministry of Employment and Labour in South Korea. The employer asks this government agency to hire someone for him. In North Korea, personal connections and family background matter a lot, and they have a big effect on the hiring process. Rason has many foreign-owned companies, and they tend to utilise the service of the said agency to hire someone.

I could get a job at a foreign-owned corporation thanks to a relative who could help me. You could continue to work permanently at a foreign-owned business if you want to. You also get paid more than joint ventures or state-owned corporations. Joint ventures had a fixed minimum wage of 400 Chinese yuan a month back in 2016. This was decided by the state. Except, we don’t use the word “wage” in North Korea. Anyways, I made 1,500 yuan a month. A cook will be paid 2,000 to 3,000 yuan, and a manager at a large casino for foreigners would be paid up to 5,000 yuan, I was told. These are payments after taxes. A foreigner has

to pay certain taxes to hire a North Korean. I don’t know exactly because I’m not an expert on taxes, but from what I’ve heard, it’s 80% of the worker’s salary withheld in tax and the remainder goes to the worker. That is to say, the 1,500 won salary I was getting must have been the remaining 20% after the 80% was taken by the state.

Rason is harder to get into than Pyongyang since it’s a special economic zone.

People from other parts of the country need a permit to get into Rason.

It’s not easy to get a permit. This is because there are many foreigners in Rason. On the other hand, it’s easy for a citizen of Rason to travel to another region. Rason has many foreigners, although they’re mostly Chinese. There are many foreign cars on the streets. The foreigners will usually run a store dealing with seafood or do a peddling business between North Korea and China. As for the stores, they enter into a long-term contract with the North Korean authorities that spans 10 to 50 years. It’s been over 20 years since foreigners started flooding into Rason. Before that, it was hard to catch a glimpse of a foreigner in Rason. Although Rason was selected as the special trade zone in the early 1990s, it didn’t mean that the trade started booming right after. If my memory serves, it must have been in 2005 when the foreigners started crowding the city.

Rason is more developed than the other cities in North Korea. For one thing, the city is clean. Then the buildings are larger and fancier. All the buildings are multi-storied in Rason, perhaps because of the many corporations located there. We have flats and lifts. We have a number of buildings that reach 20 stories. I was actually surprised to see that restaurants in Korea are so small. The restaurants in Rason are big and clean in comparison. Most of them were Chinese restaurants, but some sold North Korean food or Western food. People in Rason were better off than people in other regions. There wasn't anyone without enough to eat or anyone poor. Rich people in Rason are better off than rich people in South Korea. I've been to places like Sinuiju, Sariwon, and Hoeryong. I could see that Rason was more developed compared to those places. North Korea isn't all poor as South Koreans tend to imagine. Things are difficult in the countryside to be sure. But it's not so hard to earn a living if you are in one of the cities.

Rason is a wealthy city, but we didn't have a good power supply. There is, though, what is called "dollar electricity." The official electric power supplied from the state can only be used for one or two hours a day. The hours were always different as it wasn't running on a fixed schedule. But this dollar electricity could be used 24 hours as long as you paid for it. Business owners would use dollar electricity. They tend to use dollar electricity during the day and operate a personal power generator during the night. Technically speaking, dollar electricity also comes from state-owned power plants. I believe the dollar electricity that is used at Rason is generated at a plant in Kilju County, North Hamgyong Province.

The wealthy investors in North Korea do not get to buy land

as they do in South Korea. But they get to buy buildings. There are no real estate agents like in South Korea. Instead, houses are bought and sold between individuals. Also, you could buy cars. It is not possible to register a car under private ownership in North Korea. Instead, the car is registered under a corporate licence but is used by the individual. Those with money will buy a truck to transport goods. There were passenger cars too. There used to be a lot of "Hyundai" cars – many "Sonata" line cars in particular. There were also many "Mercedes-Benz" and "Toyota" vehicles. They seemed to have come in via China.

Rason is only about 30 minutes away from China, so you could access South Korean culture frequently.

I didn't like South Korean culture so much while I was in North Korea, so I didn't listen to the songs or watch the shows that much. It's usually the MP4 devices that we use to watch videos. You could get one of those by asking a foreigner coming to Rason. There are songs and videos saved in the MP4 players by default. I remember seeing a South Korean music video the first time I got an MP4 player myself. There were women dancing while dressed in white, pretty clothes. It used to be MP3 players that people used to listen to music before 2008. But then we started getting MP4s and MP5s from 2010 onward. EVD players have been used since a long time ago. I think it was around 2004 when people started watching things on EVD players with CDs. There are still people using EVD players since they're so cheap.

Young people use USB drives more, but older folks still use CDs or DVDs. These days, tablet computers that look like iPads are preferred since they require less electricity.

We had mobile phones, laptops, tablet PCs, and such. But none of them had internet access. I happened to have heard South Korean broadcasts over the radio. I could buy a portable radio that runs on battery from a foreigner. It could be dialled to Chinese broadcasts and South Korean broadcasts. I could pick up signals for South Korean channels from home. Radio was popular among people who went out to sea and needed weather forecasts. If they happened to pick up a South Korean radio signal, they would listen to the broadcasts. But it was impossible to listen to it openly. The police officers would catch you. We could watch Chinese movies and TV series – maybe not the newest shows, but given they weren't of problematic content, they would be released as CDs for sale. They had been censored already, so there would be no problem in watching them. You could also watch the newest movies from Western countries – depending on what the movie was about. But you could never watch anything from South Korea. It was a similar story with clothes and merchandise from South Korea. Watching a South Korean TV series was punishable by a two year prison sentence around the time I left the country.

Judging from those around me, I think antagonism against Kim Jong-un was widespread – as there is no freedom in North Korea. There is no freedom to do as one pleases – choosing what to wear, what to eat, what to say. You are not free to have a conversation with a foreigner. I worked in the hotel business, so I could engage with foreigners. But regular citizens could not. I think other people shared this sentiment. It wasn't just me. I just

happened to be more sensitive in nature, so I left North Korea because I couldn't stand it anymore. But a great many people in North Korea accept the situation and live there. Everyone has discontent; they just can't show it.

The biggest change in everyday life since Kim Jong-un came into power was that young people started to dress fancy. I think Kim Jong-un must have relaxed regulations on fashion. I was told that women get to wear white trousers in Pyongyang, although that's not the case in Rason. As in the case of the *Moranbong Band* members these days, they tend to wear sexier clothes instead of the traditional hanbok.

When it comes to politics, however, ideological control and policing has been strengthened more than before – perhaps because of the many foreigners living in Rason.

I was told that an underground religious group (Protestants) was caught and sent to Political Prison Camps back in 2013. They weren't people from Rason, but some other region. I believe that the North Korean authorities made it well-known to publicise the news of the crackdown.

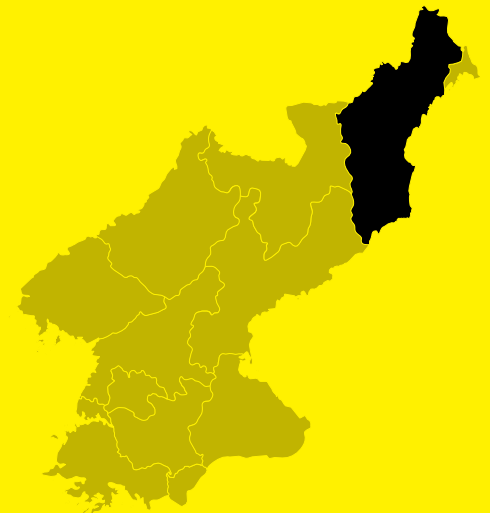
Residents of Rason look forward to reunification. They believe reunifying with South Korea will allow for even greater freedom. But as someone who's left North Korea, I am against it. Reunification won't make the Kim regime disappear right away. It will make things perilous for those who have escaped North

Korea. In fact, I think of leaving for another country when people here talk of reunification. I have bad dreams.

Voice  
51

Running a Restaurant

Hello, my name is  
Ryu Hyon-suk.  
I was born in North  
Hamgyong Province.  
I left North Korea  
in 2017 and reached  
South Korea in the  
same year.





Hello, my name is Ryu Hyon-suk. I was born in North Hamgyong Province. I left North Korea in 2017 and reached South Korea in the same year.

My family had a restaurant business. Legally, private individuals are prohibited from running a restaurant in North Korea. But you could bribe your way around it. The restaurant was also my home. All other restaurants in my neighbourhood had this hybrid design of having a restaurant in your house. The house would be renovated as a space that could serve both purposes. My house was about 25 *pyeong* in area. We would operate as a restaurant by day, and sleep in it by night. The house was well decorated to meet its restaurant function. There were 6 tables in the hall. From the outside, it would appear as a regular house.

Our restaurant didn't have a sign. There were more restaurants in the marketplace, but it was the restaurants lining the big street, including ours, that were bustling with business.

You can say that other cities and provinces also have private-owned restaurants near the market.

Although we didn't have signs or advertisements like here in South Korea, there were still ways to let people know. When we first started business, we started small. We would have the doors open and keep the food displayed at an outdoor stall to let people know this was a restaurant. Small restaurants usually sold food this way, using an outdoor stall. But these are actually low-class restaurants. Mine also started as a stall, but we refurbished our

house into a wider dining area. It took some work to get it done.

Our restaurant had over 80 different dishes on the menu. We had grilled pork belly (*samgyeopsal*), braised pollock, *yukhoe*, octopus, salted clams, stir-fried glass noodles (*japchae*), dog broth, a stew resembling South Korean *budaejjigae*... We had a variety of both cold plates and hot plates. Pork belly wasn't served exactly the same way as in South Korea, but it was pretty close. The meat is the same because pork belly can only mean the same cut of meat. But instead of having a stove installed on each table like in South Korean restaurants, we would have portable gas burners on each table for cooking the meat. Other restaurants did business in similar ways. The butane canisters for the burners were refilled at home, from a larger vessel. Sometimes we would buy canisters pre-charged, but it didn't make sense economically. It's normal to refill gas at home. There was a place for selling gas. We would buy gas in a 5-litre can or a 10-litre can and refill it into smaller canisters at home. The gas would be used for cooking and other purposes at home.

We had a separate supplier for the food ingredients. The supplier would handle most of our demand in bulk, and whatever ingredients we needed in small quantities we would get from the marketplace ourselves. Take the pork belly for example, where we have a grocer who supplies the meat and other generic ingredients. He will get us the ingredients whenever we make a phone call. These are merchants who specialise in food ingredients. They will supply all the other restaurants besides ours. There are a few ways you can start a business relationship with these merchants, but the most representative ways are as follows. First, one must become familiar with the grocer that sells the necessary ingredients at the market. You build trust with

the grocer by making a few purchases there. From there, you will get to develop a partnership where you can make orders for ingredients via phone call. Another way is to start a partnership with one of the merchants who visit restaurant to restaurant to promote themselves. If the quality looks good and the price is right, you can start a business transaction with the seller. These methods are no different in South or North Korea. My family's restaurant had more than one supplier. For pork, we had three. For other ingredients, we also kept a few different vendors to buy from whenever needed. Suppliers are usually hesitant to deliver ingredients in small quantities, but long-standing partners with a high level of trust would do us the favour. Also, at least once every day, we had to take a 10 minute walk to the market to buy the ingredients we needed.

North Korea also has a credit-based economy.

The level of trust is of the essence for people who run a shop – like my family.

If the ingredients are of fresh quality, the partnership goes on even if the seller has some abrasive traits. It's because we trust her for the quality of goods. The payments won't be made on every order but would be settled at the end of the month. Sometimes, there would be delays in payments, but it wouldn't cause a big problem because there was trust built up between the two sides. There is no business that is not based on credit. The

reason we can do business on credit is because there is a level of trust. All enterprises in North Korea can be said to be based on trust.

My family's restaurant had, on average, one full house of customers at lunchtime and about two rotations at dinnertime when business was good. That would come down to about eighteen tables that we served in a day. On the busiest of days, we would have all the tables full non-stop for the entire day. But business was bad around the time I left for South Korea. We would only serve a few tables in a day. The police crackdowns were so bad that customers wouldn't come. I've heard recently that the crackdowns are still bad and that it's bad for business. Usually, bribery will help ease the situation, but there are times when even bribery won't do the trick. If the Party Headquarters issues directives, bribes won't do. Cadres hesitate to take bribes under such circumstances because it could mean the end of their career.

Pork belly in North Korea is served slightly differently from how it is in South Korea. In North Korea, we don't serve pork belly in single-person portions, instead, we sell by weight. A kilogram of pork belly in North Korea would cost about 23,000 North Korean won. A kilogram is enough for two people. An order of pork belly would include side dishes too, just like in South Korea. Kimchi and coffee would be included as part of the meal. There's also garlic, green chilli peppers, and bean paste (*ssamjang*). North Korean bean paste is not like the South Korean variety, but the taste is roughly the same. We would serve different side dishes depending on the time of the year. In the summertime, we would have mung bean cakes and diced radish kimchi instead of cabbage kimchi. We also couldn't have onions and chilli peppers

when the prices went up. We would have seasonal dishes as sides depending on the time of the year. I see that South Korean restaurants tend to serve more side dishes than in North Korea. Also, cold noodles are served as dessert after the meat. It's usually cold buckwheat noodles (*naengmyeon*). Hotpots like *jjigae* in South Korea are usually not eaten together with pork belly.

At the restaurant, we sold liquor made of corn, acorn, magnolia berries, and goji berries. Corn whisky was brewed and sold by private individuals, while those made of acorns and berries were factory-made. These spirits contain about 25% alcohol. It's much stronger than *soju* in South Korea. One needs to brew the liquor themselves instead of reselling factory-made ones if they intend to make money from it, so I had to learn how to do that. Chinese liquor was too expensive to sell. We had beer too. North Koreans don't consider beer to be a type of liquor. We had Chinese beer like *Tsingtao* or *Harbin* which can be seen here in South Korea too. There was a cheaper beer brewed and sold by individuals. I don't know too much about these things because I don't drink.

State-owned restaurants were around even before I was born. Privately-owned restaurants only became widespread around 2011. Business was good for the first two years after starting our restaurant. We could make a decent amount of money beyond just making ends meet. Having a restaurant, we were in the upper bracket of the neighbourhood. We would make a monthly net profit of about 1,000 Chinese yuan a month when the business was flourishing. That is big money by North Korean standards. We would make 700 yuan on a good day. But the payout was different each day, so it's hard to say how much we made in a month. But then, business went bad in our third year.

At first,  
we didn't bribe the police officers.

But as news of our restaurant spread, police officers started visiting our place. We would give them some expensive cigarettes, a pack or two at a time, and they would go back without making a fuss about it. We got close to one police officer since we saw him so often. Later on, he would turn a blind eye toward us. If they received directives from their higher-ups to conduct a crackdown, the police officers would visit us ahead of time to tell us to keep the business closed for a while. That's how things used to be until Kim Jong-un gave orders for stricter controls. By then we were told that we couldn't be in business anymore. I think that was in 2014. After that, we refurbished the interior of the house to serve the old patrons, since we couldn't have the long tables set outdoors. The restaurant business started to go under from there.

Customers always paid in cash. They could pay with both Chinese currency and North Korean currency. I knew about credit cards from Chinese and South Korean TV shows, but never saw one myself in North Korea. South Koreans tend to think there are ATMs in North Korea, but I never heard of such a thing in North Korea. I don't know about Pyongyang because I've never been there. But I've been running a business for quite some time in the busiest city centre in my region. What I can say for certain is that there were no credit cards or ATMs where I lived, up to 2017 when I left the country.

Restaurants also hire employees. My family's place had employees and so did the other restaurants. We don't call them by a particular title, like "part-timer." There is a term "underling"

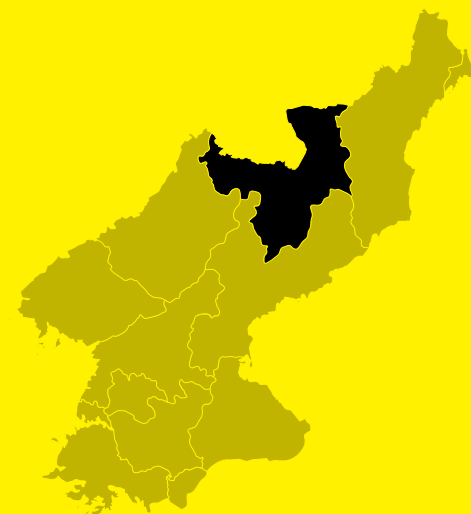
(*ssakbari*), but it's humiliating, so I would never say it out loud. We would usually just call her "big sister" or "little sister." The employees would be paid a monthly salary. Their work hours were not necessarily fixed. They would work all day every day, 7 days a week. The employees would live with the restaurant owners, and this was the case with all the other restaurants. It may appear stressful, but they only had to work while the customers were around and then have free time when none were present. At first, an employee would be paid 100 Chinese yuan a month, and over time they would get a raise like 150, 200, and 250 yuan. Foreign exchange rates fluctuate, so I don't know what the salary is like these days. In North Korea, everything is priced based on rice prices. An employee was paid 2 kg of rice as a daily stipend, so their monthly salary had to be worth 60 kg of rice.

There were no designated holidays for the employees, but they would get a few days off if they needed to visit their parents on their birthday or needed to take a few days off to get rest. This was possible because we considered them as part of the family. We work together, live together. It naturally becomes that way. The employees have their own families. In my neighbourhood, it was hard to hire someone to work for us and so we had to send word to a poorer rural village to get someone.

Voice  
52

The Construction Industry

Hello, my name is  
Choe Ju-hyok.  
I left North Korea in  
late 2018 and reached  
South Korea in  
early 2019.  
I used to live in  
Ryanggang Province  
in North Korea.



Hello, my name is Choe Ju-hyok. I left North Korea in late 2018 and reached South Korea in early 2019. I used to live in Ryanggang Province in North Korea.

I worked at the Urban Construction Office. It is where they build the houses and the flats. It's like a construction company in South Korea. South Korea is a capitalist country, so most companies are private-owned. But North Korea has a communist economy, meaning that everything is operated as a collective and everything is state-owned. Building new flats, demolishing old ones, giving out eviction orders to residents in old ground houses to build new flats on the site... that kind of work.

As old houses are demolished and new flats are built, those inhabitants of the old houses are made to stay with their relatives or in a nearby neighbourhood for 1 or 2 years while construction is underway. Those former inhabitants are given priority in getting a room in the new flat.

They build a lot of flats these days, and flats are designed to have lifts.

But the flats end up having no lifts because of the shortage in electric power.

Flats are still built with lift shafts inside. It's just that there

are no lifts installed there. It's not the lifts we lack, but the electric power. We started having flats with lifts again from around 2017. This is fairly recent. All the buildings built before that time have stairs only. The tallest would be only about 9 stories. Since I'm from a provincial city, buildings only go up to 8 or 9 stories high. You don't need a lift for that. These days, there are flats that are 10 to 13 stories tall. There are many flats in the city centres, but there are flats built around the countryside too.

Where I worked, the work was divided into the cement work team, the assembly team, the woodwork team, and the finishing team. The assembly team will put together a mould for pouring the cement, after which the cement team will do its job. After that, it's time for the assembly and woodwork teams to get busy. Once the building frame is up, it's back to the cement work team and the finishing team to go in and get the wallpapers done. I was in the cement team, and sometimes in the finishing team.

Working there, I got a living allowance, but with the economic control system going up, the monetary value came down so much that the living allowance was not even close to what can be considered livable. There was a monetary reform in 2009. After the reform, food bought with 2,225 North Korean won would be so much that a worker could live for two months with it. Earlier on, a kilogram of rice only cost 4 or 5 won. But as the economic situation worsened about 6 months after the reform, the same amount of money would get me less than a bottle of liquor. There was nothing I could buy with my salary as the value of money plummeted. These days, workers don't even care about being paid. What good is your salary if you can't even buy a drink with it? We used to get paid before the monetary reform too, but we didn't care so much for it since the amount was so small.

They still gave out rations for the family though. The construction worker is out working at the construction site, so he would be fed there. Aside from him, the family would be covered by a ration system. The wives of the construction workers would be out at the marketplace making a living. If a wife can't earn a living at the market, it's up to the husband to do so. He would have to skip work for it. Then the state would warn him for not showing up at work, saying that he could be sent to a Training Camp. Hence, he would pay a certain amount from his business profit to the workplace, monthly. The workplace would spend that money on operating expenses, and that way, he wouldn't have to show up at work. It's no longer like the old days when the state was doing well, where everything from A to Z would be covered by one's workplace. The workplace has to survive on its own too. If there are 80 employees at a workplace, 10 or 20 of them would be the "contribution crew" who would be paying the monthly contribution. The remainder was meant to show up at work, but in truth, the majority would cheat the system and not show up. The office would send someone for us when we didn't show up. Everyone worked according to their good conscience since it was unpaid work anyways.

As for the family rations, each family member besides the working member of the household would be rationed 300 grams of unprocessed corn. If there's a baby, the baby would be rationed with rice. That's because little kids cannot eat unprocessed corn. You can consider yourself fortunate enough to receive even those rations. If you have a wife and three kids, you will get 300 grams times four equaling 1.2 kilograms in rations. But was this enough to live on? I mean, can someone survive with only 300 grams of carbs a day? It helped a little, but it was not possible to live on it.

Here in South Korea, some people say that North Korea lacks construction materials and ingredients.

But that's just not true.

If you think about it, North Korea doesn't lack cement or wood or anything like that. It's the sanctions that are keeping the monetary economy from circulating, which makes for a hard living. But frankly, there are a lot of materials to go around. The people are just not affluent in terms of material wealth, but that doesn't make things difficult for construction. There is so much cement. North Korea is rich in limestones, which means you get to crunch out tons of cement. We have a lot of steel beams too. What else would you need to construct a flat other than cement and steel beams? We have plenty of wood too. The construction industry was fine. There was always work to do. The workers might be sent away to Storm Troop duty because the corporation couldn't feed them, but the construction industry was fine. Every province in North Korea has a cement factory, so there is tons of cement. A kilogram of cement would cost only 60 to 150 North Korean won. It is not true that we lack materials there.

Construction workers are not all from Urban Construction Offices, but there are also those from the Storm Troops. For instance, if there is construction going on in Samjiyon, a part of it would be handled by Ryanggang Province, while the other part would be handled by Hamgyong Province. Instead of sending one corporation to handle the task, each corporation will select

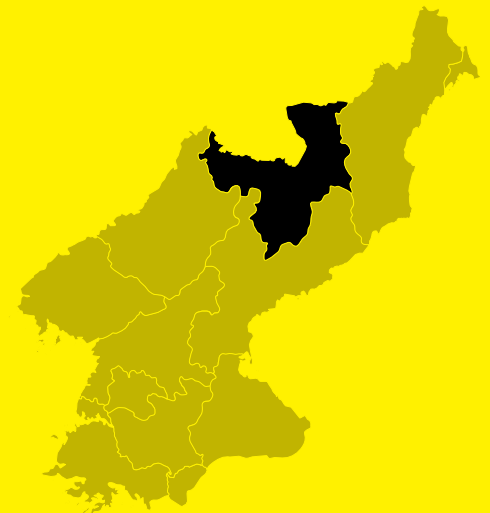
a few individuals to be dispatched as Storm Troops. These Storm Troops work in shifts. One shift would be three months long. You could be sent to Storm Troop duty even while you are working on something at the workplace. Then you have to stop whatever it was that you were doing and head out. Storm Troops don't pay you for work or anything like that. Even the food you eat there has to be self-provided. That's why we used to say we give our "flesh and bone" when on Storm Troop duty. In North Korea, they say you have to give your everything for the fatherland, for the future. They mean patriotism.

But there is some resistance over being sent as a Storm Troop. Then, they might be told to go next time instead. Or you can pay your way out of Storm Troop duty. Not complying will get you punished with a Labour Training Camp sentence. The payment here is not a bribe. You are paying an amount that is equal to the manpower that you can contribute. That way, someone else can go instead. If I have to run a business and cannot make it to Storm Troop duty, I will tell my workplace that I can't go and pay my worth so that someone else will go instead. My workplace will take half the money, while the remaining half will go to the guy who is substituting for me. He will head out to Storm Troop duty. People who need the money might volunteer to be a substitute. You need to have a knack for business to be able to make money that way, so people who are not so talented in the business world would find alternative ways to feed their families.

Voice  
53

Private Smuggling vs. State Smuggling

Hello, my name is  
Kang Hyok-gil.  
I am from  
Ryanggang Province.  
I left North Korea  
in late 2018 and  
reached Korea in  
about a month.



Hello. My name is Kang Hyok-gil. I am from Ryanggang Province. I left North Korea in late 2018 and reached Korea in about a month.

I was in the smuggling business. I would travel back and forth between China and North Korea. Smuggling became difficult ever since the sanctions took place against North Korea. Private smugglers were strictly prohibited. There is so-called “State-smuggling” that is approved by the state. A big store or a mall would participate in the smuggling trade across the Chinese border with each member of the Police, the State Security Ministry, and the Prosecutor’s office all present. I think the trade would be monitored by the Ministry of State Security, Customs office, and the Prosecutor’s office. Anyhow, those people are present on site to watch the ongoings of the trade. Once the Chinese smugglers come over, they exchange words with the North Koreans. Then they exchange the goods. The watchers from the State Security Ministry and other places are there to monitor what goods are being traded. The North Koreans who are handling the trade there are not private individuals. They belong to institutions and corporations. Big malls or stores do exist in North Korea, and they participate in the State smuggling trade.

The products that these stores and malls bring in from China range from gas cylinders for home use to industrial materials such as electric wires, welding rods, and nails. There’s foodstuff too. But speaking from what I saw, there were a lot of batteries as the power situation in North Korea is very unstable. The batteries are the quickest to be consumed. That’s why there were so many of them being brought in. There was oil too. Ever since the sanctions, oil was a constant import. I can’t speak in terms of exact quantity but I saw maybe 10 or 13 “trailer” vehicles

moving about. State smuggling takes place about once or twice a week. There were four stores in Hyesan participating in the trade, from places like the Ryangsun department store... Anyways, the shops and department stores from different places would be involved. There are many shops and department stores in Hyesan. Ryangsun department store and Moran mart are among the ones that are better known. The goods sold here are mostly acquired through state smuggling. It is here where the goods are distributed to the different provinces and counties. You can think of them as wholesalers.

About 20 to 30 percent of the entire population in Hyesan depends on the private smuggling business for a living.

It’s greater if you include other places.

You can say there is at least one person in each household involved. Metals, herbs, narcotics, and people (helping them escape) get traded in the smuggling business. I was in fact participating in the people business. Instead of goods, I would get people across the border. If they tell me they want to go to China, I allow them passage. I was in that sort of a business. I knew people on the Chinese side, so I would work there and get paid. I would spend about a month in China every time I crossed the border. Even since they locked the borders due to Covid-19, I don’t think they can continue private smuggling anymore – not under



today's conditions. But I think state smuggling is still being done quietly. North Koreans will find it difficult to survive if they decide to crack down on state smuggling as well. I did connect with someone in North Korea just today (late 2020), and I was told that state smuggling is almost down to nothing.

North Korea doesn't produce much domestically, so all the goods come from China.

I think North Korea would be in a very difficult position if they decided to regulate even the state smuggling trade.

Even in the case of money sent from South Korea, small sums cannot even make it to North Korea. It needs to be at least a million won or more to be passed along. Ever since Covid-19, I believe private smuggling is nearly impossible and state smuggling is probably very constrained. Goods are harder to get across the border. Instead, you could throw a stash of paper currency wrapped in paper to the other side when doing laundry by the Yalu River. I think that is how it is done these days. The distance is only a stone's throw away.

One of my relatives got caught trying to get a person across and was sent to a Political Prison Camp by the Ministry of State Security. This person paid tens of thousands in Chinese yuan (as bribery) and still couldn't make it out. The Ministry didn't

even tell the family about the sentence. The Ministry never lets you know. They only tell you about the detainment at the Ministry's detention centre. The family, hearing that the pre-trial examinations are under way, give up all hope knowing it was the detention centre. They expect the sentence will be given in a few months' time, and after that... it's over. There are no family visits once you are detained by the State Security Ministry. You can visit someone if they're detained at the Social Security Ministry, but not with the State Security Ministry. I believe my relative is at the Susong Reform through Labour Camp in Chongjin.<sup>1</sup> It was a life sentence. All their family members were sent there too. The crime was "Anti-state Conspiracy" or anti-state something. All in all, political prisoners are found guilty of "anti-state" crimes of some sort. But you tend to get harsher punishments for human trafficking. Even if you are helping someone get to China because the person asked for your help, it is still treated as a crime against the state.

Once sent to a Political Prison Camp, you are a dead man. No one comes back from the camps intact. I was also told that it's like a whole village there. There are shops and peddlers. You can start a family. But even if you become a married couple, you cannot spend time together. If the husband works his shift from 7 PM to 7 PM, the wife has to leave home at around 6:40 PM so that she can work her shift from 7 PM to 7 AM the next day. Then it's the husband's shift again. They are only husband and wife in name. Also, once you join the Prison Camp, your nationality card is erased. You have to return your nationality card when entering a regular labour camp. You will also be stripped of all your medals. You are no longer a citizen once you enter even a regular labour camp. You are no longer considered worthy of your

<sup>1</sup> Susong Reform through Labour Camp for Political Prisoners no. 25 in Chongjin, North Hamgyong Province.

citizenship once detained. But once you make it out, you can have your nationality card back. Political prison camps are different. Your nationality card is gone forever.

Voice  
54

Bribes, Wealth, and Capitalism

Hello, my name is  
Ko Eun-hui.  
I was born in North  
Hwanghae Province.  
I crossed the Chinese  
border in 2017  
and it took slightly  
over a month  
for me to make it to  
South Korea.



Hello, my name is Ko Eun-hui. I was born in North Hwanghae Province. I crossed the Chinese border in 2017 and it took slightly over a month for me to make it to South Korea.

I am originally from North Hwanghae Province, but after some time there, I had to move to Ryanggang Province due to family business. In North Hwanghae Province where I used to live, there was definitely more farmland than factories. They planted rice, corn, millet, sorghum, and beans. As this was one of the warmer regions in North Korea, the temperature is similar to that of South Korea, which means you can plant roughly similar crops.

After graduating school, I had a job that I worked in until I got married. But I was never paid with rations or salaries. I lived with my family who had a small patch of land, and that was what we lived off of. But that didn't mean I could stop working, because if I did that I'd be registered as an unemployed citizen to be sent off to a labour training camp. People had to go to work somewhere – be it a corporate job or some other job. Usually, you get a dispatch telling you to start working somewhere once you graduate high school. I had my family bribe a party cadre so that I could work somewhere else rather than my originally assigned workplace.

Bribes may take the form of money or many other things.

You choose different bribes depending on the other person's social status.

If it is a high-status figure that you are trying to bribe, money would be the way to go. Money is clean and easy. If you are trying to bribe a lower-status figure, then you might offer grain, pork, or tobacco. Meat is not available in shops like in South Korea. Usually, someone has to butcher the pig himself for the meat. That's why pork is so hard to come by. These things count as bribes. If it has utility value, anything could be a bribe. What I mean by high and low status is based on the person's income level and job reputation. Even if you give something that the other person doesn't need, they won't refuse. Just because you don't intend on using it doesn't mean you can't sell or trade it for something else. So people take bribes without question. In some rare cases, a person might say that they are not in need of one thing and they in fact want something else. The reason you're bribing someone is because you're trying to get something you want in return. Usually, the giver takes things into account to figure out what the other person wants, so bribes are made hard to refuse.

Bribing is customary in North Korea.

My family left for South Korea a few years earlier than I did. I gave a certain portion of the money I was getting from my family to officers of the law – I mean people like police officers and State Security officers. By bribing them, I was asking them for their help in case I got in trouble. Nowadays, there are so many people with family members in South Korea that it is impossible

to expel all of them. The police officers know all about what job your family member got in Korea. They will tell you, for instance, that such and such is working at a car wash – things that even the family doesn't know. Once in a while, the police will come over asking for money. They will say, "I know you had a phone call from South Korea this month. I need some money for firewood." That's how the cops make a living. Everyone is complicit in this system that benefits all. And so if you're stubborn and refuse to give bribes, you will get caught one day and face punishment.

As long as you are willing to pay bribes, you can reach out to a person in North Korea from South Korea. But you will be needing a middleman, no matter what. It is important that you have someone trustworthy to work as a broker. There's a difficulty in that you can never be too sure about what kind of strings the broker can pull inside North Korea. Then there's the fact that accomplices may all end up getting punished upon failure, which will also put the broker in danger too. They tend to be hesitant. A broker will usually refuse a job they cannot accomplish. But if the broker feels confident that they can get the job done, they will utilise the web of human relationships at their disposal to fulfil the request. If the broker cheats us, we just need to notify the North Korean authorities. So the work is commissioned only when the broker and the requester are confident about each other.

North Koreans value wealth. Wealthiness wasn't so important until the early 1990s. Everyone followed the socialist mindset. It was the people with poor backgrounds who would try to make up for the discrimination with wealth. They would work a little harder than others. But after the Arduous March, the people with poor backgrounds who had saved money survived while others died from starvation. They grew by participating

in the money-lending business, like the landlord class of the old days. They came to establish household economies. Since they were in possession of a lot of money, power and many other things started to be concentrated towards them. This was when people started prioritising material wealth and good living standards.

Nowadays, even motorbikes and buses are purchased privately. Of course, technically they have to be registered under institutional ownership, but the reality is that an individual pays money to own a car. Once you have a car, you can start your own transportation business. Just like inner city buses in South Korea, there are such vehicles in North Korea too – except those are owned by individuals. Usually a person who buys a bus would start operating routes, for instance, connecting Hyesan and Huchang County (present-day Kimhyongjik County), or Hyesan and Kimjongsuk County. The fees are for the bus owner to keep. People use these buses a lot. Since the state does not operate anything like that, there is no public transportation to begin with – no fuel. As the state does not have the money to operate public transportation, it cannot be done publicly or semi-publicly as they do in South Korea. You can watch clips on YouTube where they have video recordings of border regions seen from afar. All of the buses and other vehicles there are all run by private individuals. Rich people smuggle cars to start a business. On paper, they appear to be state-owned because they are registered as belonging to some office, but they are all private-owned. They say the state used to have buses running, but now it's all run by individuals as the state lacks the fuel.

An individual pays a certain percentage of their income to the corporation that has the car registered under its name. If you

pay a commission fee like that, the rest is yours to keep. That is how arrangements are made. We can find such arrangements between the state and the individual in nearly all aspects of North Korea. Some years before I left, around 2015~2017, I started seeing petrol stations in the city centres of my hometown - similar to the ones in South Korea. They don't have these at the county level – just the big and wealthy centres of provinces and cities. Before, we would have individuals who sell petrol in secret. But now we have a petrol station. Petrol stations are usually operated by a joint company with Chinese and North Korean investors. They tell the central government (Pyongyang) that they intend to start such a company and ask for permission. They can buy just about anything with money, but the land is owned by the state – hence the permission. This is hard to achieve with wealth only, and so they also need someone with political influence involved in their business scheme. Once the company is created, they start smuggling fuel from the Chinese to sell at the petrol stations. Everyone has a role to play; smuggling, selling, and funding. Even so, the company is named in a way that appears as a government-owned corporation. They will name themselves as some kind of “corporation” (*gieopso*) or “trading company” (*myeokhoesa*). Before, they used to say “office” (*saeopso*), but not so much these days. New companies are just called “companies” (*hoesa*). It may appear as a state-owned business from the outside, but in truth they are all private businesses. Smuggling fuel is officially prohibited due to sanctions, but fuel continues to make it across the border through the smuggling trade.

Having a petrol station in your region, where expensive fuel can be sold at bulk, means that the region has wealthy people. There are lots of rich people in the city. But even the

richest people in Ryanggang Province would fall significantly behind the standard of living among South Koreans. In North Korea, the rich and powerful get to do anything they want. But it's hard for them to own cars or houses as they wish. But a rich person by South Korean standards would have multiple cars and houses, right? Even if you make it to a high-ranking cadre position such as a County Secretary's position with more money than you can spend, the cars you drive and home electronics such as air conditioning are far below ordinary South Korean standards. Maybe if you were to compare the size of houses, North Korean houses might be bigger. But if you were to compare the level of wealth, their level would be far below South Korean standards. For ordinary citizens in North Korea, the wealthy and the powerful may appear to enjoy high standards, but it is hardly comparable to South Korea.

Among the people who have settled in South Korea, there are some that do say they fared better in North Korea. But there are many differences between North and South Korea. In North Korea, you can make a lot of money if you put your mind to it. You can utilise the funds in your possession to eat anything and do as you please without having to work for a living. This is just like how the landlord or the Yangban class used to engage in the money-lending business in the old days. It is this very system that allows people to make money in North Korea nowadays. It is money giving birth to more money. You can earn money from committing a crime. For instance, dealing drugs would get you money, and dealing illegal scrap metal will get you money. It is considered unproblematic even if you earn money from wrongdoing. As a result, people do as they please.

But I think things are different in South Korea. In South

Korea, you have to engage in honest work to be able to make money. People are hardworking so every hour counts. Criminal activities are not accessible, so it is harder to make a living from a life of crime. Those who used to have it easy in North Korea do say that it's tough living in South Korea because they now have to work for a living. But people like me, who had to have a job in North Korea without any compensation, prefer the South Korean life because you get to earn your share for the work you do. Anyone can make money here in South Korea given that you are hardworking. That's the difference. Also, there's freedom in South Korea. You get to visit places. I never had the chance to visit Pyongyang or Mount Paektu while in North Korea.

The kind of freedom that is most absent in North Korea is the freedom to speak your mind.

You are not allowed to call out something if it is bad. There is no freedom of expression. People are aware that certain parts of North Korean society are bad, but they cannot dare say it. The reason they dare not to, is because they are afraid of censorship and of punishment. One slip of the tongue could have repercussions reaching your children and the entire household. Knowing this, they cannot say things that are obvious to everyone. When I say there are repercussions for the entire household, I mean that the family members receive collective punishment because of guilt-by-association. My careless words could get me stigmatised, and this means my entire family would

have to enter a Political Prison Camp or a Reform through Labour Camp. My children would be stigmatised too. They would have difficulty registering as party members – let alone becoming successful. So I am sure, on the inside, everyone thinks North Korean society is horrible – as they don't get to complain, hard work does not bring a better life, and people are not paid a fair share for their work. The books tell us that socialist societies are perfect, but the reality is that no amount of hard work will get you anything. The result of this and difficult living conditions lead to complaints deep inside.

North Korea continues with their indoctrination to this day. Even so, people may have been brainwashed before, but now they are all disillusioned. People took on more capitalistic tendencies ever since the Arduous March. Individualistic and self-serving attitudes of “I take care of my business, you do it yourself” are prevalent nowadays. Before, people used to think what happens at the community level is their own business, but not anymore. Perhaps that's why I can sense that there is a lot of warmheartedness to be seen when visiting the South Korean countryside. While the present North Korean state promotes itself as a socialist country, the prevalent attitude at the village level is general disinterest in other people's business. They don't think they need to be concerned about others' suffering. For one thing, there is no concept of charity or government support. But even as your neighbours are starving in their homes, people think that they need to take care of “myself and my child only” and refuse to offer help. If they do decide to help, they will charge interest. For example, they will give you 1 kg of corn on the condition that you pay back 2 kg next autumn. Without such arrangements, even next-door neighbours won't help each other.

It is a capitalist society with a strong sense of self-interested individualism. Even the state farms are robbed by individuals who stockpile the harvest at their own place.

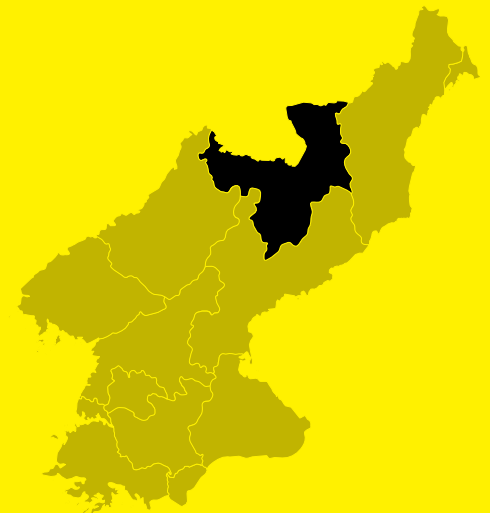
You could say that North Korea has a scarier, more complete version of capitalism and individualism – even more so than Western nations.

If South Korean capitalism has a humane side to it, North Korean capitalism is its evil twin.

Voice  
55

Transportation in North Korea

Hello, my name is Kim Myong-hui. I crossed the Chinese border in late 2018, and reached South Korea in 2019. My hometown is in Ryanggang Province.



Hello, my name is Kim Myong-hui. I crossed the Chinese border in late 2018, and reached South Korea in 2019. My hometown is in Ryanggang Province.

I worked in the railway industry. The railway situation in North Korea is unspeakably bad. If the power supply is normal, a train ride from Hyesan to Pyongyang would take only 24 hours. You can get there in two days' time. But trains nowadays have no concept of scheduled hours. With frequent power outages, the train from Hyesan to Pyongyang might spend a week or ten days at a stop-by station. It takes way too long. It's to the point where people will ask you how many days the train took once you arrive at your destination.

Trains are mostly electric. Most of the railways in North Korea are designed to run on electricity. There are some combustion engine trains that run on oil, and those are relatively better. So people tend to choose trains with combustion engines as they tend to be quicker. But even those trains with combustion engines would take about 5 days from Hyesan to Pyongyang at the quickest, often up to a week. Even though the trains run on oil, the state cannot provide enough fuel for the trains. From what I heard in my workplace, such trains are operated by private investors who can pay for the fuel. That's how bad the state is at running the trains properly.

That's why the trains are not a reliable mode of transportation. People don't take the train when they move to another location. It could take anything from two weeks to a full month. Instead, what we have are cars that will let you travel long distances.

There are buses and taxis.  
Then there are many individuals  
who own pickup vans.

If you are rich you can afford those rides. The trains, on the other hand, are inexpensive. Travelling from Hyesan to Pyongyang would cost around 12 thousand North Korean won. This is a fixed price. It's probably around 30 yuan in Chinese currency. Train ticket prices are not too hefty for North Koreans. Under communism, state-sanctioned prices are usually the cheapest price available. But the trains do not run on time, so they are not widely used. You need ticket sales to be able to support the train operations. That way, more passengers will ride the train and the state will be able to collect the funds for running the trains. For one thing, it takes too long to travel by trains, and the state does not maintain the operation properly. Since the state does a poor job at managing the trains, the tickets won't sell even at their state-sanctioned prices. The railways do not operate as a result. Private car services, on the other hand, are operated illegally with an expensive price tag. Still people patronise these services. There are a lot of taxis and taxi companies.

The state used to prohibit individuals from driving taxis. Private businesses are regulated by the state. But as people seek higher standards without the state being able to provide, people who had the money came up with the idea of buying a car and running a taxi business by themselves. That's how the number of taxis grew. The state may have been concerned about the number of taxis out there, since they established a taxi office, where individuals who own taxis have to pay a certain portion of their



monthly revenue to the state. It's like paying taxes here in South Korea. This approach was welcomed by the taxi drivers. They preferred to run their business without constraint in exchange for paying a certain fee. Hyesan had its first taxi office in 2018, which was around the time I left the country. Everyone that had a car would register there for a monthly fee so that they could run their own taxi business.

There are a lot of taxis in the Hyesan region. People often take taxis. Of course, the prices are high, but Hyesan residents have a high standard of living. The standard of living tends to be higher as the people live closer to the Chinese border. Certain aspects of life feel like capitalism. The well-to-do all ride taxis. They will choose to take a taxi for distances between Ilsan and Gimpo or Siheung in South Korea<sup>❶</sup>, for example because it's more convenient that way. Even in North Korea, transportation becomes less of an issue if you have money. But the train is inconvenient and never on time. That's why people don't take the train.

Privately owned cars are imported from China. I don't know about taxis and vans, but I saw it on the news in North Korea that trucks are manufactured domestically in North Korea. I believe the raw materials and car parts are imported from China, and only the assembly work is done in North Korea. But I have never personally seen a car made in North Korea. I remember wondering whether cars were really made domestically as I watched news broadcasts while in North Korea, describing how Kim Jong-un visited some local car manufacturer. I was told that the materials all come from China, and it's only the assembly that's done in North Korea. They still can't make passenger vehicles like the ones in South Korea. Their news broadcasts will

❶ A distance of roughly 20~30 kilometres.

say that there are cars made in North Korea, but I've never seen one. They were all Chinese cars.

There are many car owners in North Korea. An individual can buy a car to start a taxi business or just for personal use. In North Korea, cars are not manufactured like they are here in South Korea, so people buy cars smuggled from China. There is a sizable car smuggling business that supplies North Korea with many cars. Even in 2018, which was the year I left, there were lots of cars being smuggled in from China. Every night, cars without licence plates would be sent from China to North Korea and parked in a row on the street side. These were all smuggled vehicles. Once brought in, the cars were up for sale. But cars tend to be a bit pricey for just anybody to buy. The price is within reach for those with money. In Hyesan, maybe five out of a hundred households owned a car. Cars are not as prevalent as we see here in South Korea.

Since there are cars, there are also petrol stations. Petrol stations are by the streets, just like here in South Korea. I'm sure some stations are run by private individuals, but I've never heard of one. I'm sure there are those too. In North Korea, there are many joint venture companies created with Chinese investments, and it is these joint ventures that operate a lot of the petrol stations. Sometimes, the price of fuel soars so high and they reach a point where they have no more to sell. This could happen at any point in time regardless of the international sanctions, if there are too many cars in business during the summer for example. Diesel prices went up and so did petrol prices. Some people have fuel stored in barrels. They would hold on to that stash and wait for the fuel prices to go up, so they can sell at a profit. Fuel prices don't follow a steady pattern. People are always on the lookout so

the price could go up at any moment. Fuel oil is all Chinese. They come in big barrel cans. I think fuel is officially imported by the state. So it was mostly companies in charge of importing. People with connections would keep some of the fuel by themselves at their houses and then sell at a margin. These households will sell it in secret. These are all illegal activities and would often lead to fire accidents. Police stations crack down on individuals conducting fuel sales because of such accidents. But still a lot of fuel is sold by private individuals.

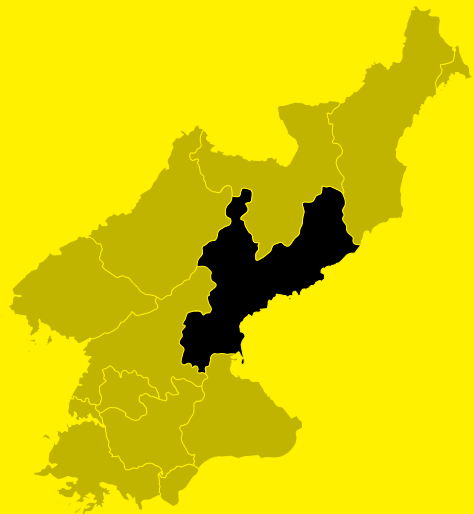
The border with China closed in 2020, but even with the regulations in place, smuggling continues in one way or another.

Covid-19 related regulations are not enough to stop the smuggling business, in my opinion. Households at the border regions are in collaboration with the guard post troops (border guards) and haul luggage together at night. I think the smuggling trade continues to this day. Still things must be tough for North Koreans these days. I'm very worried about how they are doing. Food shortages are a serious problem.

The thing is, North Korea always had a food problem. Food was always scarce. People suffer from not having enough to eat. With the shrinking smuggling business, the markets have less wares to sell and sometimes run out of goods even. But North Korea does not manufacture anything domestically. It is Chinese goods that are distributed across the country. Without the smuggling and trade, you can tell the difference in people's

lifestyles. You can already see signs of struggle. Active smuggling business with China will improve the distribution chain, getting more goods that will improve the people's lives. However, private businesses are regulated along with many other things. If the border lockdown continues, households with some background or seed money might be relatively better off, but people who live from meal to meal barely earning a day's worth of rice from a day's work are probably dying day by day – because of how they blocked the smuggling trade and private businesses. These households make up the bulk of the population.

Hello, my name is  
Ju Hye-mi.  
My hometown is in  
South Hamgyong  
Province. I left  
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late 2018 and  
reached South Korea  
in early 2019.



Hello, my name is Ju Hye-mi. My hometown is in South Hamgyong Province. I left North Korea in late 2018 and reached South Korea in early 2019.

There are many well-known industrial centres in South Hamgyong Province. There is no way to make money in North Korea outside the mining industry. Gold, silver, copper, lead, zinc, molybdenum, cadmium, antimony, and bismuth are all produced in my home region. Also, South Hamgyong Province is far away from the Chinese border. There is Chongjin city in North Hamgyong Province, and the Rajin-Sonbong region<sup>❶</sup> is further up. Chinese people can access these cities. The people there conduct trade with China. The merchants have connected networks through which the goods flow down to my hometown.

Trucks or trains may be used for transporting goods from Rajin to South Hamgyong. Initially it was all trains, and then 20-ton trucks came in use from the 2000s onward. A lot of it came from China. The price was about 20,000 dollars in North Korea. As more North Koreans took up the merchant business and made money off of it, there were also people who wanted to start transportation businesses. People with money bring in vehicles from China. Except, you cannot do that as an individual. You have to borrow the name of some factory in North Korea to get the vehicles. If I was an employee of a merchant company, I would borrow the company licence to get the vehicles. You can never use a private registration number. Hence, what happens is that the vehicles are first brought in using the company licence, and then they are operated by private individuals. Doing so, the individual pays a certain percentage of their profit to the company and keeps the rest for themselves.

❶ Rason.

Individuals do not get to own vehicles in North Korea.

Hence, you first register under a company name and the individual pays a certain fee to utilise it for business.

This way, transportation has improved, and everything is quicker nowadays. As a result, profits from the retail businesses have fallen. This is because everyone has a mobile phone nowadays, so they know the price of goods produced in remote locations. Also, a lot of goods come in through automobile transport. The situation changed from small-volume-high-profit trade to large-volume-low-profit trade. With mobile phones you get to find out what the price of goods are in Rajin – where the goods come from. If goods travel from South Hamgyong to another province, you also get to know at which price the goods will be sold there. So price can be negotiated before each transaction.

People from the outside seem to think that the food shortage has been bad in North Korea since Covid-19 broke out, but I disagree. North Koreans have gone through the Arduous March of the 1990s, and the “Currency Reform” in 2009. They have been through difficult times. Now North Koreans know how to survive. North Koreans tend to think that the State is never to be trusted, and that North Korean currency is worthless. And so, people with money and people who trade have spent all the money they have on hoarding goods. This is because North Korea does not have

a reliable manufacturing economy. With continuing inflation of prices, people started hoarding goods with what money they have. Even if you are not a trader, people tend to hoard lots of foodstuff, because food can be sold anywhere. They also tend to keep money in foreign currency (yuan and dollars) rather than domestic currency (North Korean won) as much as they can. This is because North Korean currency keeps deflating in value.

If a complete lockdown does take place in North Korea, due to Covid-19 for example, the hoarders will become even richer by selling off their stockpile. But this will make things harder for ordinary citizens. Because of inflation, what used to be just five thousand North Korean won for a kilogram of rice is now at ten thousand won. This is the situation in my hometown nowadays (as of mid-2021). There used to be big differences between rice prices in Hwanghae Province, South Hamgyong Province, and North Hamgyong Province. Many people participated in the rice trade. But now, rice prices are more or less the same everywhere. Rice traders, who used to make a living off of trading rice between different locations, are now few in number. They now tend to trade rice within their respective regions.

Before I left for South Korea, no one was eating imported rice at home. There was no imported rice where I lived. There was only North Korean rice. Back in the days of the Arduous March, we used to eat whatever food we could import from China, such as rotten corn or powdered corn meant for feeding animals. This was because we had a rice shortage back then. But people started farming small plots of land for producing crops. While nothing like the large-scale greenhouse farming in Korea, they managed to get two or three rotations of rice harvests per year by setting up heat-condensing sheets over the fields. These are small plots

of land farmed by individuals for subsistence.

In addition, small plots of land on the west coast were already allotted to individuals starting from 2015 which included both dry fields and rice paddies. But on the east coast, only dry fields for non-rice crops were allotted to individuals from 2017 or so. The collective farms are still there. As for the collective farms, the farm workers are supplied with seeds, fertiliser, and water. Then these individuals each grow crops in their respective areas. A planned portion is given to the state, and the rest is for the farmer to live off of. But if a farmer didn't meet the planned quota for the year, he would have to make up for it by buying the crops at his own expense. The state is never at a loss. Before, it was the state distribution system where the rations came first and the remainder was taken by the state, regardless of whether the harvest was good or bad. But now they take it no matter what. The state never has to face a loss. The loss is taken by the farm workers. That's why the life of a farm worker is difficult. A farm worker has to do something else – raise animals, brew liquor, or go out selling stuff during wintertime when there is no work. Without any rations and without any harvest, they have no choice but to make a living that way. Everyone has their plot of land, not just farm workers. Even among city folks such as myself, there were households that had plots of farmland. Even as I was doing business at the market, I would still harvest food from my field. Corn is usually produced self-sufficiently.

So even with the Covid-19 lockdown, people won't starve.

They have their small plots of land, and while they can't trade across the border, there is some of a domestic economy that allows them to keep doing business.

It is true, though, that consumption and spending are smaller than before. What used to be rice bowls in the past will now have to be replaced with corn. Those who cannot even find corn to eat will have to resort to porridge. But I think death from starvation is a thing of the past now. Unlike the past, people are accustomed to a self-reliant lifestyle. Some people may disagree – such as those who have spent significant time in China before reaching South Korea, or those who left North Korea a long time ago. These people are not aware of the recent situation in North Korea.

Anyways, North Koreans will no longer die from starvation as they did before. They will forage herbs in the mountains when it's the right season. They will forage mushrooms too. They can find food to eat in such ways. No matter how hard they close the borders these days, no matter how blocked the smuggling trade is, I am told that goods make their way in, little by little. A great number of people in the Yanbian region of China, in particular, make a living through trade with North Korea.

It is true that North Koreans nowadays are in a very difficult situation. I was told by a friend that even travelling in-country is no longer allowed. The rice prices jumped multiple folds so that the same amount of money that used to get 10 kg of rice will now get you less than half that weight. The people who live off of money from South Korea have it better off, but the people who

have to be self-reliant are... as I said, the rice bowls turn into corn and potatoes. People turn to porridge instead. Those who used to have three meals will now have two. Around the time I was leaving North Korea, I couldn't see a single person eating porridge no matter how tough the situation was. Now, there might be people like that.

But even now, I can say with confidence that there is no one dying from starvation. Outsiders say that North Korea is in a crisis comparable to the Arduous March, but that is not true at all. There will be no more deaths from starvation. People died before because the state system that was feeding them stopped working, and they were not prepared for that. Now everyone has the skills necessary to survive.

Even so, there must be a lot of people suffering. But there is no state support for such people. Rather, the exploitation only worsens with the tougher situation. Strictly put, it is not the state that is doing the exploitation. It is those with power, the cadres, who can wield political influence in the name of the state. For instance, a police officer will come patrolling the marketplace telling people not to sell goods from South Korea or the US. They are trying to regulate the business. But without such goods, there can be no trade in the market. Regulation is an excuse for these people to extort money. The managers of the marketplace also take part in the same exploitation in the name of regulation. The state enacts laws to keep people from committing un-socialist activities. The officers of the law abuse the law to exploit people in ever harsher ways. This only worsens the situation for the commoners.

In my hometown, rice is eaten for breakfast. Well-to-do households eat white rice. Others eat just corn. *Kimchi* is the

cheapest and the most popular side dish. It is a necessity. Then, there's some soup. Poorer households will have a meal consisting of soup, kimchi, and some bean paste to go with fresh vegetables like chilli peppers or cucumbers. A middle-class household will have tofu or vegan meat. Vegan meat is the easiest food to get by. Rich households also eat a lot of vegan meat. In the summer, when the vegetables are cheap, households will make some cucumber kimchi. As for cabbage, each household will buy maybe 30~100 kg to preserve it in salt. That way the whole family won't run out of side dishes for the whole winter until the next cabbage season. Cucumber season is when we salt the cucumbers or make kimchi. Salting is also for *minari* and chilli peppers. This is for the winter season. Salting is the only way we can preserve food, regardless of whether we are rich or poor. Poor people will have food but they cannot afford to make healthy food choices like they do in South Korea. You need soup to go with the meal and some kind of side dish, right? That makes up a basic meal.

Lunch is usually eaten with noodles because they are cheap. Noodles are made of corn flour. If a kilogram of rice is 5 thousand North Korean won, a kilogram of noodles will cost 1,700~1,800. Rice is 3 times more expensive than noodles. Also, noodles tend to gain volume when thrown in boiling water even with the same weight. That's why we eat noodles for lunch and dinner most of the time. Again, no one was eating porridge when I was leaving. I'm thinking that the countryside might be subsisting on porridge because of the Covid-19 situation. In the city too, if your household does not have a business, you might actually be eating porridge.

I saw that international organisations talk of a food crisis in North Korea, mentioning how there is a shortage of rice by a

few hundred thousand tons. That's not wrong per se, but those people don't get to know the details of North Korean lives. If you look at the rice produced at the state level, it is true that there is a shortage. But the state also goes on to train the citizens to behave in a certain way. For instance, my child was told in primary school one day that the UN personnel are going to come visit them and that they should respond to the questions asked by the UN personnel by saying they ate porridge. They do this to get aid. So the students are made to answer questions by rote, "I ate porridge with radish greens for breakfast today." But no one actually had porridge with radish greens. It's laughable. They are eating full meals, but the school tells them to say otherwise.

Before, the state used to conceal the situation of food shortages, to hide the fact. These days, the state is eager to get whatever aid they can and so the people are told to speak in a certain way. There is also a limit to how much you can conceal. Hence the people are told certain things, but in fact they rarely resort to eating porridge. They are simply following state directives. I think the UN reports are a result of this situation. I once saw the car of the UN delegation pass by with its dusty white flag. They take the car to visit some schools and ask what they ate that day. They are told, "I ate plant-based porridge this morning." The people at the UN, seeing the state harvest that year, end up thinking that the people must be indeed subsisting on plant-based porridge.

But no, because on top of farming, a lot of the foodstuff gets produced in Pyongyang. Flour is imported to produce bread. Rice is not imported but flour is. Flour gets imported from China, not from Russia. It's because China is closer in distance and the transportation is cheaper. People don't eat Chinese rice because

it has a stench and is distasteful. But flour and *udon* noodles are eaten. *Udon* is frequently eaten as an import by the people in the border region. This is because there is no added transportation cost if you live in the border region, and Chinese goods are cheaper. But for Chinese rice to enter my hometown, it is sold at a higher price than domestic rice because of the transportation cost. So people tend not to buy Chinese rice. As a natural consequence, Chinese rice is not brought in. The reason why rice prices are not getting any higher is because there's a lot of flour these days. A lot of the flour actually comes from Pyongyang instead of the border region in Ryanggang Province. I don't know how so much flour can come from Pyongyang.

I consumed a lot of Chinese flour at home because of my market business. People bake bread with flour too. Bread can either come from Pyongyang, or be produced at a regional or provincial level. So if a person has three meals a day, the three meals can each consist of rice, noodles, and a flour-based meal. This way the cost of food is cheap enough for the person to get by. There is no big difference between the inland regions and the border regions when it comes to getting food. Before, there used to be a lot of rice from the Hwanghae Province coming into South Hamgyong Province. Nowadays, rice from Hwanghae Province doesn't make it into my hometown because all regions are self-reliant now.

There were public trials after Kim Jong-un came into power, but I haven't seen public executions.

I did see public executions during Kim Jong-il's time. In my hometown, there were public trials but no public executions after Kim Jong-un came to power. There were death sentences – usually for committing murder. Death sentences are carried out at gunpoint – automatic rifles. But I didn't see any after Kim Jong-un came into power. I'm sure executions took place away from the public eye. There may be no public executions, in order to show that Kim Jong-un is a benevolent ruler, but executions still do take place inside. It could be death at gunpoint, torture that leads to death, or people dying in incarceration in the State Security Ministry. It's all death the same.

I did hear about the Political Prison Camps. A friend of mine lives in Tanchon, South Hamgyong Province where there used to be a Political Prison Camp. Now the camp is gone. I believe it was disbanded in the year 2000. Some prisoners were given civil rights and were allowed to live there. Others were relocated to the Susong Reform through Labour Camp for Political Prisoners in Chongjin.<sup>②</sup> The disbanded prison camp was for political prisoners. One of my relatives was also sent there as a prisoner. After the disbanding of the camp, these once prisoners were called “released individuals” (*haejemin*). I was told many things about the prison camp as my relatives were all convicts who had been released.

It was toward the end of 2000 when my relative moved to a new home. That's when I visited them to take a look at what used to be the camp grounds. You have to walk maybe 14 km from the camp guard post to get to the village. The houses there have low ceilings even in my standard, and I'm only about 160 cm tall. I saw that one had to climb over the cooking stove to get inside the house. One must crouch their head to get in. The implication is

② Susong Reform through Labour Camp for Political Prisoners no. 25 in Chongjin, North Hamgyong Province.

that the residents must forever live in a cowering posture. The houses were set apart by only a metre or so. This is so that each household can monitor one another. For a married couple, the husband is made to work during the day, and the wife during the night. They are hindered from sleeping together. The intent is to not let the two live as husband and wife. I was told that they let you sleep together for one night as a reward if you are a good worker there. But my relative managed to have four children, although I'm not sure how they did that.

One thing in common is that they do let kids go to school. The prison guards and police officers who work there send their kids to one school, and the kids of the prisoners are sent to another school. The two schools are very different in quality. But the presents that school children receive on Kim Il-sung's birthday are given out all the same.

I used to go to survey the land where that prison camp used to be. It was for buying gold. The released folks were geniuses when it comes to digging for gold. Now the old houses of the prisoners are all but demolished and people from other regions have moved in and built new houses. The new houses are okay. It's about a 50 *pyeong* area. The canyon where the prison camp stood was very deep and wide. It's not your typical canyon which is narrow and long. It is long and wide open. It's all gold there. There are roads too now that you need trucks to move about. It was a dirt road but still wide enough to allow two 20-ton trucks to pass. There were a total of four areas – areas 1, 2, 3, and 4. My relative told me that each area had a hundred households and more than 400 people living there. Now there are many more households. People started moving in as it's a good place to make money. One needs money nowadays. It's more important than

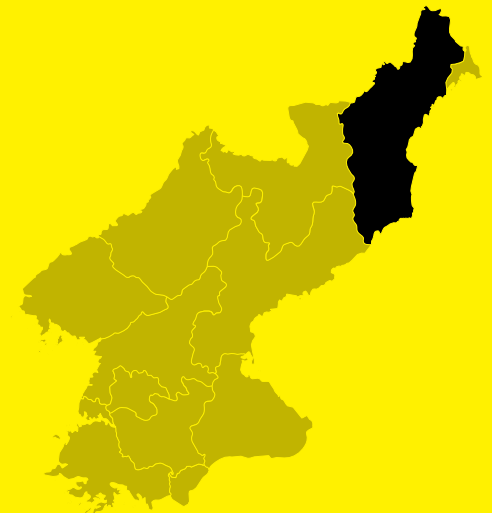


choosing where to live between the countryside or rural towns and the city. Hence, many people move in to live there.

Voice  
57

Brokering Cash Transfers between  
North and South Korea

Hello, my name is  
Park Eun-jeong.  
I lived in North  
Hamgyong Province.  
I left North Korea  
in mid-2018 and  
reached South Korea  
in early 2019.



Hello, my name is Park Eun-jeong. I lived in North Hamgyong Province. I left North Korea in mid-2018 and reached South Korea in early 2019.

I didn't exactly live in Chongjin, but I've been there. As my hometown was bordering China, the state of living was slightly better than most other places. There was a good flow of cash, as there was money coming in from South Korea. One of my friends got married to a family in Chongjin. After 10 years of living there, she said she no longer wants to come back to where we live. Chongjin is a big city after all.

A lot of people in my hometown had mobile phones.

If you count everyone in my hometown, including the students, about 40% of the people would have a mobile phone. But mobile phones in North Korea have no internet access. They are only capable of making calls and taking photos. You can take pictures, but you can't send them. You don't get to share them with anyone. You can send text messages though. In North Korea, texts are called "announcements" (*tongbomun*). You are given 20 free messages by the state. Once you use up the 20 messages, you will have to pay extra. In North Korea, each message is paid off immediately as a deduction from your prepaid amount. If you run out, you will have to make additional prepayments. Phone calls are unavailable until you do so.

There are individuals who let you make prepayments for your phones. It's not a shop or a brand. These are individuals with

cash who make those payments for you. People who operate a phone retailer at a shop or at home will have their own phones charged up to about some dozen million North Korean won in prepay. If I were to ask for my phone to be recharged, I would ask the retailer to fill up my prepay (of the mobile phone). The retailer will send the amount from his phone number. In other words, the phone retailers have prepayments made to their phones first so that they can make a business out of wiring that prepay to other people. These are businessmen, so they will pay for the prepay at 10 won a piece and resell at 15 won a piece. The retailers buy the prepayments from the postal office. They can buy them at a somewhat lower price. That allows them to make a margin off of reselling them. An individual could go buy from the postal office, except they won't handle small amounts. You can only buy there in bulk.

I used to run a business before leaving North Korea. More specifically, I used to connect phone calls to South Korea. I was a phone broker. I had this job for more than 10 years. As you know, it is not possible to make a call from South Korea to North Korea. You can only connect the two sides by starting a call from North Korea to South Korea. Back in 2004 or so, we couldn't make phone calls to South Korea and had to have a Chinese person in the middle making a call to South Korea. But I think it was around 2011 when we found a way to make direct calls to South Korea. That's when we started to make direct phone calls. The phones we use are Chinese mobile phones. A Chinese phone is needed because we are making the calls via the Chinese internet.

Of course, it's dangerous to have a Chinese mobile phone. Cash wired from South Korea cannot reach North Korea directly. It has to go through China. So we need to secure another broker

in possession of a Chinese bank account. It's his phone that we use to make the calls. And if his phone runs out of prepayments, we get a message saying that we cannot make any more calls. Immediately, we pay the broker for the prepayment and so on. The money that gets transferred from South Korea to North Korea gets deducted in fees to pay the middlemen in this way. Anyhow, you always need a Chinese middleman. Always. That's because he's the one prepaying for the phone that we are using. A Chinese mobile phone comes with an initial 100 yuan worth of prepayment. 100 yuan is enough to use for about 2 weeks. But if you don't have someone on the other side who can make additional prepayments, the phone is of no use after that initial 100 yuan. Hence you need a Chinese person.

There are so many people wanting to exchange phone calls between South and North Korea.

I would have at least one job a day – a minimum of 30 per month.

That means there are a lot of North Koreans who came to South Korea. I used to live near the border, so there were many that left the country for South Korea. The people who want to have a phone call with someone in South Korea are not only from the border region but from all across the country. They need to come up to the border to make their phone call. The phone call

can only be made close to the border since we are utilising the Chinese telecommunications network. By 2007 or so, you could make phone calls from a regular house near the border. But as the relationship with South Korea soured, the state started blocking communication signals. The network was blocked and phone calls could not be made. Then from 2014, calls could only be made from high up in the mountains. These days, the highest flat buildings are seven stories tall. You could make a phone call from the rooftops. Of course, you could be wiretapped. I was running my business for more than 10 years, which got me in trouble with the State Security Ministry many times. I got acquainted with someone at the Ministry in the process. Once I made a friend there, I kept paying bribes every month. This is how I got protection. You had to know someone at the Ministry in order to live. It had to be the Ministry of State Security because that's where they have the wiretap devices for catching signals.

There were lots of people like me running errands. But I had a direct connection with a Chinese merchant, which allowed me to make these calls to South Korea. Chinese mobile phones are costly. The best models cost around 1 million South Korean won. That is a tremendous amount of money by North Korean standards. Some people never save up that much money in their lives. Other brokers might be running the operations, but do not have a Chinese mobile phone so they would come to me for the phone via someone who knows me. Having multiple steps along the way means that you have to go through multiple middlemen. There were a number of such people who serve mediating roles for a fee. These people have a day job and keep this broker business on the side. Their day job is selling clothes or snacks at the marketplace. These brokers usually have another profession.

There were almost no instances where I would only help connect calls without cash remittance. Phone calls are dangerous. If caught, you will be treated as a criminal charged with “Collaborating in Anti-state Conspiracies.” It is not feasible to partake in such a dangerous mission for free, or to just let others borrow your phone for it. That’s why cash remittance is usually involved. I had many friends who made it to South Korea. If those friends want me to transfer money to their parents in North Korea, I would do so in the correct amount. My friends would go on to tell more North Korean friends in South Korea, so that they would remit cash to their families back in North Korea through me. When I reached one of these acquaintances in South Korea via phone call, they would ask me for a cash remittance. That’s how I already had many friends in South Korea while I was in North Korea. The friends in South Korea would ask me to visit a certain address and tell them how the people there were doing. Then, since I knew their address, I would bring them close to the border on the next scheduled date for phone calls and get them to have a phone conversation with one another.

Compared to 2018, there are less phone calls nowadays (mid-2021). It got harder than before. I had seven of my acquaintances working on phone call related businesses. Six of them got arrested last winter. I was told they were all sent to prison. I believe they are in Chongori Reform through Labour Camp<sup>1</sup>. So there is just one person left. I was told she was being very cautious. But the business is still in operation by other people. I am told that the situation is so much harder for everyone, not just my acquaintances. This drives up costs. Now, cash remittance to North Korea requires a 40% cut. What was originally at 30% is now at 40% in some decent cases and up to 50% in the more

<sup>1</sup> Chongori (also spelled Jeongeori) Reform through Labour Camp no. 12 in Hoeryong, North Hamgyong Province.

extreme ones. This is because of the cut taken in the middle. That is to say, the recipient of the remittance only gets 50%. But still, the business is up and running. It is one of the lifelines of the North Korean economy.

North Korea cannot completely block off all cash transfers. Without the cash remitted from South Koreans, there will be no money to run the marketplaces in North Korea.

There are still people that manage to remit cash into North Korea. The highest sum I’ve transferred was 8 million South Korean won. The lowest was 500 thousand. People normally send about a million to two million won. They would send it once or twice a year. Someone wiring 2 million won twice a year is spending a lot. 2 million South Korea won is enough to feed a couple in North Korea for a year. If you don’t buy new clothes and spend it all on food, it’s more than enough. I would say, 4 to 5 million won is enough to feed a family of four for a year.

In North Korea, you can tell a house is wealthy if it has lights on at night. It means they have electricity. You have to bribe someone to get an electric power supply. Even as they try to seal off any light from flowing out, there are cracks that they simply can’t hide. Police officers will look for these houses with flickering lights at night, so they can earn some spare cash for a pack of cigarettes. It’s so dark outside you can easily tell. You have to open the doors for a police officer, no matter what. Police

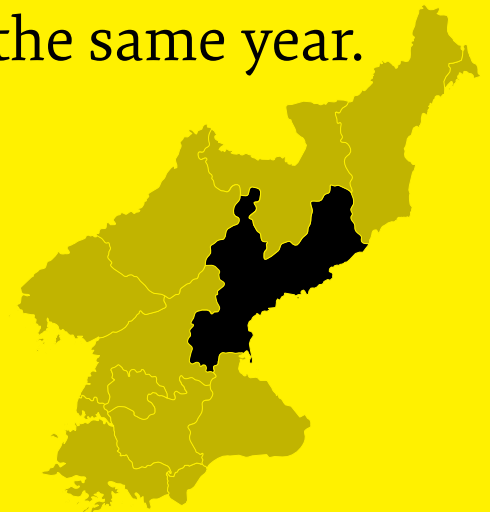
officers and Security officers all hold the right to have your house searched. You need to bribe someone at the power supply station or someone in charge of the voltage transformer. If you live nearby a power station, you can bribe the station manager. If you live far from the station, you bribe someone who lives next to a voltage transformer. The bribe is about 200 or 300 Chinese yuan per month. The national power supply operates on a schedule. Sometimes it's the whole day, but sometimes it's on and off during the day. All you can do is wait. Bribing is the way to get electricity.

Not all households can use electricity in North Korea. It's been a while since North Koreans had stable access to electric power. Electricity has been scarce ever since the Arduous March. Pyongyang was the only place I saw that had a stable power supply. I've been to places like Chongjin, Hyesan, Hwanghae Province, Sinuiju, etc... But they were all the same as where I used to live. You pay someone for electricity. Those without the money don't get to use electricity. The power grid is there, connecting every household. But the switch is turned down or something, so that you cannot use the electricity. They let you have electricity for maybe two days during the holidays like the Lunar New Year. The electric stations switch it back on for those occasions. If I wanted extra lights on, I needed to get electric cabling done separately. As a result, electronic appliances don't sell well in North Korea these days. There are people who sell shaved ice or ice cream. They are well connected to the people at the electric station. They freeze the goods at home to sell outdoors using an icebox.

Voice  
58

Living in North Korea with Disabilities

Hello, my name is  
Oh Jeong-seon.  
My hometown is in  
South Hamgyong  
Province. I lived in  
Ryanggang Province  
after I got married.  
I left North Korea  
in late 2018 and  
reached South Korea  
in the same year.



Hello, my name is Oh Jeong-seon. My hometown is in South Hamgyong Province. I lived in Ryanggang Province after I got married. I left North Korea in late 2018 and reached South Korea in the same year.

I made a number of attempts to escape before that but they all ended up in failure. I had my disability from a young age. I fell off a train in 1999 and hurt my head badly. The trains used to be packed with people back then as it was during the Arduous March. I was standing near the exit in the train cart and then I was pushed out of a running train because of the crowd. I've been crippled since then, as half of my body became paralyzed. I cannot walk properly because of that. I have been disabled ever since.

Unlike South Korea, there are no benefits for the disabled in North Korea. There is no discrimination based on your disability either.

South Koreans seem to think that the disabled in North Korea all get rounded up or get executed. There are no such things. Although crippled, as long as I had money on me, people would express their envy toward me. They would say that I live a carefree life whenever I visited the market. One could be treated better with money, so I don't recall being discriminated against for my disability. That's not to say there are any benefits either. Able bodied people and disabled people were treated all the same. The disabled were not made to work though.

I did hear that it's different for people with dwarfism. There is a so-called "dwarf village" where they are rounded up and not allowed to have children.

There are those among the disabled that have difficulty living by themselves or cannot move about on their own. But even they manage to live on. I couldn't walk properly either, and yet I had a stall selling liquor and tobacco in front of my house. I started a restaurant in the mid-2010s, but I was told not to, and so I had to quit. One can only start running a restaurant after getting registered. I had to pay a portion of my profit, and that's how the state would let individuals open restaurants. But it was prohibited all of a sudden.

I nearly died one time in my attempt to escape. It was sometime in the 2010s when I crossed the border to try to escape, and I had the bad luck of spraining my ankle – on top of being crippled. I reached China with some difficulty as I was not walking too well. Once we entered the mountains in China, the two brokers who were escorting me told me to wait, saying they will bring someone else with them. Then they just left. I was by myself in the mountains for five days without anything to eat or drink. I couldn't move to another location because I couldn't get myself up. There was nothing but trees and rocks on the mountain. I looked towards the North Korean side, and I could see the mountains of North Korea at a distance. I was stranded there for five days, unable to move in either direction, and it was the State Security officers from North Korea who came to get me. So there I was, caught by North Korean officers in Chinese

territory. That's how I was repatriated back to North Korea.

The State Security officers come out to China to arrest escaping North Koreans. This is very common.

The State Security Ministry would send search parties to places where the Chinese border control is not located. The Ministry had me interrogated for a half-day, asking why and how I had escaped. I played stubborn and pretended I didn't know anything, and somehow the interrogation came to a close. Afterwards, I was sent to the Ministry of State Security in my home region. Turns out that the two brokers that took me to China made a phone call to an accomplice in North Korea, who was arrested by the Ministry. He spoke about me in the interrogation process. That's how the Ministry found out about me and sent a search party all the way to China. I was in detainment for 10 days at the Ministry, getting interrogated and going through pre-trial examinations.

As I was visibly disabled, I wasn't beaten by the State Security officers during interrogation. But once in detainment, I had to hear all sorts of harsh curse words from the correction officers. At first, I refused to eat anything as I was planning to die there. They say you will die after a week of no food. After a few days of that, the Ministry called in my family to bring in food. My younger sibling brought in some rice, which the Ministry made porridge for me to eat. Other detainees were served corn porridge, but I was given rice porridge. Even then, I refused to eat any and

gave it all to the other detainees. The Ministry released me in the end, perhaps fearing that I might starve myself to death. After ten days of detainment, I saw that I had lost more than 10 kg compared to when I weighed over 60 kg before the escape. It was only later that I learned that I wasn't released because I refused food, but because my family had bribed the Ministry.

While in North Korea, I did hear about human rights under detainment at the Ministry of State Security.

I was told that they used to beat detainees at the Ministry. They will beat people with pieces of wood and torture people to the point their legs are crippled. One detainee I met in 2017 had been detained by the Ministry before. She told me that the beatings were bad in 2015 and 2016, but they don't beat people anymore as of 2017. I remember hearing the State Security officer saying how we should be all killed for treason, but we get to live because the party decided to pardon us. I also remember hearing them say how they don't give us beatings because they hear noises about human rights issues from the outside.

During my detainment at the Ministry, I never got to speak to a lawyer. I was not given any legal help during the pre-trials. There are no such things in North Korea, though I have heard that recently, the Ministry stopped beating the detainees ever since human rights issues were being raised. Moreover, I think the fact that I was disabled discouraged them from beating me. In the old days, they used to send everyone to a Political Prison Camp upon

attempting to leave for South Korea. This is not the case anymore. I suppose it's because even Kim Jong-un feels uneasy about it.

I think nothing in the way of human rights has improved since Kim Jong-un came to power. If anything, things got worse. The livelihoods of the people, I mean. Back when Kim Il-sung was in power, you could at least get a fair share for your work. You could earn wages and rice from your workplace if you had a place of work. That made life livable. Even after Kim Jong-il came into power, state rations became a rare thing. Now, with Kim Jong-un there is no such thing as state distribution. At least Kim Jong-un relaxes restrictions on the markets and stuff, so I think the economic situation is somewhat better.

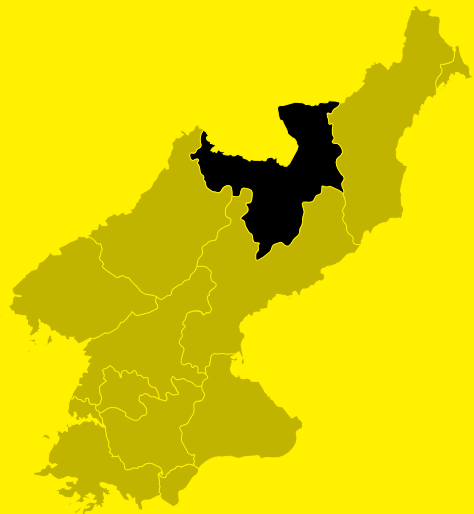
Do you know  
what North Koreans envy most of all?  
It is people who have family members  
that made it to South Korea.  
Within North Korea, they are all criticised as traitors,  
but in truth they are all jealous inside.

The reason they make harsh remarks of criticism is because they don't have such family members themselves and they have to make a living on their own. I had children who made it to South Korea before I did, and they were sending me money. So I had a decent living in North Korea. Just like that, people with family members in South Korea can live without envy. People without such family members will have to make their way through daily struggles.

But when you receive cash from your family in South Korea, they don't get to spend all the money by themselves. The police officers will bother you, the locally dispatched police agents will bother you, and so you have no choice but to pay bribes. They come and harass you to the point where you have to pay them. Having a family member that escaped the country is not the kind of reputation that will put you in danger in North Korea. Pretty much everyone around you knows, and the police station knows about it too. The Police station and State Security Ministry register all households with a missing family member who's left for South Korea. Why then, you may ask, would they not go after those households to arrest them? Isn't it obvious? We are their source of income! This kind of thinking is shared by Kim Jong-un and the party officials. "Take the money, but don't betray the state." Such a statement would be openly made to us by the Ministry. There was a regular series of lectures held for residents, I had to attend those every time. At the lectures, the State Security officers would make strong criticisms of those who have escaped. To recap, they mention how the few scumbags that betrayed the State go on degrading the country's status and giving socialism a bad name. Such comments would make me snort. I used to think, "Well, you tell me they are traitors, but I say they are patriots. They send us money so that you and I get to live another day." Ever wondered how we have cash flow in North Korea? It's all Chinese currency (sent from South Korea by family members).



Hello, my name is  
Lim Hyeon-sun.  
I was born in  
Ryanggang Province.  
I left North Korea in  
late 2017 and reached  
South Korea in  
about a month.



Hello, my name is Lim Hyeon-sun. I was born in Ryanggang Province. I left North Korea in late 2017 and reached South Korea in about a month.

I had a job at a factory after graduating school, and then I got married while working there. I held onto my job for a while after marriage, but it got too tiresome after I gave birth so I had to give up. Then I started a smuggling business before others had the idea of smuggling. It was in the early 1990s. I became an expert. I was in the smuggling business until 2015. That's 23 years of experience.

Metals used to be traded a lot. But too much of it went to China and there was no more metal left. So recently there has been less trade in metals. Goods that came in from China to North Korea were mainly rice, (cooking) oil, and foodstuff. People doing business at the marketplace will ask a smuggler like myself to bring in such and such from China. Then I do the maths – calculating what percentage I would get, deducting the cost it takes to buy the goods in China, hiring someone to carry them over to our side, and the last-mile of delivery. Only when there is a profit would I take the job. When I first started the smuggling business, I would get 1.5 million won in sales from a 500 thousand won investment. That means I got to fetch a one million won profit for the job.

I made big money at a time when others didn't know the smuggling business too well and didn't know how to do it. I was worried about where to spend all that money and that I might get myself killed because of the money. Then others started entering the smuggling business and it got harder to obtain goods for smuggling. The prices changed a lot too. Think about it. I did metals for over ten years. I traded mainly copper and hard alloys

used in shelves to China. If someone wanted to sell metal, they would most likely come to me. I had my name on that business. I bought metals at a slightly higher price than others. I was the last stop. I could send the goods straight to China. I could maintain a smaller cut and a faster cycle. That's how I could make more money. I used these to my advantage. Let's say a bottle of Chinese cooking oil sold at a marketplace would be priced at 50 yuan. I would smuggle it from China at 30 yuan, give a few yuan to the porter, and another few yuan to the seller. That's how the price gets settled. I kept my prices lower for retailers to take my goods from China so there were more people trying to buy from me.

But I don't know how many people were in the smuggling business in Ryanggang Province alone. Smuggling is not something you do legally with a business title. It's done in secret, at night, without others knowing about it. It's hard to tell who is smuggling and who isn't. Smuggling is done at night, so it's a secret between myself and the troop that covers me while it's happening. No one else knew.

Smuggling takes up a big portion of the North Korean economy.

For Ryanggang Province, the Chinese rice that came through customs accounted for more than several hundred tons a day.

A lot of consumer goods come in through North Hamgyong Province.

Mostly rice and soybean oil come in through customs. There's also Chinese beer. It's called "pjiu."<sup>❶</sup> There is also a lot of *kalpaseu*,<sup>❷</sup> which are Chinese sausages. Anyhow, you can find just about anything in the marketplace – all of it from China. The market indicators for the smuggling business consist of (cooking) oil, *pjiu*, and *kalpaseu*. These have a long history in smuggling. Chinese sausages are red and small. There are 50 of them packed in a box. I would receive about a thousand boxes in a single evening. People use these to cook and stuff. They are distributed nationwide. Once you gain hold of the goods and start distributing, they spread nationwide. There is not a single place in North Korea where you cannot find Chinese sausages. Same with all the other provinces. You can find them in South Hamgyong Province and in Pyongyang. Chinese sausages are everywhere. Sausages are inexpensive in my hometown, but they tend to get more and more expensive as you move to other regions. I ate so much sausage that I got sick of it. We even have eggs coming from China.

I asked my family back in North Korea about Covid-19 in a recent phone call (mid-2021). They told me there was no Covid-19 situation there. But the thing about North Korea is that you can't say anything unnecessary because every utterance is being wiretapped. I told my family to be careful of Covid-19, and they told me flatly that there was no Covid-19 there. I think they were just trying not to say anything that would get them in trouble over the phone. If heard, they could get in trouble for saying such things. So they won't tell. For instance, if I told them to be prepared so that they can leave at any moment if I send someone over, they will tell me not to say unnecessary things. They won't let me say it, because they are afraid the conversation might be

❶ Beer in Chinese.

❷ The word comes from the Russian *kolbasa* (колбаса).

wiretapped. My family is probably on the radar since many of my family members are already in South Korea. I get more nervous when I talk with my family over the phone – about what to say. I stick to the things I need to say, never going beyond 5 minutes at a time. That's how I communicate over the phone. I can't say anything extra.

Smugglers like myself are criminals, so we would frequently visit fortune tellers. If someone tells me there is a good fortune teller, I would go there to ask about my fortunes for the year. But fortune tellers don't open their doors to anyone. They don't want to be caught. They run their shops in secret. You can only pay a visit when someone introduces you. I don't know about punishments for superstition, but the state is concerned that a fortune teller might say something scandalous. A fortune teller might say that Kim Il-sung has some kind of illness, which could be kind of a political statement. But people in the Police Office and the Ministry of State Security also frequent these fortune teller shops. I had a close business friend in the ministry who introduced me to these fortune tellers. You can only talk about these things with people you trust. You would never expose yourself to strangers.

They do a lot of drugs in Ryanggang Province. *Bingdu* was popular in Hyesan when I came to South Korea. Poor people can't afford to start doing drugs, but people who could get by, people with a comfortable living, all did drugs. Let's say a person doing okay decides to visit her friend's house. There's a North Korean saying, "crows flock with crows and magpies flock with magpies." I'd suppose the friend's household is not doing miserably either, and so if you visit such a household it is customary to have *bingdu*. A typical scenario is like this. In South Korea, you greet

house guests by asking whether they would like some coffee. It's similar in North Korea, except a well-to-do household in North Korea would offer *bingdu* instead. *Bingdu* used to be very expensive, but then prices went down as it became more popularised. At this point, *bingdu* is more than just accessible to a normal person... There are plenty of places that sell it. Still, they don't sell it in the streets, and you can only buy from someone you know. Drug dealers know these channels very well.

### Drugs are used as medication.

*Bingdu* does count as medication in the proper sense. When someone has a stroke and their tongue and mouth go stiff, *bingdu* will set them straight. Poppy is grown by pretty much anyone who has a home garden. Opium is considered a cure-all as we do not have medicine in North Korea. As a result, there is no such thing as a farmer who is not in possession of opium. The poppy is grown in the fields. The poppy would bloom, but plucking all its leaves before flowering keeps the flower from blooming. This is so that others don't find out what you're growing. Usually, beans are grown alongside the poppies. These are like borlotti beans we have here in South Korea. If you plant a stalk of beans and plant a poppy plant next to each other, the two plants will intertwine as they grow. Plucking out the poppy leaves, no one can see the poppy growing there. That's how you grow, harvest, and dry the poppy to make opium. This is all done by regular people. You have opium at home to take when you are sick. Taking opium causes one to vomit, so it's counterintuitive that it works as a medicine.

But strangely enough, it does treat your illness. Vomiting is the unpleasant part because you get nauseous as you are throwing up. But then it works. The fever and the bleeding are gone. That's why people continue to take opium every once in a while. Opium is used to treat the common cold.

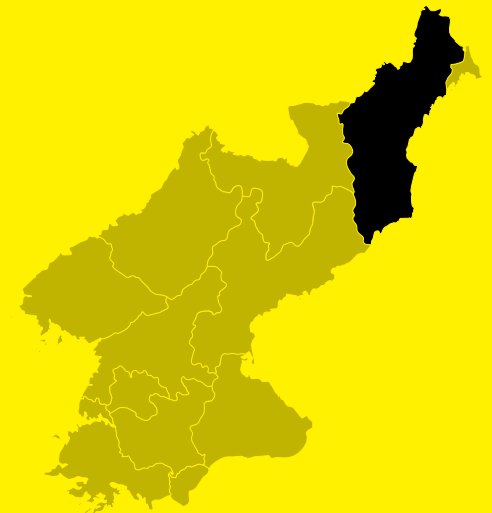
In a way,  
opium is a cure-all for North Koreans.

Since we don't have medicine  
which costs a lot of money, we tend to treat  
most illnesses with opium.

Voice  
60

Meat and Food Culture

Hello, my name is  
Kim Su-ok.  
I was born in North  
Hamgyong Province.  
I left North Korea  
in early 2017 and  
reached South Korea  
in late 2020.



Hello, my name is Kim Su-ok. I was born in North Hamgyong Province. I left North Korea in early 2017 and reached South Korea in late 2020.

I lived in North Hamgyong Province before I left North Korea. My hometown was not far from Rason city. But people from other regions cannot enter the city freely. You need a travel permit, which is very hard to get. As a cover-up, I used to pay for one of the “long vans” for taxi service to do business back and forth. That is to say, I used the long van as a “service car.” The reason people are willing to take service cars to Rason is because the city has a lot of merchandise. They can buy Chinese products wholesale and go to other cities to trade. That’s why people want to enter the city. Residents living in Rason have little difficulty getting out of the city, but it’s hard for outsiders to come in. I can’t say it’s exactly easy for a citizen of Rason to travel to another city, but it’s easier than when an outsider tries to get in. For the people living in the countryside, Rason is as inaccessible as Pyongyang.

I sold pork at the marketplace. Every marketplace has its own name. Each region has its own marketplace. The market bears the name of the region. There are also smaller markets in every nook and cranny. There were a number of regular pork dealers at the marketplace in my hometown. Then there were others who would come to sell their pigs butchered from home. When the holidays are right around the corner, a few dozen meat sellers may be there forming a line. You have your own stall in a market. You have to pay for the stall. Those without a stall may have their wares for sale on the ground. It is the market that takes the stall fee. There is a market management centre that falls under the local People’s Council which controls the marketplace.

North Koreans mainly eat pork. Pork sells well. One

kilogram of pork used to be around 280 North Korean won in the 2000s. This was a very steep price for an average person. It is equivalent to two kilograms of rice. Living standards have gone down for everyone recently, so some households may eat pork once on the Lunar New Year. Smugglers and owners of big businesses have a better living, so they may eat meat every two or three days. I had a regular client who would buy meat from me every two or three days.

An average person would have pork maybe two or three times a month.

Some can, but many households cannot eat like that.

In North Korea, the staple food is maize for North Hamgyong Province and potatoes for Ryanggang Province. Households that get to eat powdered maize like rice are doing relatively better. In South Korea, I found that maize is more expensive than rice, but most North Korean households can’t afford to eat rice. It was like that even in 2017 when I left the country. Rice is many times more expensive than maize, that’s why. Well, people with a decent living can eat rice for their daily meals. That was the living standard in North Korea.

I purchased pork from private households. There are households that had pigs. Houses that made liquor would often have pigs. North Koreans distil *soju* at home. The liquor is made

from maize. I tried making soju and all sorts of stuff. You feed the pigs with the corn residue produced from making alcohol. That's how you breed pigs. You need to bribe the police officer in order to make liquor. Word will spread that you are brewing alcohol at home. North Koreans like to snitch on each other. Once the word gets out, your neighbour will report you to the police department. The officers will learn in advance and come to search your house on the day of the distillation. If caught on-site, people that bribed the police in advance are relatively safe. But if you haven't, they will take everything and drink it up themselves. They don't return it to the state.

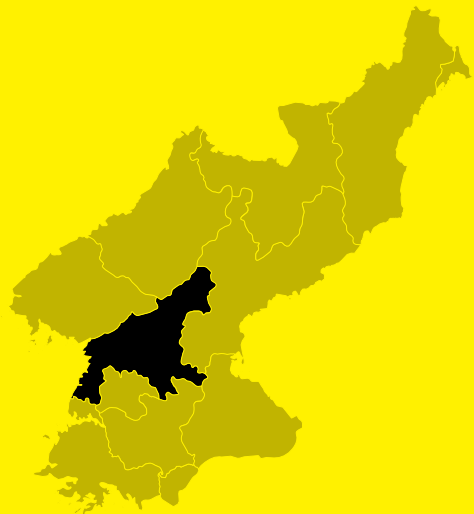
It is normal for North Korean households to breed farm animals to eat. They didn't breed so many chickens in my city because it was a big city. But many did have pigs at home. The balcony outside your flat is where you'd have the pigs stay. South Koreans don't believe me when I say you can have pigs in your flat. We don't have pigs indoors. They stay on the balcony. The balcony is not connected to the indoor space like in South Korea. It is blocked most of the time. Having pigs there, the house smells really bad. Flats on the first floor tend to dig underground to have pigs there. There is no way one can have chickens on the balcony. They'll flap their wings and get out for sure. Also, people don't breed chickens because they are not very profitable. Mostly they do pigs to sell. A pork dealer such as myself would secure my sources by visiting each of these households and asking them to sell their current batch of pigs to me this time. In North Korea, we don't sell pork in different cuts. We just sell the whole pig by weight – bone and all. We don't do it like in South Korea where you have specific cuts of meat called “pork belly” or “spare rib”. If the customer asks for the front leg, we give them the front leg.

If they ask for the rib, we give them the rib – bone and all.

There is beef too, obviously.  
But if a person is caught butchering a cow,  
he is a dead man.

Cows are state-property. There is some beef that comes from cows stolen from the state farms. I was told that the buyer and the seller are treated the same. Beef is not easy to sell in North Korea. There were repatriated Japanese Koreans who lived nearby, and they wanted beef. I had their address written down so that when I got hold of some beef I would deliver it to their place. They came to my market stall from time to time to ask if I had any beef.

Hello, my name is  
Park So-jin.  
My hometown is  
in South Pyongan  
Province. I left  
North Korea in the  
middle of 2019 and  
reached South Korea  
in about a month.



Hello, my name is Park So-jin. My hometown is in South Pyongan Province. I left North Korea in the middle of 2019 and reached South Korea in about a month.

I lived in South Pyongan Province until marriage, and I moved to my husband's place in Ryanggang Province in the late 1990s. My husband was a soldier. He was assigned to my hometown. In North Korea, one is not free to relocate to a different region. One may be allowed to move if, say, the husband has been assigned to work in another part of the country. You are not allowed to move to a different region simply because you want to live there. You have to have a valid reason why you need to live in a certain region to be able to move. Otherwise, you can't. You do get to move to a different neighbourhood within the same region, though.

Houses are bought with money.

There is this thing called a "House Use Permit" (*ipsajeung*) in North Korea. If I'm buying a house from somebody, the owner of the house handles the transaction by receiving the money and registering the permit. There is an institution that deals with registering the permit called "Housing Management... something." I don't remember exactly. Anyhow, there is a corporation that does that for you. Corporations are just like companies in South Korea, but I'm sure they belong to an administrative committee – like the People's Committee. The permit document should have the name of the former resident of the house, right? So I need to go through the process

to replace that name with mine. This, by the way, isn't free. One needs to pay for it. The process is free in principle, but bribes are exchanged in reality. This isn't so much of a commission fee because the proceeds go only to the individual handling the process. It's a form of a bribe. The person in charge of the process is called a "housing management agent." These agents are assigned to a number of People's Units. If I want to ask for a House Use Permit to be issued, I need to have some money in my pocket – as is the expected protocol. If I don't give money, they will make excuses to find me at fault. They will try to hassle you, asking who told you that a private individual can purchase housing. But if you hand them the cash upon the visit, they will get the permit issued in no time.

In North Korea we count cigarettes in a unit of ten packs. To get the "House Use Permit" issued, you will have to give ten packs of cigarettes to a male agent and give about 50 Chinese yuan in the case of a female agent. But this was the case in the old days. These days, people prefer cash because cigarettes can get obvious. The thing about cigarettes is that there are others watching when offering cigarettes, so bribes are all done in cash nowadays. The reason why they didn't give cash before was because it was understood to be a form of bribery. Cigarettes, on the other hand, can be considered to be a gift of some sort. It could lead to severe punishments if, upon inspection, it is found that money was exchanged. I think it was around 2011 or 2012 when people started to prefer cash.

I started my own business once I moved to Ryanggang Province. I used to smuggle goods across the Chinese border. But then I had to follow my husband's work to South Pyongan Province. I stayed there for a while before moving back to

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❶ The United States Congress passed a set of sanctions in the name of "North Korea Sanctions and Policy Enhancement Act of 2016" on 12 February 2016, after North Korea's 4th nuclear test. This law expanded enforcement of U.S. sanctions against North Korea including penalties on entities engaging in the mineral or

Ryanggang Province. While living in South Pyongan Province, I was involved in shipping coal to China. I would truck coal all the way to the port at Nampo, where I would dump the coal and get paid for it. From there, the coal would reach China by ship. Even after moving back to Ryanggang Province, I was still involved in the same business. Then I was trading soybeans, cowpea, and *seoritae* beans to China before coming to South Korea.

I started exporting coal to China from 2006. I was in the business for about ten years until 2016. Then, in 2016, the U.S. enacted sanctions<sup>❶</sup> which led to the end of the coal exports. This was in May, I believe. I lost my job afterwards. That's when things got hard in North Korea. People's livelihoods were made difficult. The sanctions cut off all trade – not just coal, but also minerals and stuff. Agricultural products, soybeans, herbs, and bracken were still traded through Hyesan though, one way or another. I was in the coal trading business in Phyongsong until the export trade got blocked, so I came to Hyesan wondering what to do next. There were people hauling cowpea from the southern regions to Hyesan and they would haul them on trucks to China. I wasn't the type of businessman where I would sit all day at a market stall.

My family and I had plans to come to South Korea way back in 2010. But back then, I didn't make the effort to leave as I was making good money and a decent living in North Korea. From 2016, though, I had to live off of what money I had made up to then because the coal trade had stopped. But then I was still counting on the United States to lift its sanctions sometime soon. But I couldn't continue waiting while not knowing when the sanctions would be lifted, so I came to South Korea. I had a lot of money on me when I was in North Korea. But in North Korea, one

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metal trade with North Korea. Additionally, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 2270 on 2 March, 2016, which imposes strict sanctions such as the banning of states from procuring coal, iron, and iron ore from North Korea.



does not get to own a house with two stories no matter how rich you are. I saw one of those mansions with two or three stories and a garage while watching South Korean TV shows. I watched it and wanted to live in a house like that myself. But in North Korea, such a house would get confiscated by the state regardless of how much money I have. You only get to build houses as the state has decided for you. Individuals do not get to own land either. Houses can be built, but not big ones. You only get to build ordinary housing.

It was a South Korean TV series, in effect, that made me decide to leave North Korea.

I made that choice in 2010. But how could I go when I didn't know anyone in South Korea? I needed an acquaintance in South Korea to pull me in, and I couldn't because I didn't have anyone. One day, a friend of mine in South Pyongan Province told me that she had a relative in South Korea. I asked her if she could take me to South Korea if I got her across the Yalu River border. She said yes. So I got her across the river. This was back in 2011. She reached South Korea and called me, telling me to join her in South Korea.

But this was when I was making a lot of money in North Korea. I had eight to ten 25-ton trucks in operation. It took a day for the trucks to make a round trip between South Pyongan Province and Nampo which would fetch me 100 dollars in profit per truck. That is, I was making 800~1,000 dollars a day. This was after deducting the truck costs, the fuel costs, and everything else.

I was making so much money that I stayed behind for eight years, when in fact I had told my friend that I would join her soon.

Of course, individuals are not allowed to own cars in North Korea. You go to a corporation in possession of trucks and make a prepayment and rent a truck for a month. You get to have the truck for a month as well as the truck driver as your employee. I instruct the truck driver and he works for me.

But it's not like in South Korea where you can start your own company. I just hauled coal. To be in the coal business, one needs to have an eye for coal, be able to manage the vehicles and the drivers, and have a number of other skills. Having just trucks and coal won't get you the business. There are police officers in every corner trying to find an excuse to extort money from you. I need to be able to handle them. I also need to buy good coal. In other words, I need to be able to tell good coal from bad coal. There is a testing equipment for coal, where we say that we do not take coal that has a lime contamination of over 12, and we only take those with a lime contamination under 12. If you are in a coal mine taking coal that has lime contamination levels above 12, because you do not have an eye for good coal, your business is done for. You need to make at least 1,200 dollars per truck to break even – considering the truck costs and the fuel costs. That is to say, 1,200 dollars is a baseline investment that needs to be made. But if you don't have an eye for coal, you could lose 1,200 dollars during an attempt to make 100 dollars. That's why people without an eye for coal will fail in the business.

I, on the other hand, did have an eye for coal – all my family members worked in coal mines. As a result, I knew coal like the back of my hand. The nature of coal mining is that there is no way of keeping the quality of coal constant – even as they mine

the same shaft every day. The coal trucked yesterday may have been of good quality, while the coal today might not be as good. That's why you need to shovel up a bit of coal in a plastic bag to run the tests. If the coal is of good quality in nine out of the ten trucks but the quality is bad in the remaining one truck, that won't do. They have their own experts and their own testing protocol. But then, you can get away with it if you are bribing your way to do business. If you tell them to go easy on one of the trucks that holds subpar coal, they will make adjustments since they have already taken money from you.

The coal export business started with the burgeoning of so-called "autonomous coal mines." State-owned mines use machinery to mine the coal. They use "compressor" equipment – fully mechanised. But these autonomous coal mines are ones run by private individuals. They use manpower where people carry coal on their backs and pull mine carts by hand. It's tiresome work. But the quality of the coal is better, perhaps because they reach greater depths. These private-owned autonomous mines are also registered by the state. For instance, 50% of the profit could be handed to the state while 50% is kept by the owner. From the remaining profit, the owner is made to pay for manpower, food, etc. They are like the CEOs in South Korea. Anyhow, that's how I used to offer business to the autonomous mine executives. The supply of coal is lower compared to the demand. Mining for good coal is also a difficult task. That's why I had to propose my business to the autonomous coal executives who had good quality coal. One cannot simply buy coal anywhere simply because they have money.

When I was in business, I would buy a ton of coal at 32 dollars. I would sell it for 45~50 dollars. People in the coal

business should have an eye for coal, but also have a knack for selling coal. They should be able to cover the land routes and have spare cash. With spare cash, one can have trucks. You need all five to be able to start your own coal trade, so it's not for people without the capabilities. In South Korea, capable men become CEOs and Chairman of companies, while incapable men work for others, right? It's the same way in North Korea. In North Korea also, the rich grow richer.

The smuggling trade is discontinued as of right now (March 2023). I was told that the trade is at a full stop. I know about this because I know people in North Korea and China who used to work with me in this trade. I've also told my family back in North Korea to tell me if the trade is about to resume, so that I can engage in business with North Korea. And then my family in North Korea tells me over the phone that they expect trade to resume sometime in the middle of this year. I was told that the traders are getting prepared as we speak. I really wish that was true.

One thing that Americans and South Koreans both misunderstand is that more sanctions will lead North Korea to make more nukes.

I think it is better to lift the sanctions. The more sanctions there are, the more nukes North Korea will make out of spite. I believe the sanctions should be lifted for the sake of the people in North Korea. Lives will be better once the sanctions are lifted.

Other nations of the world seem to say that sanctions against North Korea must remain in place, but I disagree. No matter how much sanctions are placed, Kim Jong-un will continue to live well and eat well. It's the people that will suffer. No number of sanctions will ever change North Korea's behaviour. Also, the North Korean people still revere Kim Jong-un. Just as Christians in South Korea revere God, North Koreans think the same way about Kim Jong-un. Kim Jong-un is God in North Korea. I looked up to Kim Jong-un as God when I was in North Korea because I was ignorant.

Rich folks tend to watch South Korean TV series with USB drives in secret. They tend to fantasise about South Korea as a result, but it's another thing to start wanting to go to South Korea. Instead, people yearn for reunification with South Korea. They also wish Kim Jong-un would open up the country with other nations of the world. That way, they believe, they can become a wealthy nation. But would Kim allow for that? You think Kim Jong-un would open up the nation? At the risk of having to hang himself? At the risk of being beaten to death by the people who have found out about the truth? Right now, North Koreans are complacent only because they are ignorant. Kim Jong-un probably does not want reunification with South Korea to happen. But all the people, myself included, thought reunification would be a good idea.

I remember talking about reunification once with a group of people in North Korea. Someone said it would be nice to live in a unified country, and someone else asked who would become president then. Then another person said that's why reunification will never become a reality. From Kim's perspective, why would he risk reunification when he can't tell who would become

president? The thing is, North Koreans don't get to talk about which form of reunification would be better for them. That would get them arrested.

## Appendix 1

# Recommendations of Amnesty International to North Korea\*

\* Democratic People's Republic of Korea: Gestures are not enough – Amnesty International Submission for the UN Universal Periodic Review 33rd Session of the UPR Working Group, May 2019 (ASA 24/9712/2019).

## Amnesty International calls on the government of North Korea to:

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### 1. NATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS FRAMEWORK

- Continue to engage with UN human rights treaty bodies, and to strengthen coordination at the national level to ensure implementation of the treaties to which the DPRK is a State Party;
- Grant immediate and unrestricted access to all UN Special Procedures who request to visit the DPRK, including the Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea;
- Consider establishing a National Human Rights Institution in accordance with the Paris Principles.

### 2. FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

- Ensure that everyone in DPRK can communicate directly and regularly with family members and others, including with parents and children living in other countries, without interference unless justified in line with international human rights law and standards;
- End the surveillance of communications that is unnecessary, untargeted or without any legitimate aim, including between children and their parents;
- Allow the establishment of independent newspapers and other media and end all censorship of domestic and foreign media;
- Introduce access to the internet (i.e. the World Wide Web) in schools, libraries and other public facilities.

### 3. POLITICAL PRISON CAMPS AND ARBITRARY DETENTION

- Immediately and unconditionally release all detainees, including foreign citizens, unless they are charged with an internationally recognizable offence and given a fair trial in line with international standards;
- Immediately close down and disclose full information about political prison camps;
- Take immediate and effective action to stop the use of torture and other ill-treatment of detainees in political prison camps and other detention facilities.

### 4. RESTRICTIONS ON FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT

- Amend the Criminal Code and other legislation to remove the requirement for permission to travel abroad, in line with international human rights treaties to which the DPRK is a State Party;
- Ensure that no one is detained or prosecuted for leaving the country without permission or subjected to torture and other ill-treatment, forced labour, enforced disappearance or the death penalty, on return to the DPRK.

### 5. WORKERS' RIGHTS

- Ensure that all persons working under the management of state-owned entities, whether in the DPRK or abroad, are guaranteed and informed of their rights, including the rights to freedom of movement, and to fair wages enabling a decent living for themselves and their families;
- Ensure through legislation and practise that all workers at home or abroad enjoy just, safe and healthy working conditions, and reasonable working hours;
- Regulate and monitor the treatment of workers by their employers, and provide appropriate means to examine and redress grievances brought by workers, individually or collectively, without the threat of reprisals.

### 6. CHILDREN'S RIGHTS AND RIGHT TO EDUCATION

- Amend the Act for the Protection of the Rights of the Child to cover all children under the age of 18;
- Remove barriers to access to education and promote regular attendance at schools;
- Ensure compulsory and genuinely free primary and secondary education for all children, as stipulated in Article 22 of the Act for the Protection of the Rights of the Child;
- Ensure that children are protected against all forms of exploitation and forced or hazardous labour, including by effectively preventing schools from requiring children to perform inappropriate amounts or types of physical work;
- Ensure, by incorporating into policies and legislation, that education is provided in a manner that respects the inherent dignity of children, enables them to express their views freely and to develop life skills, such as critical thinking, and to reach their potential and pursue options in life, while also respecting human rights values.

### 7. THE DEATH PENALTY

- Disclose information on the use of the death penalty, including all death sentences, executions, and persons under sentence of death, as well as overall annual statistics and confirmation as to whether public executions have been ended in practice or law;
- Introduce an official moratorium on executions as a first step towards the abolition of the death penalty.

## Appendix 2

### An Overview of the Interviews

Timeframe

**October 2019–  
June 2023** (3 years and 9 months)

Locations  
Visited

**Seoul, Incheon,  
Gyeonggi  
Province, South  
Chungcheong  
Province, North  
Chungcheong  
Province**

Number of  
Interviewees

**88** Individuals in total

Interviewers

Choi Jae-hoon,  
the DPRK Specialist at Amnesty International Korea  
and more.

Number of  
interviews &  
interviewees  
that went into  
the making  
of *60+ Voices*

**61** Interviews

**61** Interviewees

## 1. Interviewee Screening

- **Target:** Individuals who have left North Korea and re-settled in South Korea within the last 5 years – being mindful of the period where the North Korean borders were locked due to Covid-19 (years 2020-2023). (Certain individuals with a unique story to tell have been interviewed regardless of the point in time in which they have escaped from North Korea.)
- **Method:** Potential interview subjects have been recruited by the previous subjects in the way of “snowball sampling.”
- **Date and Time:** Arrangements were made to fit the schedule of those who have accepted the interview.

## 2. Visiting and Communication

- **Interview Location:** Interviews were conducted either at the home of the interviewee or at another secured safe location.
- **Consent:** The interviewer(s) have notified the interviewee about the content and the procedure of the interview, confirmed the interviewee’s willingness to participate, and had a signed agreement written for proof.

## 3. Interview Questions and Method

- **Topic:** On North Korean human rights in general
  - Civil and political rights
  - Economic, social and cultural rights
  - Other human rights issues
  - Local culture and recent trends
- **Interview Format:** In-depth face-to-face interviews in a conversational format using open-ended questions.
- **Interview Method:** Interviewees were invited to make oral statements on their direct experience, eyewitnesses, and thoughts.
- **Recording of the Interview:** Voice recordings were made with the consent of the interviewee and were used in combination with written notes.

## 4. Analysis of the Collected Materials

- Transcribe the voice recordings.
- Comparative analysis with related materials (existing accounts, reports, etc.)
- Validate the account based on reason and experience.
- Find implication and significance (not contained in the publication).

3

### 61 Interviewees by the Year of Escaping from North Korea

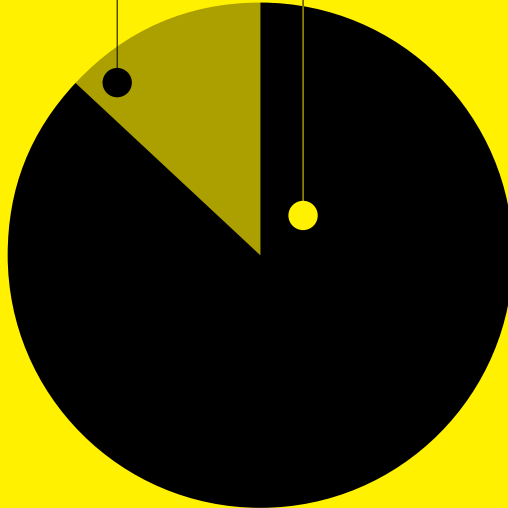
The Year of Escaping from North Korea

Number and Percentage of people that escaped before 1 January, 2017

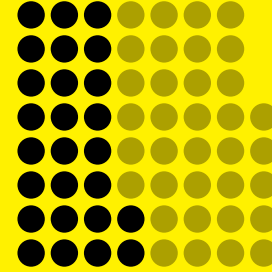
7<sup>persons</sup>  
11%

Number and Percentage of people that escaped on 1 January, 2017 and after

54<sup>persons</sup>  
89%

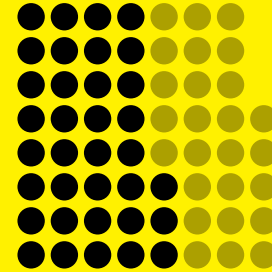


Number and Percentage of people born before 1980



26<sup>persons</sup>  
43%

Number and Percentage of people born in 1980 and after

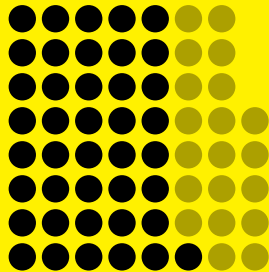


35<sup>persons</sup>  
57%

4

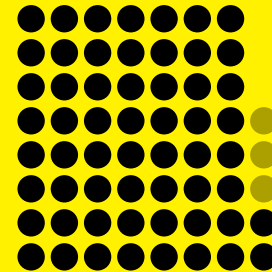
### 61 Interviewees by Gender, Age Group, and Travel Time

Number and Percentage of Women



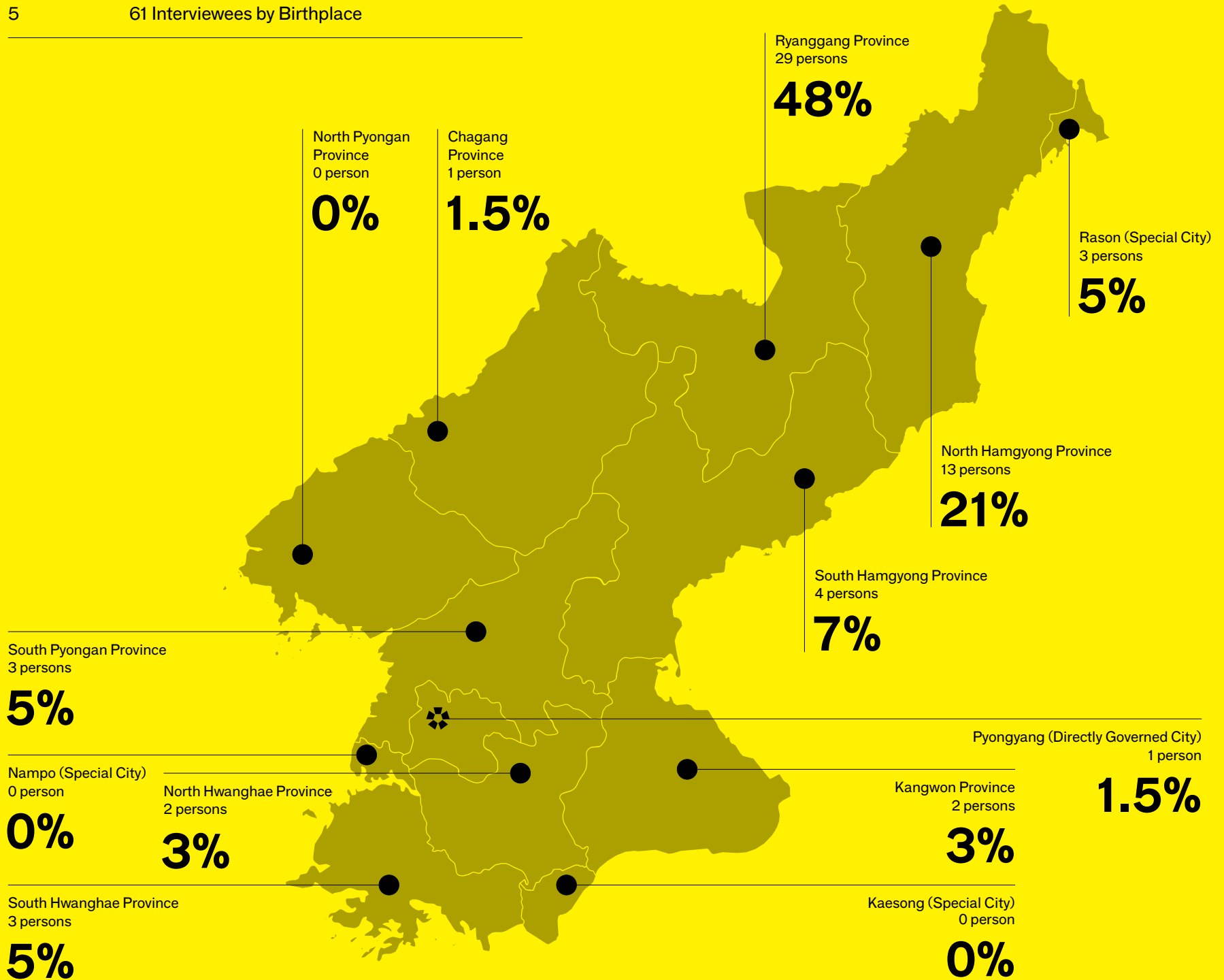
41<sup>persons</sup>  
67%

Number and Percentage of people that took less than 2 years to enter South Korea after leaving North Korea



58<sup>persons</sup>  
95%





60+ Voices

Reflecting on Everyday Lives in North Korea

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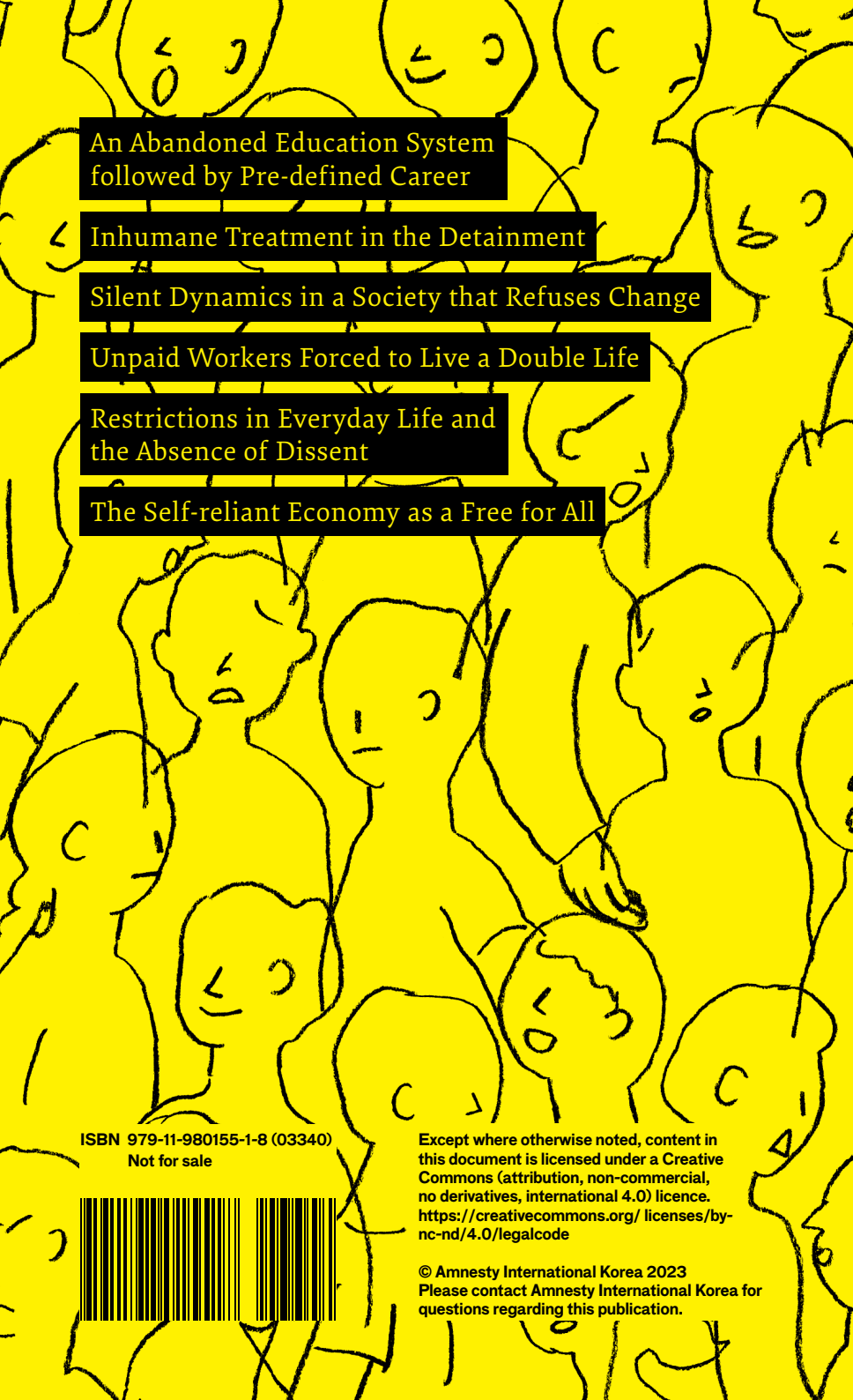
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