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When Sherlock Holmes Left Pyongyang: Surveillance And Social Control In North Korea, 1954–2021

Abstract

This dissertation argues that surveillance and social control in North Korea was always more complex than often depicted, even in the decades preceding the famine of the 1990s and early 2000s. At the same time, disobedience and resistance among the grassroots population did not seriously threaten regime stability. This shows that disobedience and stability can and often do co-exist in society. While many historians have abandoned the term “totalitarianism”, this dissertation argues that the concept remains relevant and necessary to describe societies such as North Korea where the state aspires to total control over the lives of the population, even if it does not always succeed. Through interviews with approximately 40 individuals from North Korea, most of them with memories from before the famine of the 1990s, this dissertation shows that social control always suffered from serious inefficiencies, even in the 1960s, 70s and 80s, decades not sufficiently explored in historiography on everyday life in the country.

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WHEN SHERLOCK HOLMES LEFT PYŎNGYANG: SURVEILLANCE AND SOCIAL CONTROL IN

NORTH KOREA, 1954–2021

Benjamin Katzeff Silberstein

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Supervisor of Dissertation



Frederick R. Dickinson

Professor of Japanese History

Graduate Group Chairperson



Jared Farmer

Walter H. Annenberg Professor of History

Dissertation Committee

Adrian Buzo

Lecturer, University of New South Wales, Australia

Sheena Chestnut Greitens

Associate Professor, University of Texas at Austin

Peter Holquist

Professor of History, University of Pennsylvania

WHEN SHERLOCK HOLMES LEFT PYŎNGYANG: SURVEILLANCE AND SOCIAL CONTROL IN
NORTH KOREA, 1954–2021

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Benjamin Rafael Katzeff Silberstein

This dissertation is dedicated to Bella, Piri, Margit, and all the other members of the Grünzweig and Silberstein families who perished in the Holocaust. May their memory forever be a blessing.

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None of those mentioned here should be blamed for any errors or mistakes on the following pages, but they all have a share in any of the merits this dissertation may have.

ABSTRACT

WHEN SHERLOCK HOLMES LEFT PYONGYANG: SURVEILLANCE AND SOCIAL CONTROL IN

NORTH KOREA, 1954–2021

Benjamin Katzeff Silberstein

Frederick Dickinson

This dissertation argues that surveillance and social control in North Korea was always more complex than often depicted, even in the decades preceding the famine of the 1990s and early 2000s. At the same time, disobedience and resistance among the grassroots population did not seriously threaten regime stability. This shows that disobedience and stability can and often do co-exist in society. While many historians have abandoned the term “totalitarianism”, this dissertation argues that the concept remains relevant and necessary to describe societies such as North Korea where the state aspires to total control over the lives of the population, even if it does not always succeed. Through interviews with approximately 40 individuals from North Korea, most of them with memories from before the famine of the 1990s, this dissertation shows that social control always suffered from serious inefficiencies, even in the 1960s, 70s and 80s, decades not sufficiently explored in historiography on everyday life in the country.

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Introduction

Few societies today are so poorly known and yet described in such simplistic forms as North Korea. Most media coverage focuses on its weapons of mass destruction and leadership cult. It is often described as “frozen in time.”¹ Whenever images of ordinary North Koreans reach audiences outside the country, they tend to show lines of soldiers marching in lockstep in military parades, citizens shouting slogans or waving flowers at political mass rallies.² The North Korean government’s blockade against information both leaving and entering remains remarkably successful despite a rise in clandestine news sources inside the country in recent years.

This leaves us with a poor understanding of how North Korean society actually works. The country remains technically at war with the United States ever since the Korean War (1950–1953) ended with a ceasefire, not with a peace treaty. Understanding North Korea remains an urgent task, not only because tensions remain high between North Korea and many of its neighbors. North Korea also defies common logic and assumptions about totalitarian states. Despite being the only industrialized country to experience famine in peacetime, there are no publicly known instances of civilian mass

¹ See, for example, Jordan Weissmann, “How Kim Jong Il Starved North Korea,” *The Atlantic*, December 20, 2011, <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2011/12/how-kim-jong-il-starved-north-korea/250244/>. For more on the idea of North Korea as an historical relic, see Euan Graham, “North Korea’s Historical Hall of Mirrors,” *Nikkei Asian Review*, May 11, 2017, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/North-Korea-s-historical-hall-of-mirrors>.

² It would be easy to view this as anti-North Korean propaganda. In fact, the image of a society perfectly united behind its leadership, as one body with “single-minded unity,” falls well in line with the leadership’s *Juche* ideology where the populace is described as part of a societal body where the leader is the “brain” on top. For a summary, see Alzo David-West, “Between Confucianism and Marxism-Leninism: *Juche* and the Case of Chong Tasan,” *Korean Studies* 35 (2011): 93-121, 166.

disturbances or large-scale public protests.³ Unlike other communist states, the North Korean regime was never toppled by mass unrest in the 1990s, when communism fell in Europe. Moreover, unlike other socialist states in Asia, North Korea never adopted any wholesale economic reforms.

A common explanation in the literature for the regime's survival is its exceptionally strong apparatus for surveillance and political control. But surprisingly little literature explores the historical development of this system. Many scholars assume that this apparatus has functioned virtually without flaws or faults, controlling each citizen's every move and inner thoughts. Yet, as evidenced in the interviews with 36 North Koreans now resettled in South Korea that form the basis for this dissertation, as well as off-the-record conversations with many others, most grassroots North Koreans never experienced state power in that way in their daily lives. Although state terror has generally been remarkably brutal and effective, it has never been without hiccups. One of my interlocutors, Ri Jae-min, captured this dynamic when describing his experiences reading Conan Doyle's *Sherlock Holmes*. As the political and cultural climate in North Korea grew more oppressive in the latter 1960s, Ri's favorite books suddenly disappeared from library shelves. But *Sherlock Holmes* never entirely left North Korea. Ri, like many others who generously shared their life stories, could still access foreign deemed inappropriate by the state.

³ Nick Eberstadt, *The North Korean Economy: Between Crisis and Catastrophe* (New Brunswick, NJ; London: Transaction Publishers, 2009), xi.

A fundamental finding of this research is that North Koreans always circumvented the rules established by the state. People traded with one another, bribed those in power, faked family origins documentation, criticized the government in private and travelled without permits, even in decades usually described as socially stable such as the 1960s, 70s and 80s. Those decades are often contrasted with the famine years of the 1990s and 2000s, when social control supposedly broke down. But such control was never as perfect or total as many believe.

In the early 1990s, as the Soviet Union imploded and China reduced its aid, North Korea fell into a disastrous famine after the collapse of its planned economy. This drastically curtailed the state's ability to exercise social control as the economic role of the state diminished and border guards and other security personnel became more and more receptive to bribery. The relative social chaos from the late 1990s seems particularly stark in contrast with the more stable earlier decades. But I will argue that the contrast is exaggerated.

Many analysts forecast that the fall of North Korea following the collapse of the Soviet Union. At the time, this seemed likely. In retrospect, they overestimated the scale of totalitarian control from the start. Histories of totalitarian societies are often written with their failure as the starting point, as if such regimes are, by definition, unstable. Classical examinations of totalitarianism echo this belief, highlighting regime power as, at once, strong and fragile. The case of North Korea suggests not that totalitarianism is an irrelevant or faulty framework, but rather that totalitarian systems in certain

circumstances are much more durable and capable of becoming more flexible than commonly acknowledged.

The binary between control and resistance exacerbates the problem. Scholars have often exaggerated the extent of popular resistance in totalitarian states, striving to find it in every nook and cranny and often over-emphasizing the political nature of expressions of discontent with the government. The field of North Korean studies, in many ways, mirrors that of Soviet studies, where earlier works highlighted the state in full control over all social developments. There is, as Lynne Viola puts it, “[...] a danger to the study of resistance for resistance’s sake, and that is the danger of mythologizing resistance.”⁴

The debate hinges in large part on how to define terms such as control and resistance. In the following pages, “control” refers to state methods and tools to compel conformity, not just with formal laws and rules but with norms and daily practices designed to display political loyalty, such as mass rallies.⁵ I use the term “resistance” broadly to mean “[...] opposition – active, passive, artfully disguised, attributed, or even inferred.”⁶ I recognize resistance to the state on various levels and strive to be specific about the target throughout. Unlike most surveillance studies, I highlight “surveillance” exclusively as the prerogative of the state, because that is the only surveillance in North Korea. Surveillance constitutes systematic efforts by the state to gather information about the population – from attitudes and beliefs about the regime, to activities that are either

⁴ Lynne Viola, “Popular Resistance in the Stalinist 1930s: Soliloquy of a Devil’s Advocate,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 1, no. 1 (2000): 4.

⁵ For a discussion on this term, see Mathieu Deflem, “Introduction: Social Control Today,” in *The Handbook of Social Control* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2019), 1–6.

⁶ Viola, “Popular Resistance in the Stalinist 1930s,” 46.

illegal or politically suspect, to more ordinary information such as census data. In totalitarian states, the line between administrative information gathering and surveillance efforts for political control are often blurred.

The historiography of the Third Reich has seen similar trends. Early studies portrayed a smoothly functioning totalitarian apparatus forcefully inculcating Nazi ideology in German citizens. Later, scholars overestimated the degree of popular resistance among the general public. Today, scholars generally agree that the public viewed the Nazi regime with resignation, apathy and indifference.⁷

Although often highly critical of the regime, early histories of North Korea emphasized close to total state control of every sphere of society.⁸ Since the early 2000s, scholars have become more interested in the daily lives of citizens, assigning agency and importance to those lives, but often overstating the engagement, enthusiasm and influence of ordinary North Koreans.⁹ It is important that the field move beyond the resistance and control binary, and develop a more realistic and nuanced understanding of the regime and society.

Let me first define several key terms. “Totalitarianism” connotes the social and political system of regimes such as the Soviet Union under Stalin, Nazi Germany and North Korea. In these states, all are directed toward state goals, and the state uses

⁷ Geoff Eley, “Hitler’s Silent Majority? Conformity and Resistance Under the Third Reich (Part One),” *Michigan Quarterly Review* XLII, no. 2 (Spring 2003): 4.

⁸ The most central example is perhaps Robert A Scalapino and Chong-Sik Lee, *Communism in Korea* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972).

⁹ For two prominent examples, see Charles K Armstrong, *The North Korean Revolution, 1945-1950* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003); Suzy Kim, *Everyday Life in the North Korean Revolution, 1945-1950* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013).

oppressive tools and coercive measures to keep the public actively working toward its goals. Brzezinski and Friedrich's classical six-point list of essential features of totalitarianism offers a useful sketch:

“ 1. An official ideology ...covering all vital aspects of man's existence to which everyone living in that society is supposed to adhere ... [the ideology] is characteristically focused and projected toward a perfect final state of mankind ...;

2. A single mass party led typically by one man ...and consisting of a relatively small percentage of the total population ... a hard core of them passionately and unquestioningly dedicated to the ideology ...such a party being...typically either superior to, or completely intertwined with the bureaucratic government organization;

3. A system of terroristic police control...characteristically directed not only against demonstrable „enemies“ of the regime, but against arbitrarily selected classes of the population; the terror of the secret police systematically exploiting modern science, and more especially scientific psychology;

4. A technologically conditioned near-complete monopoly of control, in the hands of the party and its subservient cadres, of all means of effective mass communication, such as the press, radio, motion pictures;

5. A similarly technologically conditioned near-complete monopoly of control (in the same hands) of all means of effective armed combat;

6. A central control and direction of the economy... typically including most other associations and group activities.”¹⁰

Together, these traits form a matrix for totalitarian control.¹¹ Most importantly, totalitarian regimes are characterized by the absence of any line between state and society. As I discuss further below, although few regimes have achieved such total control, it has remained the goal. There have been a variety of totalitarian regimes throughout history, but all share certain features: utopianism, a belief that science can achieve any goal (scientism), revolutionary violence, and a deep desire to craft a “New Man” – a better human being, more conducive to accomplishing the regime’s goals.¹² Totalitarianism is partially a byproduct of modernity. Modernity is itself subject to much scholarly debate. David-Fox, for example, argues convincingly for the recognition of multiple “modernities” rather than looking at the concept as a single, unified phenomena. Modernity has often been conflated with “westernization” and liberal democracy, but the Soviet Union and other totalitarian states have aspired to a form of modernity of their own.¹³ I use the term to stress the North Korean state’s appropriation of administrative efficiency, rationality, scientific explanation and rationalization, modern bureaucratic governance, and other traits of modern states.

¹⁰ Carl J. Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956), 9–11.

¹¹ Juan J Linz, *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes* (Boulder, CO: Rienner, 2009), 66.

¹² Richard Shorten, “Introduction,” in *Modernism and Totalitarianism: Rethinking the Intellectual Sources of Nazism and Stalinism, 1945 to the Present*, ed. Richard Shorten, *Modernism and ...* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2012), 4, https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137284372_1.

¹³ Michael David-Fox, “Multiple Modernities vs. Neo-Traditionalism: On Recent Debates in Russian and Soviet History,” *Jahrbücher Für Geschichte Osteuropas* 54, no. 4 (2006): 535–55.

My research addresses two fields: North Korean history, and the general study of surveillance, political control, state-building and totalitarianism. Within North Korean studies, it seeks to show that North Korean society was more dynamic and chaotic than has been portrayed in the literature. The period from the early 1960s to the late 1980s are often represented as decades of social stability, but as the interviewees for this dissertation affirm, there was a great deal of dynamism and grassroots contestation during this period, and this often goes unmentioned in historical works, many of which focus mainly on the higher echelons of political power.¹⁴ Many excellent works exist, primarily in the Korean language, that probe the nature and structure of the North Korean system for control.¹⁵ Other works, some by people from North Korea who resettled in South Korea, study the most central institutions for grassroots surveillance and control in great detail.¹⁶

¹⁴ I do not intend to downplay the significance of these excellent works, many of which still hold up remarkably well to contemporary scrutiny. See, for example, Scalapino and Lee, *Communism in Korea*; Dae-Sook Suh, *Kim Il Sung: The North Korean Leader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); Helen-Louise Hunter, *Kim Il-Song's North Korea* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1999).

¹⁵ For a few examples, see Young Chul Chung, "The Suryŏng System as the Institution of Collectivist Development," *The Journal of Korean Studies* 12, no. 1 (2007): 43–73; Chŏn Hyŏn-chun, *Pukhanŭi Sahoet'ongje Kigu Koch'al: Inminboansŏngŭl Chungsimŭro* (Seoul, Republic of Korea: T'ongil Yŏn'guwŏn, 2003); An Hŭi-ch'ang, *Pukhanŭi T'ongch'i Ch'eje: Chibae Kujowa Sahoet'ongje* (Seoul, Republic of Korea: Myŏngin Munhwasa, 2016); Lee U-yŏng, *Chŏnhwan'gi ŭi Pukhan Sahoet'ongje Ch'eje* (Seoul, Korea: T'ongil Yŏn'guwŏn, 1999).

¹⁶ A few examples are Kyŏng-hŭi Ch'ae, "Pukhan 'Inminban'e Kwanhan Yŏn'gu : Inminbanŭi Chojik, Yŏkhal, Kinŭngŭl Chungsimŭro" (MA thesis, Seoul, Republic of Korea, Pukhan Daehagwŏn Daehakkyo, 2008); Hyŏn In-ae, "Pukhanŭi Chumindŭngnokchedoe Kwanhan Yŏn'gu" (MA dissertation, Seoul, Republic of Korea, Ehwa Women's University, 2007); Myŏng-il Kwak, "Pukhan Inminboanwŏn'gwa Chuminŭi Kwan'gye Pyŏnhwa Yŏn'gu" (PhD, Seoul, Republic of Korea, University of North Korean Studies, 2016); Yun Tae-il, *Agŭi Ch'uk Chiphaengbu: Kukkaanjŏnbowibuŭi Naemo* (Seoul, Republic of Korea: Wŏlganjosŏnsa, 2002).

I seek to add an historical dimension, exploring the system as a dynamic, real-life entity rather than a theoretical model. The North Korean state was never omnipotent. It never controlled every corner of society, as tightly as often believed. Even in periods when state censorship tightened, such as the late-1960s, people found ways of skirting around the rules. There always existed some space, albeit a highly limited one, for conversation and exchange of ideas critical of the state among ordinary North Koreans. Even at times when state distribution of necessities such as food was stable and constituted the main source of sustenance for most citizens, people still had to supplant a significant proportion by bartering and growing their own food. Institutions such as the *Songbun* family background registry, for example, were plagued by inefficiencies and bureaucratic failings from their very inception. The surveillance network was always tight, but people could get around the state's grip through the right connections, often via family and friendship networks.

North Korean society, moreover, has never been historically static. The repatriation of close to 100,000 ethnic Koreans from Japan in the 1960s and 70s constituted a significant social shock, introducing a new form of economic inequality that hitherto had only existed between political cadres and ordinary citizens, posing a new challenge to the surveillance system.¹⁷

At the same time, one should not exaggerate the extent of social “resistance”. Although surveillance and social control was never flawless, it functioned remarkably

¹⁷ Ŭn-Lee Chŏng, “Chaeiljosŏnin Kwigukchaŭi Salmŭl T’onghaesŏ Pon Pukhanch’ejeŭi Chaejomyŏng,” *Aseayŏn’gu [The Journal of Asiatic Studies]* 52, no. 3 (September 2009): 189–227.

well throughout most of North Korean history to this day. Indeed, the same interviewees who described flaunting rules also stressed that clear political transgressions always risked swift punishment. Virtually all interviewees recalled friends, acquaintances and neighbors “disappearing” overnight or being taken away in broad daylight, sometimes for seemingly minor “speaking mistakes” that often occurred in contexts involving alcohol. Rigorous enforcement of the autocracy centered around the Kim family is a common explanation for the exceptionally low bar of tolerance for transgressions for such a long time. Institutionally, the entire governing apparatus—including the institutions for surveillance and social control – is centralized around the Great Leader, and the task of each actor in the system is to protect him, leaving few questions about authority and boundaries down the chain of command.¹⁸ Judging from the research for this dissertation, most citizens have, as elsewhere in the world, tended to look with apathy and resignation upon the regime.

This dissertation also situates itself in the history of totalitarianism and social control. The North Korean experience shows two conflicting truths about totalitarianism. On the one hand, it shows that regime rule is rarely as omnipotent and efficient as portrayed in classical works on the subject. On the other hand, it questions the extent to which this lack of perfect functionality matters for the viability of the system. The classical theoretical works on totalitarianism, such as those by Arendt, Talmon, Friedrich and Brzezinski and others, depict a system that is all-powerful, but in a way that also makes it appear very fragile, as if the entirety would collapse if control wavered within

¹⁸ For an overview of these institutions and their centering around the Great Leader, see Chŏn Hyŏn-chun, *Pukhanŭi Sahoet'ongje Kigu Koch'al*.

any social sphere.¹⁹ Meanwhile, scholars critical of the totalitarian school often exaggerate the impact of acts of disobedience on the system as a whole.²⁰ The term “totalitarianism” is itself controversial, with many scholars reluctant to use it due to political connotations from the Cold War, and because they regard its claims of state control within every sphere of society as unrealistic and exaggerated.

This dissertation seeks to show, however, that totalitarianism as an analytical framework remains both necessary and relevant. The roots of the North Korean surveillance state are multi-faceted but mainly stem from the system of governance that the Soviet Union imposed while it occupied the country between 1945 and 1948. We need a term to connote regimes that seek to control citizen’s lives in all spheres, and that prioritize aligning public consciousness along ideological lines. Totalitarianism differs fundamentally from other systems of governance in the extent of a regime’s claims to control the citizenry. That this never perfectly succeeds is irrelevant. As Martin Malia has argued, what matters is not the end result but the aspiration of full, total control.²¹ I therefore argue that totalitarianism is in fact more durable than early scholars gave it credit for. It can, and often does, co-exist with a public sphere outside of state control where people engage in private economic activity, conversation and cultural

¹⁹ See, for example, Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1973); Friedrich and Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy*; Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Permanent Purge* (Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956); Jacob Talmon, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* (New York: Praeger, 1960).

²⁰ For a few examples of this genre of literature, see Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Michael Geyer and Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Beyond Totalitarianism: Stalinism and Nazism Compared* (New York, N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Abbott Gleason, *Totalitarianism: The Inner History of the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution On My Mind: Writing a Diary Under Stalin* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009).

²¹ Quoted in Gary Bruce, *The Firm: The Inside Story of the Stasi* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 8.

consumption, all of which the state strives to root out. Such systems never worked perfectly, but they have often, as the case of North Korea shows, largely achieved unthreatened regime rule and stability. These systems can even survive challenges that appear insurmountable, under certain conditions, such as North Korea's Arduous March famine of the mid-1990s. This sphere outside full regime control can even contribute to social stability by allowing the citizens a modicum of freedom, so long as they do not cross core boundaries established by the state.

I do not focus exclusively on oppressive aspects of totalitarianism. The North Korean regime, at least in its early decades, had an ideology-driven civilizing mission. Totalitarian regimes are usually utopian, justifying their repressive methods with a morally superior end-goal that justifies its means. Nazi Germany sought a righteous racial hierarchy across Europe and beyond, and Democratic Kampuchea under the Khmer Rouge (1975–1979) justified the expulsion of certain social classes and ethnic groups as an essential component of the pathway to the utopian goal.²² Many democratic modern states also promote civilizing missions. But the willingness to impose severe human suffering and mass death on their own populations and others in the service of a future utopia is what has distinguished totalitarian states of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

North Korea never witnessed mass killings of the same proportion as the cases mentioned above. But it, too, was driven by a utopian desire to, in Stalin's well-known

²² For more on this, see Eric D Weitz, *A Century of Genocide: Utopias of Race and Nation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).

phrase, engineer the human soul. As we shall see, the early development of the country's systems for surveillance and political control were driven by a desire to not just passively spy on the population but to fashion them into economically productive citizens capable and willing to defend the homeland.²³ On the micro-level, surveillance was about defending the political order from any threats, no matter how small. On the macro-level, however, surveillance capacity was one step in North Korea's coming to "see like a state", as James Scott phrases it.²⁴ This progressive social vision is not antithetical to totalitarianism but has often been a central part of it. From the beginning, the North Korean government had a clear vision of a modern society with strict social conformity and full political cohesion.

On the other hand, North Korea's process of coming to see like a state was often highly chaotic and plagued by mistakes and errors. Much like the early Soviet state, as Kate Brown shows, the North Korean state uprooted citizens deemed ideologically impure and moved them from urban centers to less hospitable regions.²⁵ This often happened when the state bureaucracy uncovered someone's politically inferior family background, sometimes based on supposed political crimes that victims who were deported had never heard of. By forcibly moving people around the country, the early

²³ As Holquist has shown, totalitarian states are not unique in their use of surveillance methods to monitor the attitudes of the population. Rather, in the early 1900s, this was a pan-European phenomenon, and states such as France and the UK also exercised surveillance over the population to monitor their sentiments about the war. See Peter Holquist, "Information Is the Alpha and Omega of Our Work': Bolshevik Surveillance in Its Pan-European Context," *The Journal of Modern History* 69, no. 3 (1997): 415–50.

²⁴ James C Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

²⁵ Kate Brown, *A Biography of No Place: From Ethnic Borderland to Soviet Heartland* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2005).

North Korean state sought, in Bauman's formulation, to "garden" society along rational lines.²⁶

Although terror was often the outcome, it was not always the only purpose. Being able to monitor and change attitudes was simply regarded as an aspect of modern statecraft, particularly during the 1950s and 1960s when North Korea went through a process of rapid industrialization. It is no coincidence that the state created a flurry of institutions for indoctrination and surveillance, instituted regularized self-criticism sessions and enhanced the mandate of neighborhood watch groups during this era. Transforming the population was directly connected to industrialization and national defense. I seek to place North Korea in the broader historical context of totalitarian surveillance by demonstrating the continuity of such state practices, stretching consistently through North Korea's history all the way into the present.²⁷

This dissertation also raises questions about the nature of anti-state resistance. James Scott has argued that people in oppressive societies where open resistance carries dire consequences often bow to authority in public and mock it in private.²⁸ Therefore, Scott argues, autocratic regimes do not enjoy the sort of hegemony they are often perceived as holding. Under the surface, citizens defy them by small acts of everyday resistance.²⁹ Scott's work casts valuable light on how the testimonies of North Koreans in

²⁶ Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989).

²⁷ For a discussion on the roots of such thinking in enlightenment thought, see Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 6.

²⁸ James C Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. (Yale University Press, 2008); James C Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

²⁹ Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, 304.

this dissertation should be understood. Although many recalled social situations such as banishment to the provinces with a sense of resignation and despair, this does not necessarily translate into acceptance of the unfairness.³⁰

Rather, frequent criticism of daily acts of injustice suggest a lingering desire for active resistance. These research findings, however, calls into question what broader social or political significance such resistance really carries. Scott argues that small acts of resistance tend to build up to a greater mass, making a political presence felt on the whole.³¹ But as many of the people I interviewed attested, flaunting rules remained common in North Korea. And yet this led to little systemic change. The growing tolerance for markets from the early 2000s was a response to the extreme crisis of mass starvation. Gardner Bovingdon's field work on Uyghurs in China's Xinjiang province demonstrates that with an exceptionally strong state willing to use force against its own people, small acts of resistance may not have broader political impact. This speaks to the comparative strength and flexibility of the totalitarian system.

These frameworks remain relevant not just to past but to present and future of totalitarian dictatorships, whose methods are growing all the more sophisticated. While many hoped that North Korea's young leader Kim Jong-un (1984-) would institute political and economic reforms after succeeding Kim Jong-il (1941-2011) in 2011, he has actually strengthened North Korea's totalitarian system and modernized it, increasing

³⁰ Ibid, 323-324.

³¹ Ibid, xvii.

electronic means of surveillance.³² North Korea is neither alone, nor the world leader, in strengthening mechanisms of totalitarian control. China has developed methods of surveillance of its own citizenry so all-encompassing, draconian and efficient that parallels with George Orwell's *1984* no longer do it justice.³³ Beijing exports its surveillance systems and technology to multiple countries, a trend that appears to be growing.³⁴ The Chinese campaign to eradicate the culture and national identity of and reduce the numbers of Uighurs illustrates better than any other example since the Holocaust the devastating, brutal consequences of a state's effort to "garden" society along ideological lines.³⁵ ‘

These countries no longer strive to ban modern communications technology as predicted by Brzezinski and Friedrich, who argued that totalitarian systems can only function through complete state control over all means of communication.³⁶ On the contrary, online communications provide a powerful way for these regimes to surveil their citizens.³⁷ A better understanding of totalitarianism, state oppression and social control is needed, not only required for grasping history, but also for understanding a growing trend in the present.

³² Benjamin Katzeff Silberstein, "How High-Tech Can Boost Regime Stability in North Korea," *Orbis* 64, no. 4 (January 1, 2020): 589–98.

³³ Kai Strittmatter, *We Have Been Harmonized: Life in China's Surveillance State* (New York, NY: Custom House, 2020).

³⁴ Paul Mozur, Jonah M. Kessel, and Melissa Chan, "Made in China, Exported to the World: The Surveillance State," *The New York Times*, April 24, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/24/technology/ecuador-surveillance-cameras-police-government.html>.

³⁵ See, for example, Chris Buckley and Paul Mozur, "How China Uses High-Tech Surveillance to Subdue Minorities," *The New York Times*, May 22, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/22/world/asia/china-surveillance-xinjiang.html>.

³⁶ Brzezinski and Friedrich, *Totalitarian Dictatorship*, 9–11.

³⁷ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London, UK: Penguin Books, 2020).

Sources and Methods: North Korea and Oral History

The main sources for this research are 36 long-form, qualitative interviews with people from North Korea conducted in South Korea in 2018 and 2019. In addition, informal ethnographic fieldwork within the North Korean refugee community added crucial insights. Given that I examine social control in practice, oral history was a natural choice. As an environment for oral history, North Korea shares many characteristics with the Soviet Union. Particularly under Stalin's rule (1927–1953), information about everyday life was often difficult to access, largely because the regime, as does North Korea today, maintained an information blockade.

This often made it necessary for scholars to rely on testimonies by refugees. The so-called Harvard Project highlights several opportunities and potential pitfalls in this research method. Between 1949 and 1951, scholars from the Russian Research Center at Harvard University conducted interviews with over 700 displaced persons and emigres from the Soviet Union for the Harvard Project on the Soviet Social System.³⁸ The interviews were recorded through careful note-taking and non-verbatim transcripts rather than audio recordings. Scholars often cite Harvard Project transcripts as sources of historical fact, but as Prendergast points out, the context and setting of the interviews gave the researchers significant influence in shaping the transcripts.³⁹ Thus, oral history interviewing is never simply about “asking”. Here, I lay out a brief sketch of the

³⁸ Sam Prendergast, “Revisiting the Harvard Project on the Soviet Social System,” *The Oral History Review* 44, no. 1 (April 1, 2017): 19–38, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ohr/ohw136>.

³⁹ Prendergast, “Revisiting the Harvard Project,” 3.

methodology and other considerations relating to the oral history interviews for this dissertation.

Relatively little oral history research exists on North Korea compared with other communist countries. Sandra Fahy, for example, uses rigorous oral history methodologies to research topics such as coping behavior in the famine and the human rights situation in the country.⁴⁰ Lankov examines early political history partially through interviews with ethnic Koreans from the Soviet Union who served as bureaucrats and public officials with the Soviet occupation forces from 1945.⁴¹ Morris-Suzuki draws upon interviews with ethnic Koreans from Japan who emigrated to North Korea in the 1960s and 1970s, and later escaped.⁴² These works, and several others, add a human perspective to the political histories that dominate the field. I seek to make a modest contribution to this body of scholarship.

The methodology of oral history has shaped this research in significant ways. Some North Korea scholars are reluctant to rely on oral sources due the many methodological challenges. No scholar can travel to North Korea and freely meet with interview subjects. Often, information cannot be independently verified. Much of the criticism, however, stems from misunderstandings of the scope and limitations of the method. Much of the skepticism against comes from beliefs about North Korean

⁴⁰ Sandra Fahy, *Marching Through Suffering: Loss and Survival in North Korea* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015); Sandra Fahy, *Dying for Rights: Putting North Korea's Human Rights Abuses on the Record*. (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2019).

⁴¹ Andrei Lankov, *From Stalin to Kim Il Sung: The Formation of North Korea, 1945-1960* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2002).

⁴² Tessa Morris-Suzuki, *Exodus to North Korea: Shadows from Japan's Cold War* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007).

individuals who have left for South Korea.⁴³ In this view, as Fahy notes: “[t]hey are vulnerable. Poor. They need to get ahead.’ Then, at the same time—note the contradiction—is the mysterious inability to position them as a specific someone: ‘They could have been anyone back in North Korea!’”⁴⁴

Fahy recounts two common criticisms: that North Korea refugees invent or exaggerate information in order to get ahead and, that they often overplay their positions in North Korean society. Moreover, refugees are a self-selecting group, and we do not know how representative the experiences of refugees are.⁴⁵ Most refugees come from the northern region of North Korea and may only represent specific geographic areas.⁴⁶ Most relevant, in my own belief, is the risk that interviewees expect the interviewer to want to hear mainly tales about brutality and suffering in North Korea, and therefore adapt their narrative to fit the audience.⁴⁷

This research naturally could not escape these risks, but overall, they were less relevant than I thought at the outset. The more conversations I conducted with people from North Korea, the less relevant the criticisms seemed. Throughout my research in South Korea, I met interviewees through various networks. I drew upon previous contacts

⁴³ Sandra Fahy, “Qualitative Interviewing: Approaches and Techniques for Sensitive Topics,” in *North Korea Economic Forum Working Paper Series 2020-1* (Washington, D.C.: George Washington University Institute for Korean Studies, 2020).

⁴⁴ Fahy, “Qualitative Interviewing...”, 2.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴⁶ Indeed, according to South Korea’s Ministry of Unification, a stunning 19,820 out of 33,696 refugees in the country (as of 2020) originally hailed from North Hamgyong province. See Ministry of Unification, Republic of Korea, “Policy on North Korean Defectors: Data & Statistics,” accessed February 11, 2021, https://www.unikorea.go.kr/eng_unikorea/relations/statistics/defectors/.

⁴⁷ This question is in many ways a product of the general attitudes in South Korea towards North Korean refugees. See, for example, Byung-Ho Chung, “Between Defector and Migrant: Identities and Strategies of North Koreans in South Korea,” *Korean Studies* 32 (2008): 1–27.

within NGOs working with North Korean refugees and the scholarly community in South Korea. I encountered some interviewees through mutual friends, while others were recruited with the help of contacts in the activist community. We would usually hold a two-hour conversation, and I introduced the frames of the project in vague terms with the goal of letting the interviewees themselves steer the topic towards what they thought most important. Most were in their 50s or 60s, some in their 90s, and a smaller number in their 20–40s. Most preferred to meet in their own homes.

I conducted all interviews personally in Korean, with the exception of a few occasions where a mutual friend – usually someone also from North Korea – accompanied me to facilitate the meeting. I presented myself as a researcher interested in surveillance and social control in North Korea because of my own family background. My paternal grandparents survived the Holocaust in Europe. This often led to conversations about the shared experiences of Koreans and Jews. I kept interview questions purposefully open and broad, and often opened by asking interviewees to talk about their grandparents. This often brought interviewees naturally back to childhood memories.

Some of the pitfalls discussed above did cause difficulties, while others were much less frequent than anticipated. Some were simply irrelevant because of the focus of my research. After all, all interviewees were experts on the topic of my research by virtue of having lived everyday lives in North Korea. I never sought out extraordinary tales of the lives of the elite but, rather, wanted to examine the mundane. Outright fabrications about this topic would have served little purpose. To maintain a focus on interviewee's

personal experiences, I asked them to recount memories in the most detailed ways possible.

Conversations usually evolved around social interactions in North Korea – for example, how, if at all, people would talk about politically sensitive topics. I often asked if they ever directly interacted with agents from the Ministry of State Security (MSS) or Ministry of Public Security (MPS) and how those interactions were.⁴⁸ Another question was whether the interviewees themselves knew, or knew of, people “disappearing” and how people talked about such events. Specific groups such as former *inminbanjang* (heads of “people’s units”, neighborhood watch groups) and other state functionaries were asked how they were chosen for their roles, whether these roles were sought after, why they thought they got chosen, if they received any education, and, in the case of *inminbanjang*, how their relationship was with the local authorities. I posed the questions as specifically as possible: for example, when did you first meet the MSS or MPS agent in charge of your neighborhood? What did you talk about, and where did you meet? How often would you meet in a regular week, and did any of this change during the famine? The point is that while interviewing people from North Korea for oral history purposes can be challenging, it is by no means impossible, and it is the responsibility of the researcher to phrase questions in a way that allows for open-ended, deep discussion.

I sometimes had the impression that an interviewee was saying what she or he perceived that I, as a researcher from a western country studying surveillance in North

⁴⁸ Both the MSS and the MPS have gone through several reorganizations and name changes. For the sake of clarity, I use these two names and abbreviations consistently throughout the dissertation.

Korea, wanted to hear. In a few cases, interviewees recounted what sounded like a script designed to emphasize the listener's pre-conceived notions of North Korea. In a couple of cases, this led me not to use the interview in the final source bases. In other cases, I waited out this scripted talk without interrupting and afterwards focusing on surveillance and social control. I avoided entirely normative questions such as "what did you think of Kim Jong-il?" As Yurchak points out, memoirs tend to be more critical of the Soviet Union than diaries.⁴⁹ In other words, people's perspective changes over time. Being as specific as possible when asking questions can help interviewees avoid painting recollections of the past with the brush of the present. At the same time, there is no guarantee against such biases coloring the interview.

Another question is that of moral responsibility and guilt. As Gary Bruce notes, people often prefer to talk about the good times over discussing difficult moral questions and choices they made while living in an oppressive system.⁵⁰ When speaking with former *inminbanjang* or MPS agents, I avoided going into depth about moral responsibility. In a society such as North Korea, everyone is simultaneously, to some extent, both a perpetrator and a victim. I feared that interviewees might close off should we enter such territory. Only in a small number of instances did we discuss how actions of the interviewees may have caused suffering for others. Unsurprisingly, interviewees were quicker to recall instances where their actions had saved someone from getting arrested rather than condemned them as political criminals.

⁴⁹ Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 6.

⁵⁰ Bruce, *The Firm*, 5.

The biggest issue of representation stems from the fact that only a miniscule proportion of all North Koreans leave the country. I have attempted to remedy this, too, by asking interviewees to be as specific as possible when recounting their experiences. Yet, some biases are inescapable. For example, I believe that I did meet disproportionately many people who thought the system had wronged them. Geography is another issue. The experience of living in a rural farming community in the south of North Korea is very different from life in the mountainous north with its proximity to the Chinese border. Life in the relatively comfortable, trusted capital city Pyöngyang is vastly different from the rest of the country. There are also differences at play that scholars rarely note. An intellectual will often have widely differing concerns about intellectual freedoms than someone from a farming background, even if they grew up in the same region.

The researcher needs to be cognizant of how each interviewee and story may have been skewed by these factors. I have striven to be as transparent as possible throughout the dissertation about potential biases whenever such risks arise. I am convinced that the stories included in this dissertation have a lot to teach us about North Korea in a broader sense, and I can only hope that the reader will agree.

Finally, the question of the interviewee's safety is crucial. North Korean refugees in South Korea risk harm from the North Korean authorities to themselves and to any relatives still in the country if they speak publicly about their experiences. I assigned pseudonyms to all interviewees, even in instances where they had no problem with exposing their real names. I avoided mentioning their real names on interview recordings

and clarified that all interviewees could choose to not answer any questions if they feared it reveal their identities, but insisted on them letting me include their year of birth and their home province or region in North Korea. As a seasoned scholar of North Korean society pointed out, the fact that people from North Korea are often scared of speaking out even about everyday life itself speaks volumes about the strength of social control in the country.

Printed materials are also a crucial primary source base. These consist both of books such as memoirs by people from North Korea who later escaped to South Korea and materials published by the North Korean government. Both of these materials are complicated and complex to use for historical research. Three autobiographies by North Korean refugees are particularly central: Kim Jin-gye's *Choguk* (Motherland), Sŏng Hye-rang's *Tŭngnamujip* (Wisteria House), and Yun Tae-il's *Agŭi Ch'uk* (Axis of Evil).⁵¹ The two first books are relatively uncomplicated as historical resources while Yun Tae-il's *Agŭi Ch'uk* is more complex.

Kim Jin-gye was sent as a covert operative to South Korea by the North Korean government and apprehended in 1970. In 1990, he published the autobiography *Choguk* to inform South Korean readers about ordinary life in North Korea. At the time, such books were rare. Kim's book is remarkably detailed on everyday life in North Korea from the late-1940s through the 60s and 70s. It is written in a fairly non-politicized manner and recounts both positive and negative aspects of life in North Korea.

⁵¹ Kim Jin-gye and Kim Ŭng-gyo, *Choguk: Ŏnŭ' Pukchosŏn Inmin'ui Sugi* (Soŭl: Hyŏnjang Munhaksa, 1990); Hye-rang Sŏng, *Tŭngnamujip* (Seoul, Republic of Korea: Chisingnara, 2000); Yun Tae-il, *Agŭi Ch'uk Ch'iphaengbu: Kukkaanjŏnbowibuŭi Naemo*.

Sŏng's *Tŭngnamujip* is a somewhat more complex book for purposes of historical scholarship. Sŏng effectively became part of the ruling Kim family after her sister gave birth to Kim Jong-Il's child. She raised her child and often travelled abroad and defected to South Korea in the mid-1990s. Facts about the inner life of the Kim family are impossible to verify, and authors often emphasize the bizarre. Still, Sŏng's book is written in a remarkably nuanced style. One should always exercise caution when using memoirs and autobiographies as historical sources. Still, I use these works mainly as sources for concrete routines and everyday life politics in pre-famine North Korea, never for value judgments, thus limiting the effect of potential biases on the conclusions.

Yun Tae-il's *Agŭi Ch'uk* is somewhat more complicated. Yun is a former agent in the Ministry of State Security (MSS). The very title of his book, "Axis of Evil," hints at bias. However, Yun's book is too valuable to ignore in the name of objectivity. I use *Agŭi Ch'uk* as a resource for information that only someone in his position would have known, such as the proportion of ethnic Korean immigrants from Japan whom the North Korean government deported to labor camps.⁵² Yun does not give a specific, verifiable source for such estimates but he was likely directly privy to them or heard them through contacts within the organization. I have opted to use Yun's book both as a primary and secondary source but readers should remain aware of the nature of this and other similar works on North Korea.

I also draw extensively upon printed sources from North Korea such as newspaper, magazine articles, and speeches by the country's leaders. Newspaper and

⁵² Yun Tae-il, *Agŭi Ch'uk Chiphaengbu: Kukkaanjŏnbowibuŭi Naemo*, 206.

magazines are relatively straightforward sources for regime beliefs and motivations for its policies. Speeches by the leaders are more complicated. North Korea often publishes leaders' speeches several decades after they were supposedly given. The speeches were often not likely delivered in the form in which they are printed, and at the stated times and venues. They are sometimes outright falsifications and often, perhaps as a general rule, at least heavily edited after the fact.⁵³ They are, however, also amalgamations of data and information once collected by the North Korean government, even if highly skewed and re-packaged decades later. In other words, they likely reflect, in some way, how the government saw things at the point in time that the respective speech is attributed to.

The dissertation proceeds as follows. Chapter 1 consists of an historical background that situates North Korea in the broader context of modern statecraft, surveillance, and the history of the Korean peninsula.

Chapter 2, "Seeing like a Surveillance State", shows how the North Korean government crafted and tailored institutions and routines for surveillance as part of the post-war buildup of a modern state.

Chapter 3 examines North Korea's chaotic state-building process. It does so through a detailed study of how the state registered each citizen's family background and used it to create a social hierarchy known as *Songbun*. It relies both on interview testimony from people with recollection of the investigation process and its direct impact

⁵³ For more on this issue, see, for example, Dae-Sook Suh, *Korean Communism 1945-1980: 1945-1980: A Reference Guide to the Political System* (Honolulu, HI: Univ. Press of Hawaii, 1981), 1-14.

on the lives of their families, as well as a classified North Korean government-published manual instructing registration agents on how to conduct investigations. By surveying the problems that the manual seeks to rectify, the chapter shows that the process was plagued by severe difficulties, such as corruption, sexual harassment and arbitrary decision-making by registration officials.

Chapter 4 focuses on everyday life, surveillance and state control, showing the multiple ways in which North Koreans have always skirted around the surveillance system and used contacts, family ties and corruption for illegal consumption, not least of foreign culture, and social advancement. The chapter relies heavily on interviews with *inminbanjang*, leaders of local neighborhood units designated by the state.

Chapter 5 examines the impact on North Korea's social culture of the immigration of close to 100,000 ethnic Koreans from Japan to North Korea in the 1960s and 70s, carrying with them values of consumerism and free expression foreign to North Korea. Many based their choice to emigrate on highly unrealistic propaganda and promises of high living standards by the North Korean government. Instead, the majority were dispatched to harsh living conditions in coal mining towns in the rugged northeast. Many disappeared in North Korea after complaining about living conditions or demanding to return to Japan. They also caused serious social rifts with the general public because of their access to foreign luxury goods and foreign currency that their families back in Japan continued to send for several years after they immigrated.

Chapter 6 serves as an epilogue and outlook. It surveys the development of surveillance and economic control under Kim Jong-un, arguing that contrary to what many expected from the relatively young leader, social control is becoming stronger as the state is centralizing private economic activity into state frameworks. Kim Jong-un is re-asserting state control over the economy and other spheres of society, marking a return to the full totalitarian rule that prevailed for most of North Korea's history. Continuity trumps change. At the same time, the social model is altered in crucial ways. Citizens increasingly use modern communications technology and engage in private economic activity. However, this acknowledgment and allowance for greater public freedom does not spell liberalization.

Chapter 1: Historical Background: Surveillance and Social Control in North Korea and Beyond

North Korea's system for surveillance and social control is part of the broader history of what Foucault termed "governmentality", as well as the broader history of the Korean peninsula in the modern era. The roots of social control in the twentieth century lie in the idea of the state not simply as tasked with defending a country's national borders, but also with governing society and the people. This ambition alone does not lead to destruction, oppression or mass death. Combined with ideology and opportunity, however, it has led to some of the most brutal episodes of human suffering in human history. To understand the history of totalitarianism, of which North Korean history is part, one must first examine the broader history of state violence in the name of social progress.

The people at the forefront of regimes of terror often believe they are spearheading enlightened ideas of progress. That humans can remake and direct society through politics is rooted in the French Revolution and its ideals of human equality beyond the divine right of kings to govern and uphold an unequal order.⁵⁴ Totalitarianism is made possible by the idea of the individual as fully emancipated, and that society can be built along rational, enlightened lines through politics and state guidance.⁵⁵

Foucault's concept of "governmentality" isolates this aspiration by the modern state to not only maintain basic social order, but to rationally and actively govern the

⁵⁴ Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, 6.

⁵⁵ Michael Halberstam, *Totalitarianism and the Modern Conception of Politics* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1999), 5.

popular subjects. He defines the act of “government” as separate from the state, connoting activity meant to shape or guide the broader conduct of the population – in other words, the terms “rational” and “government”, which together become “governmentality.”⁵⁶ Foucault, moreover, traces the roots of the discourse of governmentality to the time of the reformation in Western Europe in the sixteenth century.⁵⁷ The reformation was an anti-authoritarian movement but during the counter-reformation movement that followed, the Catholic church expanded and strengthened its uniform control over society. After the reformation, Protestants and Catholics both came to share an interest in centrally policing people’s faith and imposing church doctrine.⁵⁸

Through the nineteenth century, state administrators began thinking of the inhabitants of the territory ruled by a state as a distinct and identifiable population. Statistical methods were invented in the nineteenth century by social scientists needing statistical tools to examine society.⁵⁹ Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, there erupted what Hacking describes as an “avalanche of printed numbers,”⁶⁰ as governments newly born as nation states calculated and classified their inhabitants through a growing number of categories. During the same time, the first welfare state

⁵⁶ Richard Huff, “Governmentality,” in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed June 8, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/governmentality>.

⁵⁷ Michel Foucault, “Governmentality,” in *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, ed. Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 88.

⁵⁸ John Bossy, “The Counter-Reformation and the People of Catholic Europe,” *Past & Present*, no. 47 (1970): 51–70.

⁵⁹ Theodore M Porter, *The Rise of Statistical Thinking, 1820-1900* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021), <https://dx.doi.org/10.23943/princeton/9780691208428.001.0001>.

⁶⁰ Ian Hacking, *The Taming of Chance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 3.

arose in Imperial Germany and the state for the first time in history sought to actively control social life, using “regulation” to “shape collective practices.”⁶¹

The idea of the nation state and the population as a national body changed the scope of the state’s claims over individual citizens. In the eighteenth century, the European state was still, as James Scott puts it, largely a “machine for extraction”⁶² of resources from nature and the people. In the 1890s, however, Western powers grew increasingly concerned about problems such as epidemics (typhus in particular) spreading from Eastern Europe and Russia to their own territories, threatening not only the health of individuals but the social body and, in turn, social order. Extensive campaigns followed to make civilians compliant with sanitary regime, a symbolic and early example of the state making claims on civilian bodies.⁶³

Around this time, standardized populations became part of modern governance. In 1897, the Russian Empire conducted its first census, registering a wide variety of “populations” based on languages and religious belonging.⁶⁴ The roots of standardization go back much further, and in the eighteenth century, European states were figuring out standardized measurements for weights, distances and other metrics, a prerequisite for an overview of their territories and assets and, not least, populations.⁶⁵

⁶¹ George Steinmetz, *Regulating the Social: The Welfare State and Local Politics in Imperial Germany*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 2, <https://public.ebookcentral.proquest.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=617266>.

⁶² Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, 88.

⁶³ Paul Weindling, *Epidemics and Genocide in Eastern Europe, 1890-1945* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 8.

⁶⁴ Brown, *A Biography of No Place*, 4.

⁶⁵ For an overview of this process, see Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, chap. 1.

World War I marked a further advancement in nationalism and the idea of the state as deriving sovereignty from “the people” as a specific national unit.⁶⁶ Prior to this, Europe mainly consisted of empires with multiple nationalities, but with changes in the international system that followed the war, states increasingly regarded those outside the national body – that is, minority groups within their borders – as potential threats. At the same time, the concern grew for the national community as such, extending to the racial health of the population.⁶⁷ In Germany in particular, as Peter Fritzsche has shown, World War I instilled a sense of unitary, equal, national belonging among Germans, which in turn paved way for the National Socialists to take over based on a program for revitalization of the *volk*.⁶⁸ Because of the need to mobilize masses of people for the war effort, World War I required European states to insert themselves into the lives of civilians to a vastly greater extent than before and, not least, to have the population registered and standardized.⁶⁹

Mass political surveillance also grew out of World War I. Before, surveillance evolved primarily as industrializing states built bureaucratic capacities.⁷⁰ During the war, states began to exercise mass surveillance to monitor and change sentiments among the general public. Surveillance during World War I was a pan-European phenomenon, with countries such as Germany, France and England keeping track of the mood of its soldiers

⁶⁶ Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), 41.

⁶⁷ Mazower, *Dark Continent*, 77–78.

⁶⁸ Peter Fritzsche and Mazal Holocaust Collection, *Germans into Nazis* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998).

⁶⁹ Norman M Naimark and Mazal Holocaust Collection, *Fires of Hatred: Ethnic Cleansing in Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001), 8–9.

⁷⁰ Toni Weller, “The Information State: An Historical Perspective on Surveillance,” in *Routledge Handbook of Surveillance Studies*, ed. Kristie Ball, Kevin D Haggerty, and David Lyon (Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2012).

during wartime. Both the Imperial army and the Bolsheviks of Russia and the Soviet Union made extensive use of surveillance to keep track of popular moods during the civil war.⁷¹ Surveillance did not end with the war. The Bolsheviks in particular extended surveillance far beyond the war context. Throughout the 1920s, the Soviets greatly expanded the tradition of monitoring correspondence through a special “black office” room at each post office and censors copied everything that held information about the popular mood.⁷²

In isolation, the state’s capacity to administer, count or surveil the population does not lead to tyranny. Scott posits three elements that need to be present in addition to practices of state simplification and the ordering of nature and society: first, a high-modernist ideology with the ambition to create utopian societies driven by boundless belief in rational science; second, an authoritarian state able and willing to execute these plans, as well as wartime conditions that create a sense of emergency; and third, the absence of a civil society strong enough to stop such plans.⁷³ The ideologies of high modernism and utopianism are central because they provide a vision to strive for, and justify a narrative of “progressive” policies that mask the reality of mass coercion and state violence. Self-styled progressive, revolutionary elites have therefore committed history’s worst genocides, famines and instances of mass killings, often after coming to power with a strong (initial) popular mandate to radically transform society.⁷⁴ The best known such instance the Third Reich (1933–1945) under Adolf Hitler (1889–1945), who

⁷¹ Holquist, “Information Is the Alpha and Omega of Our Work.”

⁷² Vladlen S. Izmozik, “Voices from the Twenties: Private Correspondence Intercepted by the OGPU,” *The Russian Review* 55, no. 2 (1996): 287–308.

⁷³ For a brief summary, see Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, 5.

⁷⁴ Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, 89.

sought to order all of Europe into a racial hierarchy with the Germans on top.⁷⁵ Indeed, the Holocaust itself was an expression of the Nazi German state's ambition to "garden" society, in Zygmunt Bauman's phrasing, and mold society along what it considered to be ideologically appropriate lines.⁷⁶

Another example is the imposition of communist rule by the Soviet Union throughout Central and Eastern Europe. The Soviets and the regimes they put in place sought to garden society by eliminating potential political enemies.⁷⁷ The process was in many ways similar across the communist world, but local factors made developments play out differently over time. Because the Soviet border moved several hundreds of kilometers west through the war, the Soviet Union encompassed millions of new inhabitants who were former citizens of prewar central European states. Stalin ordered a major wave of arrests of such people to preemptively quell nationalistic uprisings.⁷⁸ In Bulgaria, 30,000 people were killed in only the first ten days of occupation, and perhaps as many as 180,000 thousand political prisoners passed through the country's eighty-eight labor camps. The Bulgarian Communist Party, like many others, turned against its own shortly after it came to power. In 1949, one fifth of all Party members, 100,000

⁷⁵ Karel C Berkhoff, *Harvest of Despair: Life and Death in Ukraine under Nazi Rule* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 35–36.

⁷⁶ Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, 12.

⁷⁷ The tragic case of Poland is the clearest example. Both the Soviet Union and the Nazi Germany sought during World War II to subjugate Poland not only as a territory, but as a society. Hence, both countries conducted vast campaigns to eradicate the cultural, military and political elite of the country during their respective period of occupation, the most famous example of which is the Soviet massacre of 22,000 Polish military officers and members of the intelligentsia in the spring of 1940. The Soviets sometimes simply consulted Polish "Who's Who"-type books searching for victims in the struggle to eradicate modernity from Poland entirely. See, for example, chapter 4 in particular in Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010); Lukazs Kaminski, "Stalinism in Poland, 1944–56," in *Stalinist Terror in Eastern Europe: Elite Purges and Mass Repression*, ed. Kevin McDermott and Matthew Stibbe (Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 2010).

⁷⁸ Applebaum, *Iron Curtain*, 251–252.

people, were branded “class enemies” and sent to concentration camps.⁷⁹ From 1945 until Stalin’s death in 1953, the NKVD (former KGB) held 150,000 people in concentration camps in East Germany.⁸⁰ In Poland between January and April 1945, the NKVD arrested 215,540 suspected political enemies.⁸¹ Labor camps held 180,000 political prisoners in Romania, and between 1948 and 1953, the Hungary imprisoned 400,000 peasants for failing to deliver production quotas.⁸² Conflicts between domestic communists and those educated in Moscow (essentially assets for the Communist International, Comintern, controlled by the Soviet Union), were also common throughout the communist world, as in North Korea.⁸³ However, because Korea did not experience any significant fighting in World War II, the Soviets had fewer scores to settle than it did in Europe. Moreover, many, perhaps even the majority, of those who would have been charged as Japanese collaborators fled to South Korea between 1945 and 1950.⁸⁴

North Korea’s historical trajectory also shares many traits with Albania, another small country occupied by the Soviet Union after World War II, where a strong cult of personality also developed around the leader. Albania saw harsher Stalinist rule than other countries in Eastern Europe, where Stalinism, as in North Korea, remained long

⁷⁹ Ekaterina Nikova, “Bulgarian Stalinism Revisited,” in *Stalinism Revisited: The Establishment of Communist Regimes in East-Central Europe*, ed. Vladimir Tismaneanu (Budapest, Hungary: Central European University Press, 2010), 289–292.

⁸⁰ Applebaum, *Iron Curtain*, 107. As their equivalents in North Korea, the purpose of these camps was to isolate potential political enemies, and the camps had no economic benefits whatsoever.

⁸¹ Applebaum, *Iron Curtain*, 95.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 276–277.

⁸³ In Romania in the early 1950s, for example, several officials from the so-called Muscovite group of people educated in, and with strong bonds to, the Soviet Union, were purged from their positions. See Vladimir Tismaneanu, “Diabolical Pedagogy and the (Il)Logic of Stalinism in Eastern Europe,” in *Stalinism Revisited: The Establishment of Communist Regimes in East-Central Europe*, ed. Vladimir Tismaneanu (Budapest, Hungary: Central European University Press, 2010), 42.

⁸⁴ Kim Sŏng-bo and Lee Chong-sŏk, *Pukhanŭi Yŏksa* (Seoul: Yŏksa Pip’yŏngsa, 2011), 98.

after Stalin's death in 1953. As in North Korea, a siege mentality fueling purges and the hunt for enemies within developed early on in Albania, a country ostensibly surrounded by potential enemies on all borders.⁸⁵ As in North Korea, the Albanian communist government after World War II sought to “remak[e] individuals by redesigning their environment.”⁸⁶

Few instances of mass death are as illustrative of high-modernism and utopian ambitions as China's Great Leap Forward (1958–1962) and the Khmer Rouge genocide during the period of Democratic Kampuchea (1975–1979). In China, Mao Zedong espoused industrialization more rapidly than ever before in history through neatly ordered collective farms with full equality, producing enough grain to feed the politically crucial urban centers.⁸⁷ Yang Jisheng, whose father starved to death during the Great Leap, was initially enthusiastic about the project and its utopian vision. In a powerful testament to the role of ideology, Yang initially viewed his father's death as a small tragedy on the road to social transformation, not the fault of the government.⁸⁸

In Cambodia, Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge envisioned total social transformation and a return to a pastoral past, with full social equality, free from the decadent influences of

⁸⁵ Robert Austin, “Purge and Counter-Purge in Stalinist Albania, 1944-1956,” in *Stalinist Terror in Eastern Europe: Elite Purges and Mass Repression*, ed. Matthew Stibbe and Kevin McDermott (Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 2010), 199.

⁸⁶ Elidor Mëhilli, *From Stalin to Mao: Albania and the Socialist World* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2018), 4.

⁸⁷ Felix Wemheuer, *Famine Politics in Maoist China and the Soviet Union* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2014), 17.

⁸⁸ Jisheng Yang, *Tombstone: The Great Chinese Famine, 1958-1962* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012), 6.

capitalism and the foreign culture of the cities.⁸⁹ The regime divided the entire population by class, much like the North Korean *Songbun* system. Pol Pot's utopia demanded that enemies be purged from the social body. The Democratic Kampuchean regime saw the country's Cham Muslims as a nationality lacking a working class, and regarded Cambodians born in Vietnam, the country's sworn enemy, as inherently hostile to the regime.⁹⁰ Both were singled out for harsh treatment. Ben Kiernan labels the extermination of a fifth of the population as genocide.⁹¹

North Korea is part of this history of totalitarian modernism. Some ideas of social control, surveillance and social gardening came to the Korean peninsula through Japanese colonial rule (1910–1945). At the same time, the Soviet Union planted not only an idea, but an entire social system through their occupation and tutelage following World War II. Deeply rooted Korean traditions have played a role in many state practices of North Korea, but the structures of the system of surveillance and social control was primarily shaped by ideas and practices from outside the peninsula. At the same time, after the Korean War (1950–1953), the North Korean regime strengthened its drive for surveillance and political control, spurred by continued tensions and competition with South Korea and the disarray and destruction after the war. These factors, however, only gave the regime an imperative for social control. Its direction – in other words, who it would seek to control, and how – was set by the ideas underpinning the North Korean regime.

⁸⁹ Ben Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-79* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 55.

⁹⁰ Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime*, 26.

⁹¹ *Ibid*, chapter 7.

Prior to being colonized by Japan, Korea was governed by relatively powerful states which, at the same time, rarely sought to exercise strong central rule. The Chosŏn dynasty (1392–1910) was primarily governed on the local level. The central government designated magistrates to administer each locality but exercised little central rule.⁹² Local elites, so-called *Yangban* gentry, inherited their status from their fathers and governed in an authoritarian fashion.⁹³ At the same time, in line with Neo-Confucianist ideology, there was an understanding that while governed subjects accepted their place in the social hierarchy, rulers had a reciprocal responsibility to govern for the best of the community. Popular riots often broke out whenever the central government’s magistrates overstepped the limits over their power.⁹⁴ Prior to the nineteenth century, moreover, clan and lineage were far more central than national community.⁹⁵ Invasions, as well as shared dialects and customs, did generate a sense of “Korean-ness”, but it was neither strong nor unified across the peninsula.⁹⁶

When a “modern” Korean state emerged is a hotly debated topic among scholars. In 1876, Chosŏn and Japan struck the Kanghwa Treaty, opening Korean ports to trade. Although the country continued to be governed by aristocratic elites, the treaty marked the beginning of Korea’s gradual integration into global trade and exchange.⁹⁷ Korea’s

⁹² Adrian Buzo, *The Making of Modern Korea* (London; New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2017), 1–16.

⁹³ JaHyun Kim Haboush, *The Confucian Kingship in Korea: Yŏngjo and the Politics of Sagacity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 17.

⁹⁴ Buzo, *The Making of Modern Korea*, 1–19.

⁹⁵ Carter J Eckert, *Offspring of Empire: The Koch’ang Kims and the Colonial Origins of Korean Capitalism, 1876-1945* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991), 225.

⁹⁶ James B Palais, “Epilogue: Nationalism: Good or Bad?,” in *Nationalism and the Construction of Korean Identity*, ed. Timothy R Tangherlini and Hyung Il Pai (Berkeley, CA: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1998), 215.

⁹⁷ Eckert, *Offspring of Empire*, 3; Buzo, *The Making of Modern Korea*, 1–16.

Kabo reforms in 1894 modernized the structures of Chosŏn governance by centralizing control around the state and cabinet, somewhat limiting royal power.⁹⁸ The reforms did not quickly enough achieve the governance capacity that their backers sought. Only three years later, in 1897, King Kojong established the Taehan Empire (1897–1910), granting the emperor autonomy in both domestic and foreign policy and command over the armed forces.⁹⁹ The Taehan Empire achieved took several steps toward modern statehood, such as a large-scale cadastral survey with the objective of creating modern institutions for state management of land rights.¹⁰⁰ Even so, prior to Japan’s colonization of Korea, the Korean government remained relatively weak in terms of domestic governance and the ability to “see like a state”.

Colonial Rule and Social Control

Practices of social control and modern governmentality first became part of Korea’s social fabric with Japanese imperial rule. When Korea became a protectorate of Japan in 1905, Japan ruled Korea indirectly through the resident-general system until formally annexing Korea in 1910. Korea effectively lost control of its judicial system in 1909 when it was forced to sign the “Korea-Japan Memorandum on the Delegation of the

⁹⁸ Do-hyung Kim, “Introduction: The Nature of Reform in the Taehan Empire,” in *Reform and Modernity in the Taehan Empire*, ed. Tong-no Kim, John B Duncan, and Do-hyung Kim, Yonsei Korean Studies Series 2 (Seoul, Republic of Korea: Jimoondang, 2006), 2.

⁹⁹ Kim, “Introduction: The Nature of Reform...”, 12.

¹⁰⁰ Won-kyu Choi, “The Legalization of Land Rights under the Great Han Empire,” in *Landlords, Peasants and Intellectuals in Modern Korea*, ed. Ki-jung Pang and Michael D Shin (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 120.

Administration of Courts and Prisons.”¹⁰¹ As Japanese rule grew harsher, the role of the police forces grew, and they became a major presence in people’s everyday lives. The police were not only tasked with maintaining order, but also conducted surveys, monitored public hygiene, and organized meetings for ideological propaganda.¹⁰²

The Japanese colonial government’s growing ambitions mirrored the evolution of surveillance in Western Europe and happened around the same time.¹⁰³ Japan began to keep permanent registries of household data. These changes reflected a new notion of “governmentality” where the state regards citizens themselves as a national resource to be developed and molded.¹⁰⁴ The Japanese government strove to control the information environment with pre-publication censorship laws against articles that “disturbed morals”, “defamed the imperial households of Korea and Japan”, or “jeopardized public peace”.¹⁰⁵ The Security Law of 1907 controlled public expression by punishing “politically disquieting speeches and acts.”¹⁰⁶ From 1928, leading an anti-state organization became a capital offense.¹⁰⁷

The state sought to convert so-called “thought criminals” and continued to monitor them in their everyday lives even after they were converted and released. During the period of total war, from 1933 until the fall of the Japanese Empire in 1945, Tokyo extended the administrative authority of the government both in Japan and in the

¹⁰¹ Chulwoo Lee, “Modernity, Legality, and Power in Korea Under Japanese Rule,” in *Colonial Modernity in Korea* (Brill, 1999), 25.

¹⁰² Lee, “Modernity, Legality and Power...”, 37.

¹⁰³ Holquist, “Information is the Alpha and Omega...”.

¹⁰⁴ Lee, “Modernity, Legality and Power...”, 38.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 43.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 46.

colonies. As Lee notes, the government at this time went beyond policing behavior, but wanted to “master” the very minds of the population.¹⁰⁸ The Japanese parliament enacted, in 1936, a “Law on the Protective Surveillance of Thought Criminals.” Even a released thought criminal could be placed under extreme surveillance in his everyday life according to the law.¹⁰⁹ In 1937, the Japanese instituted the so-called “One-Body Policy”, exhausting Korea’s natural and manpower resources for its efforts in World War II, while strengthening totalitarian control and social order to new levels sometimes met with disgust by Japanese as well.¹¹⁰

Early North Korean State-Building Power Consolidation

In August 1945, Soviet troops landed in Korea and occupied its northern half, while US troops arrived in September and took control over the south, dividing the Korean peninsula. Local members of prominent families established “people’s committees” to maintain social order after the Japanese left and before occupation forces arrived.¹¹¹ They consisted primarily of nationalist politicians with a small minority of communists. In November 1945, the Soviets formally recognized their authority but only after they had restructured them to become dominated by communists. The people’s committees subsequently proclaimed allegiance to and support for the Soviet presence.¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 47.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 48.

¹¹⁰ Eckert, *Offspring of Empire*, 238.

¹¹¹ Erik van Ree, *Socialism in One Zone: Stalin’s Policy in Korea, 1945-1947* (Oxford, England; New York, NY: Berg, 1989), 85.

¹¹² Kim Sōng-bo and Lee Chong-sōk, *Pukhanŭi Yōksa*, 72.

Kim Il-sung, only arrived in the country a few weeks after the Soviets had already liberated the country.¹¹³

It would take some three years until two separate states were proclaimed in the summer of 1948. The de-facto construction of two separate states, however, began almost immediately when the occupation forces arrived. North Korea's state structure and institutions were thus created by the Soviet Union, the state which, more than any of its contemporaries, embodied ideas of totalistic surveillance.

The Soviets paid immediate attention to political surveillance and social order. In November 1945 a Political Defense Bureau was set up under Soviet oversight and headed by Ch'oe Yong-gŏn, a colleague and friend of Kim Il-sung's.¹¹⁴ In 1946, it became the Security Bureau and it was placed under the People's Committee of northern Korea, the temporary North Korean government. In September that year, it began to systematically investigate people's personal backgrounds by re-issuing ID-cards. In 1947 the Security Bureau changed to the Internal Affairs Bureau and was placed under the Internal Ministry, which also opened a school for training security cadres.¹¹⁵

The security apparatus was quickly put to work in political purges that began soon after the Soviets entered. As in other occupied territories, the Soviets initially sought a coalition government including bourgeoisie and nationalist parties.¹¹⁶ This changed after the Moscow Conference in late 1945, where the Soviet Union and the US decided to

¹¹³ Van Ree, *Socialism in One Zone*, 105.

¹¹⁴ Kwak, "Pukhan Inminboanwŏn'gwa Chuminŭi Kwan'gye Pyŏnhwa Yŏn'gu," 15.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 16.

¹¹⁶ van Ree, *Socialism in One Zone*, 10.

place Korea under a five-year period of trusteeship, which in effect would prolong the occupation.¹¹⁷ The plan was widely unpopular and eventually abandoned. The communists in northern Korea, however, reluctantly had to support and defend the plan. Prominent nationalist politicians such as Cho Man-sik were strongly against it, and the Soviets arrested and purged several of them in early 1946.¹¹⁸ Cho himself was placed under house arrest and his secretary was arrested for allegedly mishandling tax incomes.¹¹⁹ More centrist parties such as the Chondogyo Young Friends Party – which at one point had almost 300,000 members – were forcibly subordinated under Communist Party control.¹²⁰

By the 1940s, most influential communist figures in Korea were based in the southern half of the peninsula. In October 1945, the North Korean Bureau of the Korean Communist Party was founded in Pyŏngyang under Soviet guidance, and Kim Il-sung appointed its chairman.¹²¹ In the spring of 1946, an independent Communist Party of North Korea was founded. In August, it was merged with the North Korean New People's Party, led by leftist intellectual Kim Tu-bong, to create the North Korean Worker's Party (NKWP).¹²² In this way, the Soviets centered all essential power within one year of their arrival around one party and one person, their designated leader Kim Il-sung. By 1949, moreover, as anti-communist repression increased in the south under

¹¹⁷ Balazs Szalontai, *Kim Il Sung in the Khrushchev Era: Soviet-DPRK Relations and the Roots of North Korean Despotism, 1953–1964* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2006), 16.

¹¹⁸ Szalontai, *Kim Il Sung in the Khrushchev Era*, 16.

¹¹⁹ Kim and Lee, *Pukhanŭi Yŏksa*, 46.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 65.

¹²¹ Szalontai, *Kim Il Sung in the Khrushchev Era*, 15.

¹²² Andrei Lankov, *Crisis in North Korea: The Failure of De-Stalinization, 1956* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), 12.

President Syngman Rhee, the North and South Korean Worker's Parties were merged into one unified Korean Worker's Party (KWP) which governs North Korea to this day.¹²³

Control was not always successful. The mid- to late-1940s saw significant political violence and resistance against the Soviet occupation and the new government. The government's land reform efforts, for example, spurred violence on the right and left. Partially because of Soviet pressure, land reform became more radical and rapid than in most other socialist states at the time.¹²⁴ In several parts of the country, farmers took revenge on former landowners, fueled by years of pent-up anger. In many instances, security forces had to rescue victims to restore order.¹²⁵ In some areas, landowners and other right-wing forces committed acts of terror and vandalism to protest the expropriation of their property.¹²⁶ Nevertheless, although land reforms caused skirmishes, resistance was weakened by landlords fleeing south, where they were treated more favorably.¹²⁷

The Korean War and Social Transformation

As in other territories occupied by the Soviet Union, North Korea was subjected in less than five years to revolution that had taken decades in the Soviet Union. At the

¹²³ Lankov, *Crisis in North Korea*, 11.

¹²⁴ Sōng-bo Kim, "The Decision-Making Process and Implementation of the North Korean Land Reform," in *Landlords, Peasants, and Intellectuals in Modern Korea*, ed. Ki-jung Pang, Michael D Shin, and Yong-sōp Kim (Ithaca, NY: East Asia Program, Cornell University, 2005), 208–209.

¹²⁵ Kim and Lee, *Pukhanŭi Yōksa*, 85.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 86.

¹²⁷ Kim, "The Decision-Making Process...", 237.

same time, consolidation of control in present-day South Korea led to several cases of brutality and bloodshed, such as the Jeju Island massacre of 1947.¹²⁸ Mass killings occurred when the South Korean army sought to subdue leftist guerillas, often directed by North Korea.¹²⁹

These events contributed to social tensions that often erupted at the grassroots during the Korean War (1950–1953). North Korea invaded South Korea on June 25th, 1950 and initially pushed its defenses down to a small perimeter near the southeastern coastal city of Busan. The United Nations, led by American general Douglas MacArthur, intervened in September, pushing North Korean troops close to the Chinese border. This sparked a response from China’s People’s Liberation Army on behalf of the north. Battle lines again moved to the center of the peninsula where they remained from 1951 for most of the war, leaving the peninsula divided roughly as before. An armistice signed on July 27th, 1953 by the United States (formally the United Nations), North Korea and China formally ended the fighting.

Throughout the war, more civilians were killed on the home front than soldiers in battles, and countless were displaced.¹³⁰ As Jan Gross has observed, wars are often social

¹²⁸ Hun Joon Kim, *The Massacres at Mt. Halla: Sixty Years of Truth Seeking in South Korea* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014).

¹²⁹ Bruce Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981), 441; Alexandre Y Mansourov, “Communist War Coalition Formation and the Origins of the Korean War” (New York, NY, Columbia University, 1997), 154; John Roscoe Merrill, *Korea: The Peninsular Origins of the War* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1989), 129.

¹³⁰ Ch’an-sung Pak, *Maüllo Kan Han’guk Chõnjaeng: Han’guk Chõnjaengi Maülesõ Põrõjin Chagün Chõnjaengdül* (Paju, Republic of Korea: Tolbegae, 2010), 6.

revolutions in their own right: they alter the social order beyond recognition.¹³¹ Vast population movements benefitted the regime because groups that could have otherwise resisted the government's socialist policies, such as former property owners, Christians, and others, fled south *en masse* before and during the war. According to official figures, however, the population declined by twelve percent, with the real figure possibly higher.¹³² Family structures were altered beyond recognition due to deaths and population movement, creating an opportunity for the state to craft new social relations. In his memoir, Kim Jin-gye notes that when he traveled to the countryside as propaganda chief a month before the armistice, the lack of young men in North Korean society was widely known. Most people toiling in the fields were women.¹³³

By war's end, demographics had changed to such an extent that the regime likely had little overview over who was in the country. For a totalitarian regime aspiring to modern governance, this necessitated the vast and ambitious investigations of people's identities and backgrounds described in the following chapters. In addition, the government likely suspected pollution by foreign influences and capitalist ideology during the war.¹³⁴ North Korea was occupied almost in its entirety for some time during

¹³¹ Jan Gross, "War as Revolution," pp. 17–39 in Norman M Naimark and L. IÅ Gibianskiĭ, *The Establishment of Communist Regimes in Eastern Europe, 1944-1949* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1997).

¹³² Kim Byōng-no and Kim Sōng-ch'ōl, "Pukhansahoeŭi Pulp'yōngdŭng kujowa Chōngch'isahoejōk Hamŭi," *T'ongil Yōn'guwōn Yōn'guch'ongsō*, 1998, 23. Wada Haruki cites a significantly higher figure for population change, taking the natural rate of population increase into account, and states that the overall population decrease as a result of both wartime deaths and displacement was 28.4 percent. See citation in Cheehyung Kim, "The Furnace Is Breathing: Work and the Everyday Life in North Korea, 1953-1961" (New York, NY, Columbia University, 2010), 100.

¹³³ Kim, *Choguk*, 203.

¹³⁴ For an excellent overview of the sociopolitical impacts of the war, see Balazs Szalontai, "The Evolution of the North Korean Socio-Political System, 1945–1994," in *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary North Korea*, ed. Adrian Buzo (London; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2021).

the war. North Korean propaganda emphasizes (and often highly exaggerates) the brutality of the occupation, but it was likely just as concerned about ideological contamination. This does not make North Korea unique. In Democratic Kampuchea under the Khmer Rouge, the regime labelled those who had lived in urban centers and areas controlled by the Lon Nol regime before the war as “new people” with potentially problematic ideological beliefs.¹³⁵ This added another incentive to survey, surveil and categorize the population.¹³⁶

The war, moreover, devastated much of the country materially. This not only necessitated massive investments in reconstruction, but the regime also had to organize the population into manageable registries and units that could be dispatched to various sectors in the planned economy. In June 1950, the U.S. Army Far Eastern Air Forces (FEAF) estimated that their bombing campaign had destroyed significant parts of North Korea’s major cities: 90 percent of Hweryŏng, 65 percent of Kanggye, and 60 percent of Sinŭiju, all close to the border with China.¹³⁷

A staggering number of civilians were killed by both side’s armies and guerilla fighters, which would later become relevant for the trajectory of social control in North Korea after the war. Atrocities committed by the South Korean army and affiliated groups took the largest number of victims.¹³⁸ Mass killings often happened in the form of retribution when one side retreated, leaving a vacuum that let those who had suffered

¹³⁵ Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime*, 164.

¹³⁶ I am grateful to Balazs Szalontai for bringing this parallel to my attention.

¹³⁷ Ibid 203.

¹³⁸ Pak, *Maüllo Kan Han’guk Chŏnjaeng*, 31.

under the previous occupation regime take revenge.¹³⁹ The importance of family and clan in Korea impacted the fighting during the war. Although families were often divided by political affiliation, relatives even through marriage ties rarely killed one another.¹⁴⁰

These mass killings left a legacy for the state-building processes of both North and South Korea. In South Korea, research into the mass killings was taboo under the dictatorship.¹⁴¹ Primarily under later liberal administrations, mass killings have been subject to serious scholarly study both in academia and in a state-appointed Truth and Reconciliation Commission, but their historical memory remains controversial.¹⁴² No such commission was ever established in North Korea where the state has both exploited and falsified the history of mass killings, such as the Sinch'ŏn Massacre, perpetrated by right-wing guerillas and civilians but for which North Korea blames the United States.¹⁴³

This chapter has argued that surveillance and social control in North Korea have their roots in both Japanese colonial practices but, first and foremost, in the Soviet occupation period. The Korean War had significant impact on North Korea's social system after the war and influenced the surveillance state's earliest choices of targets. At the same time, the war did not cause the apparatus for surveillance and social control to come into existence. Kim Il-sung and the North Korean leadership had a social vision. As

¹³⁹ Ibid, 8.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, 35–36.

¹⁴¹ Kir-ŏn Hyŏn and Hyŏn-suk Kang, *Dead Silence and Other Stories of the Jeju Massacre* (Norwalk: EastBridge, 2006).

¹⁴² Chae-jŏng Sŏ, *Truth and Reconciliation in South Korea: Between the Present and Future of the Korean Wars* (London; New York: Routledge, 2013).

¹⁴³ Dong-choon Kim, "The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Korea: Uncovering the Hidden Korean War," *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* 8, no. 9 (March 1, 2010), <https://apjjf.org/-Kim-Dong-choon/3314/article.html>.

we shall see in the next chapter, the war shaped the implementation of this vision in crucial ways, but its seeds were already planted.

Chapter 2: Seeing Like a Surveillance State: Constructing Social Control, 1954–1967

The latter 1950s and early 1960s were a formative time for social and political control in North Korea. The country underwent a massive modernization drive where social control was both a means and an end in itself. On June 25th, 1953, an armistice halted the fighting in the Korean War. The war, which ended through an armistice on June 25th, 1953, devastated the peninsula, and industrial reconstruction became the regime's top priority after the war. In April 1954, North Korea's rubber-stamp parliament, the Supreme People's Assembly (SPA) passed the country's first three-year economic plan for reconstruction, to run until 1956. To execute economic central planning, however, the government needed to administer the population. In this way, surveillance and social control became integral parts of state administration. The population could only become ideal, communist humans if infused with proper values and ideological zeal. Ideological consciousness was, according to the North Korean leadership, central to both economic growth and national defense. To this end, the regime created a host of new institutions for indoctrination and political surveillance and reinvigorated old ones, through the 1950s – 60s.

At the same time, the Korean Worker's Party (KWP) was divided about economic development. Policy differences intertwined with power struggles. Although the personality cult of Kim Il-sung had already begun, the KWP contained four factions that each laid claim to some political power without necessarily questioning the political structure itself.

The strongest faction in the early days of liberation was the domestic group or South Korean Workers Party (SKWP) faction, made up of underground communists who

remained active in Korea throughout Japanese occupation until 1945. Their most prominent member was Pak Hŏn-yŏng whom Kim Il-sung saw as his biggest domestic threat. Pak was leader of the Korean Communist Party while it was based in Seoul before the merger in 1949.¹⁴⁴ The purge of the domestic faction (and Pak in particular) began during the Korean War. At the Fifth Plenum of the Central Committee of the KWP in December 1952, Kim Il-sung attacked “factional elements”, communists with origins in South Korea.¹⁴⁵ As this chapter explores further below, the purge of the domestic faction was felt in society more than other factional purges because the SKWP had stronger links to the public than others.

By the end of the war, the dominant faction consisted of Kim Il-sung and his former guerilla comrades who had fought the Japanese in Manchuria in the 1930s and escaped to the Soviet Union in 1940, remaining there until Japan was defeated. Although ethnically Korean, most had not lived in Korea since the 1930s.¹⁴⁶ The Yan’an (or Chinese Korean) faction consisted of mostly leftist intellectuals who had left Korea for China in the 1920s and 30s. It was led by renowned Korean linguist Kim Tu-bong, who had strong ties with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and later, the People’s Republic of China (PRC). even after they returned to North Korea.¹⁴⁷ The fourth faction comprised ethnic Koreans from the Soviet Union, whom the Soviets brought to Korea during the occupation to serve as administrative bureaucrats, interpreters, supervisors and advisers.

¹⁴⁴, Lankov, *Crisis in North Korea*, 12.

¹⁴⁵ Szalontai, *Kim Il Sung in the Khrushchev Era*, 37.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, 13.

They were, as Lankov puts it, “the primary conduit of Soviet traditions and expertise into the North Korean society.”¹⁴⁸

While most of the European communist states adopted softer approaches to political and social oppression following Stalin’s death, North Korea veered in the opposition direction. Throughout the 1950s, tensions built within the KWP. Some differences were rooted in policy. The Yan’an and Soviet Korean groups wanted to see a stronger role for light industry in economic planning, to raise people’s living standards instead of dedicating most resources to heavy industry (including armaments manufacturing).¹⁴⁹ Culture and personal bonds also mattered, with both the Soviet Korean and Yan’an groups often sharing more of a cultural background and common language within themselves than with North Korean society.¹⁵⁰

But the conflict was mainly about politics. Officials from these two factions also became increasingly critical, through the mid-1950s, of the personality cult around Kim. Individuals from both groups openly criticized Kim’s rule at a Central Committee Plenum in August 1956, calling for a more collective leadership. Kim launched a large-scale purge against his critics but had to reinstate them after pressure from the Soviet Union and China. The purge was launched again around 1957, and by the early 1960s, Kim’s faction completely dominated the KWP.¹⁵¹ At the same time, De-Stalinization in

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, 14.

¹⁴⁹ James F Person, *"We Need Help from Outside ": The North Korean Opposition Movement of 1956*, The Cold War International History Project Working Paper Series 52 (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2006), 13.

¹⁵⁰ See, for example, Lankov, *Crisis in North Korea*, 21.

¹⁵¹ Szalontai, *Kim Il Sung in the Khrushchev Era*, 114.

the Soviet Union hinted that Moscow might, as it had in other communist states, push for more shared leadership and clamp down on cults of personality.¹⁵²

These challenges increased the urgency of the regime to “see like a state” and make society “legible”.¹⁵³ The state organized each citizen into a vast system through which their attitudes could be monitored and changed. Social control was not only about detecting threats, but about state-building itself. Underpinning the process was a strong belief in a rational, science- based social order.¹⁵⁴ The state sought the tools, as Zygmunt Bauman put it, to “garden” society, and fashion North Koreans into new, communist people.¹⁵⁵

This process culminated with the introduction of the “Monolithic Ideological System” in 1967, the final declaration of a totalitarian state.¹⁵⁶ The system was supported by ten principles to underpin social life and politics, cementing the totalistic power of the great leader, or *suryong*. The principles also legitimized the succession of Kim Jong-il, the Great Leader’s son, and eradicated the last remnants of pluralism in the KWP through the simultaneous purge of Pak Kŭm-chŏl and the so-called Kapsan faction.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵² Lankov, *Crisis in North Korea*, 23–24.

¹⁵³ Scott, *Seeing like a State*.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, 89.

¹⁵⁵ Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*.

¹⁵⁶ Fyodor Tertitskiy, “1967: Transition to Absolute Autocracy in North Korea,” in *Change and Continuity in North Korean Politics*, ed. Adam Cathcart, Christopher Green, and Steven Denney (London; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017), 82–94.

¹⁵⁷ James Person, “Introduction, NKIDP e-Dossier No. 15 The 1967 Purge of the Gapsan Faction and Establishment of the Monolithic Ideological System,” Woodrow Wilson Center, North Korea International Documentation Project, accessed April 21, 2020, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/the-1967-purge-the-gapsan-faction-and-establishment-the-monolithic-ideological-system>.

Scholarship on North Korean history often identifies the period between Soviet occupation and the Korean War (1945–1950) as the formative era for the country’s social system.¹⁵⁸ This chapter argues that a central part of North Korea’s state-building happened after the war and was directly shaped by it. Arming the people both with guns and proper ideology was a central goal. This required a strong system for mobilization and social control, which could both indoctrinate citizens with proper beliefs and watch over and model their values and behavior. Economic development and social control were part of the same process.

Industrialization, Civilization, Ideology and Consumption

North Korea’s post-war state-building process mimicked, in many ways, the one that the Soviet Union went through close to three decades earlier. In 1928, the Soviets launched a massive industrialization through its first five-year plan. A famous 1930-children’s book, *The Story of the Five-Year Plan*, explains that the plan was itself a cultural revolution, transforming both the populace and the land. Through hard work, people would be transformed into new communist humans, armed with proper ideology and a proletarian spirit. Remaking society required ubiquity of the Party, both in people’s private lives and throughout society.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁸ See, for example, Kim, *Everyday Life in the North Korean Revolution, 1945-1950*; Armstrong, *The North Korean Revolution, 1945-1950*.

¹⁵⁹ Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, 293.

North Korea's trajectory was similar. Almost immediately after the war ended, in August of 1953, the Korean Worker's Party (KWP) Central Committee (CC) adopted a three-year economic plan for reconstruction, to span from 1954 to 1957. This plan was to be followed by a five-year industrialization plan spanning 1957–1961.¹⁶⁰ This was the context for the Chöllima movement, officially launched by the CC plenum introduced in December 1956. Named after a mythical winged horse alleged to have traversed one thousand *li* (approximately 500 kilometers) in one jump, Chöllima was a shock worker mobilization similar to the Soviet Union's 1930s Stakhanovite movement of the 1930s. Much like Albania, North Korea was a peasant-dominated society where the state needed to create an enlightened working class out of a peasant-majority population to make socialism survive and thrive.¹⁶¹

In the words of Kim Il-sung, Chöllima was a movement of ideological education above all else.¹⁶² Historical scholarship often emphasizes economic aspects, but both Söng Hye-rang and Kim Jin-gye recall re-making the people as an equally crucial goal, even more so. According to Söng, people worked far longer hours than their ordinary job assignments. People were enveloped in state-directed activities with little time for private life.¹⁶³ Kim recalls that individuals upheld as Chöllima role models (labor heroes) were not only exceptionally hard workers but also knowledgeable of Party policies and

¹⁶⁰ There is unfortunately not sufficient space in this chapter to go into depth about these economic plans, both of which are academic objects of study in their own right. For works that deal with these plans and the Chöllima Movement in greater detail, and for references for the broad overview in this section of both topics, see, for example, Kim Söng-bo and Lee Chong-sök, *Pukhanüi Yöksa*, ch 6; Szalontai, *Kim Il Sung in the Khrushchev Era*, chap. 5; Yöng-t'ae Im and Yu-hwan Ko, *Minjok Hwahaewa Hyömyöngüi Sidae Ingnün Pukhan 50-Nyönsa* (Soül: Tüllyök, 1999), chap. 6.

¹⁶¹ Mehilli, *From Stalin to Mao*, 6.

¹⁶² Im and Ko, *Minjok Hwahaewa...*, 349.

¹⁶³ Söng, *Tüngnamujip*, 276.

passionately involved in political activism. Chöllima role models were also scrupulous about personal hygiene.¹⁶⁴

At the same time, North Korea collectivized agriculture at a quicker pace than other communist countries. Land reform in 1946 gave many peasants farmland ownership but only for a limited time. In 1954, Kim Il-sung thought some farmers had grown too prosperous, posing a threat to social stability and national security.¹⁶⁵ By then, three forms of agricultural cooperatives existed under different degrees of collective ownership.¹⁶⁶ By December 1958, fully one hundred percent of all farmers lived and worked on collectives of 300 households on average.¹⁶⁷

Harvests in North Korea declined dramatically during the first year, sparking a food crisis.¹⁶⁸ The state responded by banning private trade in grain in October 1954. Previously, urban residents could make up for insufficient rations by buying more rice in

¹⁶⁴ Kim, *Choguk*, 261–262.

¹⁶⁵ Jae-Jean Suh, “The Transformation of Class Structure and Class Conflict in North Korea,” *International Journal of Korean Unification Studies* 14, no. 2 (2005): 52–84, 58.

¹⁶⁶ Chong-Sik Lee, “The ‘Socialist Revolution’ in the North Korean Countryside,” *Asian Survey* 2, no. 8 (1962): 9–22. These are figures that the North Korean government itself published and should be taken with a grain of salt. Even if they are only indicative, however, they speak of an enormous transformation of rural life and social structure, in a relatively short period of time.

¹⁶⁷ Lee, “The ‘Socialist Revolution’”, 12. Such a radical transformation simply could not have taken place without mass use of methods of coercion. Nonetheless, politically, collectivization in North Korea was relatively smooth, especially compared to the same process in the Soviet Union. Because the state initially pursued land reform in the late 1940s, many dispossessed landowners had already left for the south after the division of the peninsula, and before and during the war. In the Soviet case, peasants resisted the state’s takeover of agriculture with vigor and violence, and in 1930 alone, Lynne Viola estimates, around two million peasants participated in riots against the state. While Soviet peasants experienced collectivization as an assault on their long-standing social structures and traditions, North Korea’s social structures had already gone through a massive rupture with the war. There was not as much for collectivization to destroy, and not as much ground for peasants to resist in an organized, collective, and forceful manner. For Viola’s estimate and other assessments, see Lynne Viola, *Peasant Rebels under Stalin: Collectivization and the Culture of Peasant Resistance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 4.

¹⁶⁸ Szalontai, *Kim Il Sung in the Khrushchev Era*, 65.

state-run shops. After the ban, black-market prices skyrocketed.¹⁶⁹ People starved in parts of the country.¹⁷⁰ Only in the summer 1955 did the regime retreat from some repressive economic policies after the Soviet Union promised aid.¹⁷¹

Security Threats at Home and Abroad

North Korean officials continued to speak of military threats and investigations after the Korean War ended.¹⁷² In 1957, for example, Kim Il-sung claimed to the Soviet ambassador that South Korea planned to launch an anti-communist revolt in North Korea. Kim claimed that the south would send “30,000 specially trained people” to Pyöngyang, Namp’o and Wönsan in early 1957. The presidium of the Worker’s Party Central Committee planned “additional steps” to counter “subversive activity.”¹⁷³

North Korean press reports through the late 1950s and early 1960s speak of crackdowns against spies from South Korea and the United States. Some were originally from North Korea but got stuck behind enemy lines in the south after the armistice and

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, 64.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, 65.

¹⁷¹ Ibid, 74.

¹⁷² We cannot know for sure how great the threats against its security really were, and how much of the anxiety stemmed from a general sense of paranoia. Nonetheless, documents disclosed by the South Korean government after the end of military rule reveal that Syngman Rhee did in fact dispatch thousands of agents into North Korea in the 1950s, and the North Korean regime captured many of them. As Balázs Szalontai concludes, some of the countless charges against the hundreds or even thousands of suspected collaborators that were arrested in the dramatically harshened political climate in the late 1950s must have been valid. All the same, the spy hunt still struck against high-ranking officials who almost certainly were no collaborators. See Szalontai, *Kim Il Sung in the Khrushchev Era*, 125.

¹⁷³ “Journal of Soviet Ambassador to the DPRK A.M. Puzanov for 6 May 1957,” May 06, 1957, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, AVPRF F. 0102, Op. 13, P. 72, Delo 5, Listy 44-113. Translated for NKIDP by Gary Goldberg. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/115609>.

later sent back to North Korea for subversive activity. On April 18, 1958, *Rodong Sinmun* reported that the US and South Korea sent a spy originally from North Korea, clad in a Korean People's Army uniform.¹⁷⁴ On May 30th, the paper claimed that a North Korean soldier forcibly kept in South Korea after the war was trained as a spy and sent to the north. The report specified that the soldier carried North Korean identification documents, including a soldier's ID and a domestic travel permit.¹⁷⁵ The explicit mention of a travel permit shows how important such documents were as the regime tightened domestic travel restrictions through the late 1950s and early 1960s.¹⁷⁶ The North Korean press made similar reports in 1959 and 1960 about spies dispatched by South Korea and the US but caught by North Korean border guards.¹⁷⁷ Other threats were both international and domestic at once. For example, General O Chin-u deployed the army to P'yŏngyang in 1956 to prevent protests in the wake of the Hungarian uprising.¹⁷⁸ The state also mobilized students and intellectuals for physical labor to forestall any potential subversive activity inspired by the events.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁴ Chosŏn Chungang T'ongsin, "Kangje Ŏngnyuhan Chŏnjaeng P'ororŭl Kanch'ŏbŭro P'agyŏnhan Migukch'ŭk Ch'oehaeng Paegirhae P'ongno," *Rodong Sinmun*, April 18, 1958.

¹⁷⁵ Chosŏn Chungang T'ongsin, "Kangjeŏngnyuhan Sirhyang Saminŭl Kanch'ŏbŭro P'agyŏnhan Migukch'uk Mhoehaengbaegirhae p'ongno," *Rodong Sinmun*, May 30, 1958. Little is known about precisely when the North's internal travel restrictions were set up, and this reporting suggests that at the very least, it was in force in the late 1950s.

¹⁷⁶ Hyŏn In-ae, "Pukhanŭi Chumindŭngnokchedoe Kwanhan Yŏn'gu," 11.

¹⁷⁷ Chosŏn Chungang T'ongsin, "Mijeŭi urich'ŭge Taehan Chŏktaehaengwirŭl Paegirhae P'ongno – Kongdong Kamsi Sojo Che 2 Cho Kongdong Chosa Chinhaeng," *Rodong Sinmun*, June 15, 1959; Chosŏn Chungang T'ongsin, "Mijega Urich'ŭge Kanch'ŏbŭl P'agyŏnhan Chŏktae Haengwirŭl Chosa P'ongno," *Rodong Sinmun*, July 10, 1959; Chosŏn Chungang T'ongsin, "Ttodasi Tŭrŏnan Mijeŭi Őmjunghan Kanch'ŏp Haengwi," December 13, 1959; Chosŏn Chungang t'ongsin, "Chŏngt'amp'agoe Haengwiŭi Chinsangŭn Tto tasi Tŭrŏnatta," November 11th, 1960.

¹⁷⁸ Person, "New Evidence", 460.

¹⁷⁹ Szalontai, *Kim Il Sung in the Khrushchev Era*, 103.

North Korea's strategic position also became increasingly difficult. The remaining 250,000 Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) volunteers from the Korean War withdrew in 1958.¹⁸⁰ Between 1958 and 1961, the US increased its troop presence in South Korea by over 11,000 and placed nuclear weapons in South Korea.¹⁸¹ By the late-1950s, North Korea's security environment became more tense, seemingly from all angles. To be sure, the regime was not simply reacting to rising threats. Surveillance and tight political oppression were part of its social vision well before the Korean War. The regime used the tense security situation as an excuse to tighten social control. Still, the regime's paranoia was likely real to some extent, and made social control all the more imperative.

North Korea against the trends: de-Stalinization and 1956

It is common to describe the 1950s and 1960s as a golden era for North Korea.¹⁸² Many North Koreans interviewed for this project recalled the Chöllima era fondly, as a time when material conditions steadily improved at an impressive rate. Söng Hye-rang calls it a time of success and enlightenment.¹⁸³ At the same time, the political climate

¹⁸⁰ Szalontai, *Kim Il Sung in the Khrushchev Era*, 130. Although Kim, as Szalontai notes, most likely welcomed the withdrawal as it would strengthen his own political independence, it still changed North Korea's security position.

¹⁸¹ Tim Kane, "Global U.S. Troop Deployment, 1950-2005," The Heritage Foundation, accessed March 3, 2020, <https://www.heritage.org/defense/report/global-us-troop-deployment-1950-2005>. Hans M. Kristensen and Robert S. Norris, "A History of US Nuclear Weapons in South Korea," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 73, no. 6 (November 2, 2017): 349–57.

¹⁸² Adrian Buzo, *Politics and Leadership in North Korea: The Guerilla Dynasty*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018), 276; Andre Schmid, "Historicizing North Korea: State Socialism, Population Mobility, and Cold War Historiography," *The American Historical Review* 123, no. 2 (April 1, 2018): 439–62.

¹⁸³ Söng, *Tüngnamujip*, 276.

harshened considerably. The purges that took place from 1956 became formative for the political system. They were not unusually vast or brutal compared with those in other communist countries. However, they laid a crucial foundation for North Korea's exceptionally oppressive and monolithic political system.

The most significant purge began during the Korean War, directed against the remnants of the South Korean Worker's Party (SKWP). Pak Hŏn-yŏng, the most famous leftist leader at the time of the Soviet invasion, was its most prominent member.¹⁸⁴ Unlike Kim Il-sung's partisan faction, the SKWP had some roots in Korea.¹⁸⁵ Pak Hŏn-yŏng assured both Kim Il-sung and Stalin before the war that the masses would rise up in support if the north invaded.¹⁸⁶ When this did not happen, Kim wanted to pin the blame for the war failure on someone and Pak was the clearest target. Tensions in Pak and Kim's relationship became evident at a reception with Soviet diplomats late in the war. Kim exclaimed that Pak misled Stalin about the prospects of success and threw an ink bottle at Pak which instead hit a map of Korea on the wall. Kim was, as Mansourov states, evidently afraid that he would be deposed by Stalin because of the war failure.¹⁸⁷

Because the base and identity of the SKWP laid within the peninsula, the purge reverberated more strongly in society than other purges. The Soviet Koreans, for example

¹⁸⁴ Lankov, *Crisis in North Korea*, 12.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 11.

¹⁸⁶ For an overview of these dynamics, see Mansourov, "Communist War Coalition Formation and the Origins of the Korean War."

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 300, footnote 91.

consisted of some 400 individuals. Around forty-five of them, Lankov estimates, disappeared or were executed while most fled back to the Soviet Union.¹⁸⁸

That the southern population did not rise up when the Korean People's Army entered likely caused Kim Il-sung to mistrust people from the south in general. As explained at the beginning of this chapter, the government also believed that the population at-large was subjected to sociopolitical contamination during the UN occupation. Many of those purged at the 5th plenum of the KWP in 1952 had southern roots, Sŏng Hye-rang recalls, and several people close to her father were accused of spying for South Korea.¹⁸⁹ Political figures of southern origins were banished to remote provinces through the early 1950s and many of Song's university friends, children of cadres from the south, disappeared.¹⁹⁰ Many were likely taken to North Korea's growing network of political prison camps. Many shunned southerners socially since any connections with them could be dangerous. Those of southern origin who were not purged faced a glass ceiling and could rarely or never climb to top positions.¹⁹¹

Kim Jin-gye recalls his surprise over prominent socialists of southern origins being accused of spying.¹⁹² His superiors first ordered him to place books by Im Hwa, a prominent socialist author with roots in the south, in the village reading room. A few months later Im was tried as a South Korean spy.¹⁹³ Like Song, Kim also notes the

¹⁸⁸ Lankov, *From Stalin to Kim Il Sung*, 103–4; Lankov, *Crisis in North Korea*, 190.

¹⁸⁹ Sŏng, *Tŭngnamujip*, 244–245.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 246.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 249.

¹⁹² Kim, *Choguk*, 220.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 210.

professional glass ceiling faced by cadres of southern origins.¹⁹⁴ This became common for people of politically suspect family origins.

The immediate postwar period also saw hostility against people accused of aiding the enemy side during the war. According to Kim Jin-gye, the state even tried to hinder retribution and violence by mob justice.¹⁹⁵ Kim estimated that tens of farmer families in his home village of P'yŏngnŭl had been affiliated with the *Ch'iandae*, a South Korean civil defense group set up to maintain social order after the Japanese left in 1945. The North Korean authorities suspected that many of them sided with South Korea during the war. In some instances, the Party excluded people because a relative had either voluntarily left for, or otherwise ended up in South Korea after the war. Kim recounts a local People's Committee meeting that decided to exercise mercy and integrate these former enemies rather than punish them.¹⁹⁶

As a Party functionary at the time, Kim has obvious reasons to cast the Party's role in a favorable light. More interesting and relevant than the supposed benevolence of the government, however, is Kim's recollection of social tension. The Korean War left a complicated, chaotic legacy of unresolved social conflict. These tensions carried over into and interacted with the North Korean state-building process. The purge against people with southern roots were part of larger social tensions. Much suggests that southerners made up a significant proportion of labor camp inmates after the war. One Hungarian diplomat reported to Budapest in 1955 that North Korea had several large

¹⁹⁴ Ibid, 225.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid, 225.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid, 226.

camps with many inmates of southern origins.¹⁹⁷ Four years later, Kim Il-sung said to a Hungarian delegation that 100,000 “southerners” were receiving “re-education.”¹⁹⁸

Not all these were interned in prison camps.¹⁹⁹ Sŏng Hye-rang recalls that the Party set up facilities to re-program ideologically problematic people. They called such facilities “lecture sites” and Song’s mother was sent to one north of Pyŏngyang for six months of “re-education.” Inmates were shuffled between lectures and struggle sessions where they were made to denounce each other. As in similar process in China and the Soviet Union, participants were made to repeat confessions of character flaws and make up accusations against others.²⁰⁰

Timing and sequencing of the political turmoil differed in North Korea from other communist states. The foundation for North Korea’s “independent Stalinism”, as Lankov calls it, was formed between 1955 and 1960 while the political climate relaxed in much of the communist world.²⁰¹ Kim strengthened his control over the political apparatus particularly from 1955 and onward in order to contain winds of de-Stalinization in the Soviet Union.²⁰² North Korea turned the other way in part because of international developments, not despite them.

¹⁹⁷ Szalontai, *Kim Il Sung in the Khrushchev Era*, 80.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 42.

¹⁹⁹ According to Balazs Szalontai, Kim was probably referring to the entire heterogeneous group of southerners, encompassing both unrepatriated PoWs and opponents to the ROK government who fled to North Korea for political reasons. Balazs Szalontai email, March 22, 2020.

²⁰⁰ Sŏng, *Tŭngnamujip*, 269.

²⁰¹ Lankov, *Crisis in North Korea*, 3.

²⁰² For some examples, see Szalontai, *Kim Il Sung in the Khrushchev Era*, 77–80; Lankov, *Crisis in North Korea*, ch. 2.

Enveloping all of society into a blanket of institutions for social control was part of this response to the political upheaval. The purges also sparked a brutalization of political life and society. Söng Hye-rang identifies the “August Incident” as the beginning of a new wave of “ideological struggle.”²⁰³ From May 1957, several faculty members at her college were purged for ties with the “factionalists.” Professor Yi Yong-pil, for example, was fired because of guilt-by-association with Ch’oe Chang-ik. Students in Yi’s seminar class were accused of disloyalty by association.²⁰⁴ Söng notes especially that anti-intellectual, brutish “class warriors” despised intellectuals as bourgeoisie. Differences in culture between old-guard, Marxist intellectuals and young, radical recruits in the mold of Kim Il-sung’s unrefined guerilla personality played a significant role. Prominent scholars got sent to work in farming villages, and leading academics were put through humiliating struggle sessions. From the late-1950s and onward, these indoctrination practices became routine in every sphere of North Korean society.

Surveillance, mobilization, indoctrination as state-building in the late-1950s

Why would Kim and his political allies choose to strengthen social control when they were already in a position of strength? They may not have grasped their own position accurately. The international political situation surely must have seemed threatening, and domestically, the regime had no way of gauging popular support.²⁰⁵ The

²⁰³ Söng, *Tüngnamujip*, 262–263.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid*, 263–264.

²⁰⁵ For an account of the internal logics of a purge, see Igal Halfin, *Stalinist Confessions: Messianism and Terror at the Leningrad Communist University* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009).

Worker's Party Standing Committee resolved in July 1957 to carry out a large-scale purge.²⁰⁶ Between 1956 and 1958, almost all cadres with ties to the Yan'an and Soviet Korean groups were replaced with those exclusively loyal to Kim Il-sung.²⁰⁷ In late 1958, security services arrested alleged spies and anti-Party elements all over the country, often on dubious grounds.²⁰⁸ The Party replaced most People's Committee chairmen.²⁰⁹

Important clues to why oppression increased at this time can be found by looking at the Soviet Union two decades earlier. In only a few years, North Korea pushed through the same steps and stages of development that the Soviet Union went through over several decades.²¹⁰ In 1936, the Soviet Union adopted the "Stalin Constitution" recognizing the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) as the supreme ruling institution.²¹¹ Stalin declared two years earlier, at the seventeenth congress of the CPSU, that all opposition had been beaten.²¹²

It marked a victory but also upped the stakes. With the dictatorship of the proletariat firmly in power, setbacks and obstacles to the construction of socialism could only be the work of subversive elements. There could no longer be mistakes in economic construction, only "wrecking" by enemies of the people.²¹³ At the same time, the threat of capitalist encirclement from abroad looked increasingly real with fascism rising in

²⁰⁶ Szalontai, *Kim Il Sung in the Khrushchev Era*, 116.

²⁰⁷ Scalapino and Lee, *Communism in Korea*, 463.

²⁰⁸ Szalontai, *Kim Il Sung in the Khrushchev Era*, 125.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 127.

²¹⁰ As in similar states, political terror in North Korea was often "Soviet in form, local in content." See Kevin McDermott and Matthew Stibbe, *Stalinist Terror in Eastern Europe: Elite Purges and Mass Repression* (Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 2010), 20.

²¹¹ Dietrich André Loeber, *Ruling Communist Parties and Their Status under Law*, Law in Eastern Europe 31 (Dordrecht, the Netherlands: M. Nijhoff, 1996), 21.

²¹² Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, 304.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 315–316.

neighboring Germany and Japan. Throughout the 1930s, over one million people were executed as traitors and countless others exposed as class enemies.²¹⁴

North Korea in the late-1950s was in a similar position. Collectivization was declared complete in 1958, and the so-called “factionalists” who challenged his rule in 1956 were purged and defeated. Difficulties abounded in economic construction, but the Worker’s Party had drastically changed the structures of society, taking full control over most spheres of economic production. For a society formerly dominated by peasants, full collectivization must have seemed sufficient to declare the victory of socialism.²¹⁵

With socialism now not an aspiration but a fact, any subversive elements had to be conscious class enemies and could no longer be mere remnants of Japanese colonialism or Chosŏn era feudalism. As Kim Il-sung put it in a speech in 1958, for the country to reach the highest peak of socialism, the masses had to be “defended with the weapon of communism...ideological education and ideological struggle [...]”²¹⁶ To arm the population with this weapon, the government introduced several new institutions for political and social control, and re-shaped existing ones to prime them for the mission. But sheer repression was not the government’s only method. To use Zygmunt Bauman’s “gardener” analogy, the state sought to pick out and throw away the weeds out of the social garden.

²¹⁴ Ibid, 301–310.

²¹⁵ Kim Byŏng-no and Kim Sŏng-ch’ŏl, “Pukhansahoeŭi pulp’yŏngdŭng,” 80.

²¹⁶ Quoted in footnote 40 of Lee U-yŏng, *Chŏnhwan’gi ŭi Pukhan Sahoe T’ongje Ch’eje*, 39.

The Inminban: Neighbors Reforming Each Other

The evolution of the *inminban* system is a clear example of the state's effort at organizing the population into manageable units. The term literally translates to "people's groups", but a more accurate descriptor would be "neighborhood units." These units consist of ten to twenty households. One person per unit, the *inminbanjang* (inminban head), usually an elderly woman, is responsible for mobilizing the inminban for public works such as construction and farm work. The *inminbanjang* also conducts neighborhood surveillance and reports irregularities to the security services. The *inminbanjang* conveys information and propaganda from the state through regular unit meetings. The *inminbanjang* is also responsible for neighborhood upkeep and occasionally distributes rations.

The system was formally created in 1946. The Japanese operated a similar system known as the *aegukpan* (*tonarigumi* in Japanese) through which the state mobilized citizens for economic construction.²¹⁷ Both North and South Korea retained versions of the institution after colonial rule. South Korea formed the *Bansanghoe*, which had somewhat similar functions to the inminban during South Korea's military dictatorship years.²¹⁸ In North Korea, the inminban was first used for administrative tasks such as census taking.²¹⁹

²¹⁷ Ch'ae, "Pukhan 'Inminban'e Kwanhan Yŏn'gu...", 14–15.

²¹⁸ For an excellent overview of the bansanghoe system, see Jungmin Seo and Sungmoon Kim, "Civil Society under Authoritarian Rule: Bansanghoe and Extraordinary Everyday-Ness in Korean Neighborhoods," *Korea Journal* 55 (January 4, 2015): 59–85.

²¹⁹ Ch'ae, "Pukhan 'Inminban'e Kwanhan Yŏn'gu...", 15.

Judging from North Korean press reports, the *inminban* functioned primarily as an administrative unit during the Korean War. One article in *Rodong Sinmun* from 1952, for example, highlights one *inminban*'s strong record in rearing pigs.²²⁰ In December of the same year, another article told the story of an *inminbanjang* who exposed two South Korean spies in his neighborhood.²²¹ This article highlights a male *inminbanjang*, while *inminbanjang*, at least a few years later, were always female.

After the war, the *inminban* became more central for ideological education and social control. In 1955, *Rodong Sinmun* presented a model *inminbanjang*, Han Ji-sook.²²² One year earlier, the *inminban* had discussed how to strengthen the “morality of the masses” and “social order.” Certain residents did not want to participate in construction projects out of laziness but the *inminban* eventually succeeded in mobilizing them as well. Residents were on high alert for potential spies and the *inminbanjang* had to give permission for guests to stay overnight. The article emphasizes that the *banjang* would always grant permission, suggesting that friction sometimes arose. It is not clear precisely when permits began to be required for domestic travel, but this article shows that they were needed as early as 1955.

In 1956, the cabinet formally adopted new rules and regulations for the *inminban*, outlined in the political magazine *Inmin* (“The People”). To develop local administration,

²²⁰ “Modu Ta Twaejirül Kirüja: Ryungganggun Hyönam Purak Inminban Chwadamhoesö,” *Rodong Sinmun*, April 25, 1953.

²²¹ “Chöktürüi Kanch'öp Moryagül Punswaehara: Naemuwönüro Kajanghan Kanch'öp Chökpäl: Inminbanjang Kang Sök-u Tongmu,” *Rodong Sinmun*, 27 December, 1952. Another fascinating detail about this particular case is that a man could apparently be an *inminbanjang* at the time, something otherwise unheard of. This article is the only example I have come across of evidence that men have also served as *inminbanjang*.

²²² “Inminban Saenghwal,” *Rodong Sinmun*, February 24th, 1955.

the state sought to make the inminban stronger, more regularized and uniform throughout the country.²²³ The state would not have needed such regulations if the inminban had already functioned smoothly across the country. According to the article, the inminban should ensure that the grassroots population clearly understand the practical consequences of government policies. They were also essential for protecting the state and social order, national self-defense, cleaning and neighborhood upkeep, and even people's hygiene. It should also inspire patriotism and social responsibility among citizens.²²⁴ The inminban, in other words, linked grassroots citizens to the state. In 1961, Kim Il-sung stated that the inminban should know even "how many spoons and chopsticks" each household has.²²⁵ Several interviewees for this project confirmed that this remained a common slogan several decades later. Kim said the inminbanjang must know everything about families in their inminban: where they work, the size of their income and how many working adults are in each household.²²⁶

From the late-1950s and early-1960s, surveillance became a more central task for the inminban. When guests come from outside, Kim said in 1961, the inminbanjang must register them and note exactly where they are staying to keep "bad people" out.²²⁷ Kim said that people from the old, pre-revolutionary society – landlords, capitalists, exploiters – secretly harbored discontent because they had to work for a living under socialism.

²²³ Ch'oe Byōng-hūp, "Nongch'onesōi Inminban Saōp Kanghwaui P'iryosōng," *Inmin*, no. 9, September, 1956.

²²⁴ Ch'oe, "Nongch'onesōi Inminban Saōp...", 139.

²²⁵ Kim Il-sung, "Inminbanjangdūri Yōkharūl Nop'yōya Handa: P'yōngyangsi Chungguyōk Kyōngsangdonggwa Oesōngguyōk Sōsōngdong Inminbanjangdūlgwa Han Tamhwa," pp. 88–92 in *Kim Il-sōng Chōnjip*, vol 29 (Pyōngyang, DPR Korea: Chosōn Rodongdang Ch'ulp'ansa, 2000).

²²⁶ Kim Il-sung, "Inminbanjangdūri Yōkharūl...", 80.

²²⁷ *Ibid*, 81.

Therefore, the inminban must watch their every move and report and struggle against them if they complain.²²⁸

The state also saw the inminban as a crucial institution in re-molding the population. The inminban, Kim said, should educate and refine the people's ideology to protect the social order, and make sure they did not illegally skip work. Lazy people could do so in the past because no one kept track of them. Surveillance had a strong moral element and the inminbanjang was supposed to educate people to spend money on their children's needs instead and to drink only on special occasions.²²⁹

North Korean press coverage of the inminban increased significantly from the early 1960s and increasingly focused on the institution's power to rear moral citizens, repeatedly referring to the inminban as "one red, big family."²³⁰ In the spring of 1960, *Rodong Sinmun* launched a campaign to highlight the institution. Numerous articles between 1961 and 1963 emphasized the importance of the inminban, several of them prominently placed in the paper. In the spring of 1963, Kim Il-sung attended a celebratory gathering for model inminbanjang from across the country, leading to several days of intense news coverage.

This signaled a broader trend where the state regarded the grassroots population as most important for remaking the people. In 1961, the same year as Kim Il-sung's speech to the inminbanjang, *Rodong Sinmun* portrayed a model inminbanjang, Kim Soo-

²²⁸ Ibid, 81–82.

²²⁹ Ibid, 83.

²³⁰ See, for example, "Pulgŭn Taegajŏng," *Rodong Sinmun*, 10 January, 1963.

hwa, in Wönsan.²³¹ One resident, Comrade Son Dong-won, preferred to stay in her house and rest rather than work. A few of the workers in the inminban decided to lead by example and threw themselves into perfecting their neighborhood, cleaning not only their own doorsteps but also those of their neighbors. Others soon joined in and helped each other like one, big family. Citizens led one another without state intervention. Some days later, *Rodong Sinmun* ran a long editorial about the role of the inminban.²³² Through the inminban, communist ideology could reach people directly in their neighborhoods and homes. It would “foster a new environment,” different from “the relationships of extraction” under capitalism. If a resident went astray, the inminban would educate them in the proper life. The elderly had a particularly difficult time coping with the new system. Several articles describe elderly people with “old values” and individualist attitudes.²³³ People with problematic values featured in North Korean publications almost always changed their ways and shed their individualism.²³⁴

Thus, while surveillance was intended to weed out politically dangerous elements, the inminban also had a constructive purpose: transforming the population into modern citizens with collectivist values. Neighborhood upkeep was as important as helping their neighbors form the right political mindset. The North Korean drive for citizens to foster one another may have been inspired by similar efforts in the Soviet Union at the time. Khrushchev released large numbers of prisoners from the Gulags and revived the project

²³¹ “Uri Inminban Saramdül,” *Rodong Sinmun*, 16 June, 1961.

²³² “Inminbanül Töuk Hwamokhago Tanhaptöen Sahoejuũijök Kajöngüro!,” *Rodong Sinmun*, 21 June, 1961.

²³³ “Inminban Saenghwalgwa Tang Punjo,” *Rodong Sinmun*, 2 July, 1961.

²³⁴ “Iut han chiban,” *Rodong Sinmun*, 6 August, 1961.

of the “New Soviet man and woman.”²³⁵ Instead of hunting the hidden enemies of the people, people would change one another into better citizens.²³⁶

The Rational Units of Society

At the same time, the state launched several other institutions to make the population legible, such as the, *5-hodamdangje*, or five-person household responsibility system. Kim Il-sung visited a village in North Pyŏngan province in 1958 and proclaimed that one professional cadre should lead five households in ideological education, labor mobilization and labor morale. Just as Kim Il-sung’s anti-Japanese guerilla fighters ostensibly armed each other with proper ideology through this responsibility system, so should the people.²³⁷ A 1962 essay in the Party’s ideological magazine *Kullŏja* explained that the system was the most efficient way to organize ideological indoctrination and economic production, two deeply intertwined tasks.²³⁸ By assigning five families to each cadre, he or she could get to know each family in greater depth, including their level of ideological consciousness, hobbies and interests, hopes and aspirations for the future, as well as their personality traits.²³⁹ In this way, each unit leader could appropriately assign

²³⁵ Miriam Dobson, *Khrushchev’s Cold Summer: Gulag Returnees, Crime, and the Fate of Reform after Stalin* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 8.

²³⁶ Dobson, *Khrushchev’s Cold Summer*, 9.

²³⁷ As cited in Ch’oe Song-kŭn, “Taejung Chŏngch’i Kyoyangesŏi 5hodamdangje,” *Kullŏja* 19 (no. 212, 1962): 30–34. In reality, it is of course impossible to trust that these renditions are correct. In particular, Kim’s speeches may often have been edited selectively after the fact, to conform with changes in the political line.

²³⁸ Ch’oe, “Taeung Chŏngch’i...”, 30.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, 31.

people to ideological education sessions.²⁴⁰ Ensuring participation in mandatory political mass activities was clearly difficult. Five-household unit leaders were instructed to deal with problematic people respectfully, hinting that cadres did not always do so.²⁴¹ In this way, the system would strengthen Worker's Party control.²⁴² The North Korean press pushed for the system in a flurry of articles in the 1970s, many focused on its propaganda dissemination role.²⁴³

The government also emphasized the role of criticism and self-criticism [*Pip'an'gwa chagibip'an*] in maintaining ideological propriety in society at the time.²⁴⁴ Not entirely unique to communist movements, the method entailed Party cadres, workers and school children scrutinizing and evaluating each other's performance at work or in school and other everyday contexts. The seminal book for ideological education long used by the Bolshevik movement, *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union*, has an entire chapter about the practice.²⁴⁵ The term first appeared in *Rodong Sinmun* in 1953 but it may well have been common earlier.²⁴⁶ It is possible that Korean guerilla

²⁴⁰ Ibid, 32.

²⁴¹ Ibid, 34.

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ For only a few examples out of many, see Ri Gyu-jöng, "Shodamdangsjönwöndürüi Ch'aegimsönggwa Yökharül Nop'yö," *Rodong Sinmun*, January 14, 1970; Kim Jöng-ung, "Kömsanmaürüi Shodamdangsjönwön," *Rodong Sinmun*, May 19th, 1971; Kim Dong-ch'öl, "Shodamdangsjönjaöbe Taehan Tangjökchidorül Kangwahaja," *Rodong Sinmun*, 23 November, 1973; Kim Dong-ch'öl, "Shodamdangsjönjaöbül Tök Himitke Pöllija," *Rodong Sinmun*, November 7th, 1973; Ri Ki-ch'an, "Shodamdangsjönwöndürüi Yokharül Nop'yö," *Rodong Sinmun*, January 25th, 1974.

²⁴⁴ This is the name of the method itself, but it has historically been applied to many different settings. Most North Koreans I have spoken with encountered the practice at the weekly *saenghwalch'onghwa*, meetings in the inminban or collective farm unit where people would admit their own mistakes, in ideology, work or social life, and point out those of others.

²⁴⁵ See, for example, chapter 12 of *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks): Short Course* (New York, NY: International Publishers, 1939).

²⁴⁶ See, for example, "Pip'an'gwa Chagibip'anün Tangsöng Tallyönüi Yeriha Mugi," *Rodong Sinmun*, November 9th, 1953.

fighters encountered it while fighting with the Chinese communist guerillas against Japan.

According to works by Chinese communist authors, criticism and self-criticism is a method for self-refinement and accountability that gives individuals an orderly context in which to express frustrations which might otherwise boil over into conflict.²⁴⁷ In July 1939, while the PLA encamped at Yan'an, Liu Shaoqi, one of the most important ideologues of the Chinese Communist Party, wrote a substantive treatise on self-cultivation through criticism and self-criticism. Liu writes:

When we say Communists must remold themselves by waging struggles in every sphere against the counter-revolutionaries, we mean that it is through such struggles that they must seek to make progress and must enhance their revolutionary quality and ability. An immature revolutionary has to go through a long process of revolutionary tempering and self-cultivation, a long process of remolding, before he can become a mature and seasoned revolutionary who can grasp and skillfully [*sic*] apply the laws of revolution. For in the first place, a comparatively immature revolutionary, born and bred in the old society, carries with him the remnants of the various ideologies of that society (including its prejudices, habits and traditions), and in the second he has not been through a long period of revolutionary activity.²⁴⁸

Liu regarded criticism and self-criticism as a method for communists to grow as revolutionaries, and to cast off the yoke of the old, pre-revolutionary society and its norms of behavior. In practice, however, it was and remains an often-excruciating ritual for those involved. As sociologist Franz Schurmann has observed, alienating the individual from the group would in the end, in theory, create greater group cohesion:

Essentially, the technique consists in the usually temporary alienation of a single member from the group through the application of collective criticism. One member is singled out for criticism, either because of faulty ideological understanding, poor work performance, or some other deviance. He is not only subjected to a barrage of criticism from the members, but also joins in and begins to criticize himself. . . . The avowed purpose is to "correct" (*kai-tsoo*) the individual. Under normal circumstances, the individual is "reintegrated" into the group after the "temporary alienation." The experience of temporary

²⁴⁷ Lowell Dittmer, "The Structural Evolution of 'Criticism and Self-Criticism,'" *The China Quarterly*, no. 56 (1973): 708–29.

²⁴⁸ For an online version of the book, see Liu Shaoqi, "How to Be a Good Communist," July 1939, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/liu-shaoqi/1939/how-to-be/index.htm>.

alienation of the one criticized and collective criticism by the group members is, in theory, supposed to have the general effect of maintaining the group's cohesion and effectiveness. Great fear exists on the part of those potentially criticized that they may become victims of a more permanent alienation. Fear of such permanent alienation serves to strengthen the bonds within the group.²⁴⁹

Several interviewees from North Korea described the weekly criticism and self-criticism sessions as sometimes brutal and psychologically painful. Other times, participants would make deals beforehand giving each other merely ceremonial criticism. Although likely used even earlier, Söng Hye-rang notes that “circles” and other mutual ideological scrutiny became much more common from the early- to mid-1950s. Such practices would not just focus on ideological conformity and fervor, but on personal hygiene as well.²⁵⁰

In 1958, the Party published a pamphlet about criticism and self-criticism within its ranks, establishing that criticism and self-criticism is a way to overturn old values and usher in new ones:

What is criticism and self-criticism, and why is it needed? As everyone knows, we can only achieve development through a struggle between old things and new things. Thus, our process of development is a process [of] overcoming the old, while the new wins out and goes forward in victory. This process must also be carried out inside our Party, without fault.²⁵¹

It further noted that individualism, egoism, liberalism, conservatism and other old ideologies remained within the Party. The pamphlet condemned factionalism, localism, family-based favoritism and the like, references to Kim Il-sung's critics who were being purged at the time for challenging his leadership two years earlier.²⁵² The pamphlet notes that criticism must be concrete, and that it is not enough to simply brand people “anti-

²⁴⁹ Quoted in Dittmer, “The Structural Evolution”, 709.

²⁵⁰ Söng, *Tüŋnamujip*, 243–244.

²⁵¹ *Tangwönnün Pip'an'gwa Chagibip'anül Wöŋch'ikchögyüro Chöŋ'gaehayöya Handa* (Pyöngyang, DPR Korea: Chosön Rodongdang Ch'ulp'ansa, 1958), 2–3.

²⁵² *Tangwönnün Pip'an'gwa*..., 3.

Party”, or make small matters into big affairs for the sake of criticizing in itself.²⁵³ This suggests the Party was aware that personal conflicts often spilled over into the sessions, as several North Korean interviewees attested to.

Atomizing the individual, as Hannah Arendt observed in 1948, is one of the most central tasks of a totalitarian state, because when it keeps man lonely, he will simply be part of a mass at the disposal of the state, separated from any groups where solidarity could form beyond the grasp of the government.²⁵⁴ Through these rituals in the everyday, the government made the individual lonelier and less trusting of others, and more dependent on the state. The “big red family” in the North Korean propaganda was broken by design.

Synopsis: The Ever-Evolving Surveillance Mission

The process of making society legible, begun in the late 1950s, never ended. In 1967, Kim Il-sung articulated the official view on the transition from capitalism to socialism and the dictatorship of the proletariat.²⁵⁵ The former extractive classes would continue to resist even in an equal society, and old ideology would remain among the

²⁵³ Ibid, 19.

²⁵⁴ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

²⁵⁵ Kim Il-sung, “Chabonjuũirobut'õ Sahoejuũieroũi Kwadogiwa P'ũroret'ariadokchae Munjee Taehayõ,” pp. 445–461 in Kim Il-sõng Chõnjip, vol 38 (Pyõngyang, DPR Korea: Chosõn Rodongdang Ch'ulp'ansa, 2001).

people.²⁵⁶ As long as there was capitalism left in the world, the dictatorship of the proletariat could not go away.²⁵⁷

Kim reiterated this nineteen years later, in a 1986-speech to the North Korean parliament, the Supreme People's Assembly (SPA).²⁵⁸ Although the extractive classes may be gone, old ideology and destructive enemies will remain in the outside world. And as long as these ideologies and enemies still exist, one cannot speak of the full victory of socialism.²⁵⁹ Thus, the dictatorship of the proletariat would remain as long as non-socialist ideologies prevailed in the rest of the world.

The revolutionization of the masses and the hunt for enemies continued for decades and arguably still goes on. In this sense, the year 1967 was both an end and a beginning. The year is crucial in North Korean political history as the final end to any trace of pluralism within the Worker's Party. The Ten Principles of the Monolithic Ideological System discussed in the beginning of this chapter mandated full, uncompromising unity around the leader. The authority of the Party Center – the one-man leadership – became absolute, on paper as well as in practice.

This chapter has shown that the North Korean government stepped up its state-building efforts after the Korean War by tightening the screws of social and political control to previously unknown levels of intensity. The state aimed not merely to control the people, but to make any control superfluous by remaking them. Down to the

²⁵⁶ Kim, "Chabonjuūirobut'ō...", 447–448.

²⁵⁷ Ibid, 449.

²⁵⁸ Kim Il-sung, "Sahoejuūiūi Wanjōnhan Sūngnirūl Wihayō," Kim Il Sōng Chōjakchip, vol. 40, Pyōngyang, DPR Korea: Chosōn Rodongdang Ch'ulp'ansa, 1994), 470–498.

²⁵⁹ Kim, "Sahoejuūiūi Wanjōnhan...", 473.

grassroots level, the state now had each individual organized in units under its control.

Things did not evolve so neatly. The system was deeply flawed in practice, but its stability never truly threatened at the core.

Chapter 3: Stigma, Social (Im)mobility, and Bureaucratic Failings: Family Background and the Songbun System in North Korea

In the late-1950s, the North Korean state launched a massive endeavor to catalogue the family background of the entire population and classify it on a ladder of political loyalty known as *songbun*. From then on, a significant proportion of the population saw their lives uprooted as they were thrown down several levels on the social class ladder. Many were even deported from the relative comfort of the cities to the rugged countryside as the state “uncovered” their enemy class family backgrounds.

With such a massive task as cataloging the family ties and background of the entire population, operational errors were inevitable. Some were able to take advantage of cracks in the bureaucracy and use personal connections and bribes to escape social downfall. Most people, however, conformed to their new places in the social hierarchy simply because they had little choice. Cracks in the bureaucracy of a totalitarian state do not necessarily constitute spaces of “resistance”, and after falling in the social hierarchy, upward mobility was rare.²⁶⁰ Thus, the 1960s through 1980s were decades of social upheaval for tens of thousands, and perhaps hundreds of thousands, who had their family background registrations changed in recurring rounds of messy investigations. North Korea during this time period was not as stable as commonly believed, as oral testimonies from the grassroots show.

²⁶⁰ Scholars of totalitarian societies have often striven to find narratives of resistance, in order to show that the state’s nature could not be truly totalitarian. For an overview and discussion of this issue, see Michael David-Fox, “Whither Resistance?” as well as other articles in the same issue.

This chapter makes two main interventions. First, it seeks to complicate the picture of social stability between the Korean War and the famine of the 1990s. Through the process, songbun came to be a way in which North Koreans themselves ascribed social status to one another, as evidenced by the way in which interviewees discussed their own songbun status and that of others. The famine is often seen as the watershed between efficiency and disorder in North Korean governance. However, most events recalled by the informants for this article occurred in the 1970s and 1980s. Faults, weaknesses and problems in North Korean governance predate the famine.

Second, this chapter adds to the literature on state-building, governance, surveillance and civilian resistance. As the previous chapter shows, even the most repressive facets of North Korean governance were part of something much bigger, namely, a project of totalitarian state-building and modern governance.²⁶¹ Despite their horrific outcomes for many, oppressive systems such as Stalinism, a role model for North Korean state builders, are best understood as utopian, forward-looking projects striving to create a fully rational, scientifically based social order.²⁶² The “scientific” cataloging of the population through the songbun system can be regarded as part of North Korea’s modernization drive, itself part of the larger ambition of fully totalitarian control. North Korea was hardly alone in such grand ambitions for what the bureaucratic order could achieve. Wartime Japan’s “reform bureaucrats”, for example, fused military and

²⁶¹ For an historical overview of surveillance and modernization, see Weller, “The Information State”.

²⁶² Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, 6–7.

bureaucratic planning agencies to create an economically productive and hierarchical national community.²⁶³

A close study of the songbun system as bureaucratic practice reveals that the state's ambitions have often run into trouble on the ground. The songbun system is a remarkably illustrative example of a state seeking to rationally standardize, catalogue, rule and change the population and social life along political, rational lines, out of a belief that rational science can achieve almost any goal – to “see like a state.”²⁶⁴ By cataloging the entire population in an ideological hierarchy, the state strove to see its citizenry through administrative, bureaucratic state glasses, with considerable difficulty.²⁶⁵

Still, while the songbun system illustrates the merits of Scott's framework, the processes of legibility, as experienced by citizens, often involved a great deal of contestation, disruption and difficulty for the regime. It also raises questions about the limits of this contestation. In *Weapons of the Weak*, Scott shows that resistance in groups such as poor peasants facing oppression by the wealthy often comes in the form of foot dragging and other “small” forms of resistance that coagulate and make their political presence felt.²⁶⁶ While the case of songbun shows that the grassroots population can and often does manipulate the state to its advantage, as Scott demonstrates, incompetence and systematic flaws in the state apparatus often facilitate such manipulation in the first place. Conscious grassroots effort, in other words, does not always generate acts of resistance. Moreover, in line with Scott's argument, this chapter shows that while often exacerbating

²⁶³ Mimura, *Planning for Empire*, 4.

²⁶⁴ Scott, *Seeing Like a State*.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 4.

²⁶⁶ Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, xvii.

difficulties inherent in the system, such attempts at manipulation do not necessarily threaten the stability of the entire system.

North Korea's Approach to Family Background: Songbun in Comparative Context

The North Korean government has never released public information about the songbun system. It is formally impossible to verify given that North Korean state archives remain completely closed. Nevertheless, South Korean scholars have managed to identify the broad strokes of the system's evolution. The system is an extension of the government's "class line" policy launched in 1945, prior to the official proclamation of the North Korean state in 1948. According to this policy, the working class should lead all other classes through the socialist revolution.²⁶⁷ As Kim and Kim note, the Korean War uprooted traditional structures of family and class, enabling the regime to reconstitute social class structures along its own ideological lines.²⁶⁸ As explored further below, it is unclear precisely when the songbun system came into being. The government began a census of the population in 1946 which included information about family relations.

Between 1958 and 1960, as the political climate hardened during the purges in the KWP, the Party ordered a wide-reaching investigation into the socio-political family

²⁶⁷ Byōng-no and Kim Sōng-ch'ōl, "Pukhansahoeüi Pulp'yōngdūng kujowa Chōngch'isahoejök Hamüi," 21–22.

²⁶⁸ Ibid, 22.

backgrounds of all citizens.²⁶⁹ Hundreds of thousands were exposed as “hostile and reactionary elements” between 1958 and 59.²⁷⁰ Most scholars therefore date the birth of the system to the late-1950s.²⁷¹ However, the system evolved over time. Throughout the 1960s and 70s, the state conducted several campaigns to re-investigate people’s backgrounds and further divided the population into specific categories of loyalty and trustworthiness.²⁷² In 1964, a Party plenum formally decided to divide the population into three broad classes of loyalty.²⁷³ Between 1976 and 79, the government investigated the songbun of the residents of Pyöngyang. During that period, around 200,000 residents with problematic songbun were forcibly resettled further inland and further north, far away from sensitive areas such as the capital, the coasts, and the de-militarized zone (DMZ), the de-facto border to South Korea.²⁷⁴ The government has conducted re-investigations intermittently ever since, often in connection with increased political volatility, such as Kim Jong-il’s succession to power and times of military tension.²⁷⁵

In North Korean parlance, the most basic meaning of songbun is that of socio-political family background. At the same time, it is also a bureaucratic system of population registration. Moreover, as I explore further below, it is also often used in everyday speech to denote social privilege on the one hand, and low social status on the

²⁶⁹ Ibid, 26–27.

²⁷⁰ Lankov, *Crisis in North Korea*, 181.

²⁷¹ Ibid.

²⁷² Lee U-yöng, *Chönhwan’gi üi Pukhan Sahoe T’ongje Ch’eje*, 45.

²⁷³ Hyön In-ae, “Pukhanüi Chumindügnokchedoe Kwanhan Yön’gu,” 14.

²⁷⁴ Kim Byöng-yön, Pak Myöng-gyu, and Kim Byöng-no, *Kaesöng Kongdan: Konggan P’yöngghwa üi Kihoekkwa Hanbandohyöng T’ongil P’ürojekt’ü* (Kwach’ön-si, Republic of Korea: Chinjin, 2015), 323–324.

²⁷⁵ Hyön In-ae, “Pukhanüi Chumindügnokchedoe Kwanhan Yön’gu,” 14–16.

other. This chapter uses the term interchangeably when discussing all these contexts, with clarifications when necessary.

Academic literature on songbun is sparse. Hyŏn In-ae provides the most extensive scholarly description of how the system works and the dynamics of historical, structural change of the institution.²⁷⁶ Kim Byŏng-no and Kim Sŏng-ch'ŏ's convincingly describe songbun as the foundation of North Korea's unequal social structures, and argues that the system has been a crucial factor for political stability through historical periods such as the famine.²⁷⁷ Robert Collins provides a thorough, English-language overview of the system, focusing on the systematic discrimination that it causes.²⁷⁸ This chapter seeks to add a dimension of social history to this robust body of descriptive scholarly works. The testimonies from North Koreans who resettled in South Korea give new insights into the dynamics of the songbun system, particularly from the 1960s through 1980s, decades often ignored by the historical literature.

Historically, family background has played a significant role for social and political advancement in other communist or authoritarian contexts, but these practices have not been as persistent, permanent, or institutionalized as in North Korea. In the Soviet Union under Stalin, the families of victims of de-kulakization and purges were often deported and punished together with their spouses or parents, but the state

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

²⁷⁷ Byŏng-no and Kim Sŏng-ch'ŏl, "Pukhansahoeŭi Pulp'yŏngdŭng kujowa Chŏngch'isahoejŏk Hamŭi."

²⁷⁸ Robert M. Collins, *Marked for Life: Songbun, North Korea's Social Classification System* (Washington, D.C.: Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, 2012).

employed such practices chiefly during specific campaigns and periods of intense social rupture, and not as permanent, bureaucratic practice.²⁷⁹

Under Mao, the Chinese state recorded family backgrounds during land reform after taking power in October 1949, and, much like North Korea, dispatched teams to re-investigate and “uncover” previously hidden class enemies in the 1960s.²⁸⁰ However, the Chinese state eliminated the hereditary nature of the system during the post-Mao reforms in the late-1970s and reassessed classifications of those who had been wronged by corrupt and sloppy investigations officials in the 1960s.²⁸¹ In Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, the Ba’ath Party screened the backgrounds of membership applicants, checking for their circumstances and behavior around the Iraq coup d’etat in 1963.²⁸² During the war with Iran, the Party rejected applicants who had Iranian origins even far back in their family histories.²⁸³

The connection between family background and social advancement was not new to the Korean peninsula. During the Chosŏn Dynasty, mainly people from certain lineages were able to hold high office.²⁸⁴ The inherited social status of those in power in many cases stretched back as far as the mid-900s. Family background and social status as

²⁷⁹ Golfo Alexopoulos, “Stalin and the Politics of Kinship: Practices of Collective Punishment, 1920s–1940s,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 50, no. 1 (January 2008): 91–117.

²⁸⁰ Jeremy Brown, “Moving Targets: Changing Class Labels in Rural Hebei and Henan, 1960–1979,” in *Maoism at the Grassroots*, ed. Jeremy Brown and Matthew D. Johnson, Everyday Life in China’s Era of High Socialism (Harvard University Press, 2015), 53. I am grateful to Puck Engman for pointing me to the literature on this topic.

²⁸¹ Brown, “Moving Targets”, 75–76.

²⁸² Joseph Sassoon, *Saddam Hussein’s Ba’th Party: Inside an Authoritarian Regime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 26.

²⁸³ *Ibid*, 44.

²⁸⁴ Much of this elite even hailed from the same families as those who ruled the preceding Koryo Dynasty. See Park, *Between Dreams and Reality*, 17; Duncan, *The Origins of the Chosŏn Dynasty*.

the most central factor for social advancement, in other words, is a norm rather than exception in the history of the Korean peninsula. Chosŏn, however, never operated a formal, socio-political caste system akin to *songbun*. It was also not a modern state with the same ambitions for governance and control of society as North Korea.

Songbun in Practice: Changes over Time

The *songbun* registration process in North Korea built on earlier efforts at registering the population but extended further than any ordinary census. Even before North Korea was formally founded as a state, in 1946, the nascent government began to conduct a census of the population, as any modern state would have. According to Hyŏn In-ae, this period stretched till 1963, after which the state formally divided people into different classes of loyalty.²⁸⁵

The testimony of Kim Kwan-il shows that the tasks of an ordinary census and *songbun* investigations were not always entirely separable. Kim is the only interviewee for this project who directly recalled the time when state functionaries came to record his family origins:²⁸⁶

“I have a memory from when I was in 1st grade [in primary school]... There were people who got mobilized to conduct the registration process, they came looking for us at home... The whole basis of the process was the *chokpo* [traditional Korean genealogical record] going back to the Japanese imperialist era. They would go around to families and tell them to write down their family going back to your grandfather... They would ask: who was your grandfather?, what was he up to?... Later they started

²⁸⁵ Hyŏn, “Pukhanŭi Chumindŭngnokchedoe Kwanhan Yŏn’gu,” 13–14.

²⁸⁶ Kim Kwan-il, interview by author, Seoul, Republic of Korea, March 5th, 2019.

verifying all the details, and even if it was all lies, it didn't matter as long as there were no witnesses [to correct the record]...They came by not just once, but around ten times in the early- to mid-1960s."²⁸⁷

In truth, the government already had a great deal of information gathered about people who had applied for applied for Korean Worker's Party membership, since their family backgrounds were investigated earlier, but their numbers were very small.²⁸⁸ The emphasis on weeding out improper elements also came before the formal creation of songbun classes. In 1957, the standing committee of the Party took a formal decision to launch a large-scale hunt for counterrevolutionary elements, and search out, for example, those with a history of anti-communist activities. One year later, in 1958, management of the task centralized under the powerful Organization and Guidance Department (OGD) of the Worker's Party, in charge of personnel appointments through the whole Party.²⁸⁹ Thus, although the songbun system may not formally have come into existence yet in its current form, the state investigated people's family backgrounds much earlier.

In the late-1950s, stories abounded of people having their pasts "uncovered."²⁹⁰ Wartime activities were of special interest in these investigations, and the state was especially suspicious of those whose families fled south or cooperated with the enemy.²⁹¹ In February of 1964, the Party's Central Committee decided to formally divide the

²⁸⁷ Ibid.

²⁸⁸ Hyŏn, "Pukhanŭi Chumindŭngnokchedoe Kwanhan Yŏn'gu," 11–12.

²⁸⁹ Ibid, 13. I wish to stress that we know very little about the nature of the task at this point in history.

²⁹⁰ Ibid.

²⁹¹ Kim and Kim, "Pukhansahoeŭi pulp'yŏngdŭng kujowa chŏngch'isahoejŏk hamŭi," 24–25.

population into three categories of political loyalty, marking the final creation of the songbun class structure.²⁹²

Since then, the has state launched several new, targeted investigations of the people's family background, particularly at socially turbulent times such as leadership transitions. From the late 1950s through early 1960s, approximately 70,000 people (15,000 families) were deported to forced labor camps and penal labor colonies in the countryside as a result of the investigations.²⁹³ The state deemed some three million people members of a potentially hostile class and placed them under special surveillance.²⁹⁴ Many fared significantly worse. According to Yun Dae-il, Kim Il-sung had around 6,000 people executed in the most intense era of Songbun investigations.⁵³ Between 1967 and 1970, the state further refined the categorical divisions to add 51 sub-divisions to the three main class categories. The purpose was to keep especially close track of the so-called enemy share of the population and pre-empt any potential resistance.

Between 1973 and 1976, when Kim Jong-il became director of the OGD, he began a purge of KWP members based on songbun.²⁹⁵ During the time, around 300,000

²⁹² Hyŏn, "Pukhanüi Chumindüngnokchedoe Kwanhan Yŏn'gu," 14. According to Kim and Kim, the structural division was merely altered at this time, not created. See Kim and Kim, "Pukhansahoeüi pulp'yöngdŭng kujowa chŏngch'isahoejök hamüi," 27.

²⁹³ Kim and Kim, "Pukhansahoeüi pulp'yöngdŭng kujowa chŏngch'isahoejök hamüi," 26–27.

²⁹⁴ Pukhan Yŏn'guso, *Pukhan Baekkwa Sajŏn* (Seoul, Republic of Korea: Pukhan Yŏn'guso, 1983), 317–318.

²⁹⁵ Another source gives 1979 as the final year for the project and claims that specifically Pyŏngyang residents had their Songbun re-investigated. This makes sense since the regime has always been especially concerned with the loyalty of the power base in the capital city. Moreover, this same source instead gives 200,000 as the number of people moved out of Pyŏngyang; perhaps 500,000 is the total figure for deportations and 200,000 the number of people moved specifically from Pyŏngyang. See Kim Byŏng-yŏn, Pak Myŏng-gyu, and Kim Byŏng-no, *Kaesŏng Kongdan*, chap. 9.

people lost their Party memberships and 500,000 were deported within the country, generally from urban centers to the less hospitable countryside.²⁹⁶ In 1980, the state re-investigated relatives of refugees to South Korea and other countries (then much fewer than in the 1990s and 2000s), and in 1981, ethnic Korean immigrants from Japan were targeted for special investigation.

In theory, Kim Jong-il was a staunch critic of the *Songbun* system. In a 1971-speech, he severely chastised Party officials for discriminating people based on family background, calling it a vestige from Japanese colonialism.²⁹⁷ Many whose background was classified as “complicated” did not even know what wrongs their grandparents had committed, Kim rightly pointed out, and at any rate, most had come into the embrace of the Party.²⁹⁸ Kim stated outright that “songbun and family background environment cannot be the basis for evaluating a person,”²⁹⁹ and said to grab the hands of people whose grandparents may have committed wrongs and move forward.

In practice, however, there is little evidence that Kim’s words were sincere. There is reason to believe that the leadership tried to de-emphasize the importance of songbun in cadre recruitment in the 1970s and 80s to enhance efficiency.³⁰⁰ However, in all likelihood, speeches such as Kim’s were attempts to appear benevolent in the eyes of the public by criticizing songbun-based discrimination and shift any negative public sentiment from the leaders onto lower-level officials. The system continued to operate

²⁹⁶ Collins, *Marked for Life*, 43.

²⁹⁷ Kim Jong-il, “Pukchaphan Kunjungwaŭi Saöbŭl Charhalde Taehayö.”

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 235.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 236.

³⁰⁰ Kim and Kim, “Pukhansahoeüi pulp’yöngdŭng kujowa chöngch’isahoejök hamüi,” 34–35.

and evolve. Throughout the 1980s, investigations became more rigorous and intensive as Kim Jong-il ascended to power, and any potential or imagined enemies had to be uprooted. The state made songbun records digital in 2003.³⁰¹

The Ministry of People's Security (MPS), North Korea's police bureau, is in charge of fixing and keeping up records of the citizen's songbun. All records are kept secret and people are registered from birth. Dedicated departments for songbun exist both at the central ministry, as well as at each province (*do*) and special city level (*t'ükpyölsi*), and at each city (*si*)-, county (*kun*)-, and ward (*kuyökh*)-level MPS headquarters.³⁰² Moreover, each village (*ri*)- and neighborhood (*dong*)-level police office (*punjuso*) has an officer in charge specifically of the personal files of people living within the district, though the information they handle is mainly administrative.³⁰³ Songbun files are kept at the MPS offices both at the city- and province-levels.³⁰⁴

The personnel in charge of actually conducting investigations, *tüngnok poanwön*, are agents from the county-level MPS bureau for songbun registrations. They solicit information from local *punjuso* officers, as well as from the neighborhood People's Unit heads (*inminbanjang*), the security officer (*poanwön*) (North Korea's police equivalent)

³⁰¹ Hyön, "Pukhanüi Chumindügnokchedoe Kwanhan Yön'gu," 30.

³⁰² Chön, *Pukhanüi Sahoet'ongje Kigu Koch'al*, 32–34. For a more detailed institutional map that includes the level of city police station, see Hyön, "Pukhanüi Chumindügnokchedoe Kwanhan Yön'gu," 19.

³⁰³ Hyön, "Pukhanüi Chumindügnokchedoe Kwanhan Yön'gu," 19. The system for Songbun registration – *chumindügnok* – is separate from the system registering and handling personal information such as residence address, workplace, family linkages, and so on, known as *kongmindügnok*. The systems are, however, not entirely separate. The latter information is central for investigating Songbun, and such investigations build upon the *kongmindügnok* information. Moreover, according to interviewees who have done administrative work involving information available in these administrative, personal file ledgers at the *punjuso* level, a person's Songbun status shows up among this administrative information as well.

³⁰⁴ Some people's files were kept separately, such as those of employees in sensitive security organs. See Kim and Ri, *Chumindügnoksaöpch'amgosö*, 116.

at each person's workplace, and security officers of similar rank, among others.³⁰⁵ As all these functionaries in turn have informant networks of their own, the total number of people involved in the process is vast.

Each person's songbun is supposedly fixed at age 17 when they first receive an ID-card, and later re-scrutinized upon release from army service.³⁰⁶ The ledger is routinely checked and updated every year. Cases where a re-examination of someone's songbun leads to upward advancement are extremely rare. Instead, the main purpose of the re-examinations is to ensure that new criminal or otherwise suspicious acts by relatives are noted and reflected in each person's songbun ledger, such as defections to South Korea.³⁰⁷

Songbun as State-Building

According to the North Korean government, like the rest of the system of social control, classifying the population along lines of socio-economic background was not only an oppressive endeavor. Rather, the state's intention was to create a map of the population and make it easier to read. In order to govern and mold the people, the state needed to know, understand and register it. Songbun is, as presented by the government, a highly rational and scientific system.

³⁰⁵ Hyŏn, "Pukhanŭi Chumindŭngnokchedoe Kwanhan Yŏn'gu," 22.

³⁰⁶ Ibid, 31.

³⁰⁷ The present author has never come across a case in the literature of someone's songbun status being unexpectedly upgraded. This may theoretically happen, but it is rare.

The ability to gather information about the population has generally been part and parcel of modern state-building and governance. Unlike the case of North Korea and songbun, enhanced capacity to gather information has often come in *parallel* with democratic developments such as the extension of the franchise.³⁰⁸ Indeed, legibility is a central tenet of social and economic development, as any state that wishes to collect taxes has historically needed to keep records of the population.³⁰⁹

Scott, however, points to a few factors that distinguish authoritarian or totalitarian states that seek to make society legible. Such regimes often come into power with a self-perceived mandate to radically transform society along utopian lines.³¹⁰ These regimes have often harbored a belief in the potency of rational science and technology to achieve almost any social goal, and officials have been able to launch devastating projects of social transformation thanks to their largely unfettered power.³¹¹ In this context, it is not surprising that the North Korean government's songbun manual calls investigation methods "scientific".³¹² Constructing the songbun system was one way of organizing the population, just like economic resources, along more rational lines.

Chu Sin-il, a former employee of the MPS, provided an enlightening glimpse of the reasoning behind the songbun system. He was born of relatively privileged songbun stock in 1954 and was a soldier for most of his life. Both his parents were Party members

³⁰⁸ Thomas Brambor et al., "The Lay of the Land: Information Capacity and the Modern State," *Comparative Political Studies*, February 1, 2020, 175–213.

³⁰⁹ Melissa M. Lee and Nan Zhang, "Legibility and the Informational Foundations of State Capacity," *The Journal of Politics* 79, no. 1 (January 1, 2017): 118–32.

³¹⁰ Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, 89.

³¹¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

³¹² See, for example, the very introduction to the manual in Kim and Ri, *Chumindǔngnoksapch'amgosǒ*, 6.

and often served in positions of confidence, such as leaders of mass organization units and work teams.³¹³ Unlike other interviewees, Chu did not portray the process of joining the Party as corrupt. Others highlighted the role of bribery and contacts, but Chu spoke about studying hard and being loyal. He worked for several years in the 1980s in the extended military unit in charge of the safety of the North Korean leader, which comprises several military bases around the country tasked with seeing to security whenever the leader would visit or travel through the area. These positions require almost perfect songbun, and Chu was thoroughly vetted.³¹⁴

In our conversation, Chu explained the songbun system as reasonable and necessary. You cannot know who someone really is, deep-down, only by talking to them, Chu reasoned. Unless you thoroughly investigate someone's background and social environment, you cannot really know if someone may be a spy. Chu's reasoning likely reflects a broader view in North Korea that a person's social environment *does* reveal, or at least indicate, their political loyalty. The most central task of the songbun system is to root out spies, and to that end, it is a necessary structure.³¹⁵

The government's manual for songbun registration reflects similar thinking. It was published by the MPS in 1993, around the time that North Korea lost crucial financial subsidies from the Soviet Union and China, and regime credibility was perhaps under greater threat than ever due to widespread social disorder and starvation. On the

³¹³ Chu Sin-il, interview by author, Seoul, Republic of Korea, July 11th, 2019.

³¹⁴ Ibid.

³¹⁵ Ibid.

very first page, the manual alludes to such difficulties and emphasizes “the struggle against powerful enemies” in the conditions and “demands of the present.”³¹⁶

The manual states that the “citizen registration project” is the foundation of a safe society, and integral to the class struggle. Class basis, family bonds, the individual’s socio-political environment and position are all factors that automatically determine how reliable someone is in the present.³¹⁷ This is what the manual means when it calls the endeavor “scientific.”³¹⁸ Because of the emphasis on social environment, it is only logical that class foundation should be automatically passed on from parents to children.³¹⁹

The manual’s view of two demographic groups, ethnic Korean immigrants from Japan and people with roots in the southern part of Korea (prior to the division), clearly illuminates this rational, “scientific view.” Both groups are singled out for special scrutiny.³²⁰ The government regarded both groups with suspicion from the earliest days of North Korea’s state, and the manual confirms this.³²¹ These suspicions are best understood as scientific in the North Korean sense. If socio-political environment determines the worldview and attitudes of a person, then surely those with experiences from other societies posed especially large threats.

The publication of a standardized, detailed manual suggests the process of classification was not standardized enough before. As several interviewees for this article

³¹⁶ Kim and Ri, *Chumindŭngnoksapch’amgosŏ*, 6.

³¹⁷ Ibid, 6–8.

³¹⁸ Ibid, 6.

³¹⁹ Ibid, 17.

³²⁰ Ibid.

³²¹ See, for example, Kim and Kim, *Choguk*, 276.

attest, the process was often arbitrary, messy, and inconsistent. Individual state agents in charge of the process had enormous power and opportunity for abuse. Reading the manual as an historical document sheds light on a number of problems that the state sought to remedy.

First, the guide gives detailed instructions for how people should be sorted into categories such as poor farmer background or land or capital owner stock. This background division, in turn, determines the “class foundation” of each person.³²² Historically, it has been immensely difficult for socialist regimes to determine differences between propertied and oppressed classes, not least in agriculture, because such categories often could not be applied uniformly across countries.³²³

The manual is remarkably specific, and often offers detailed numbers to help with proper classification. For example, someone will be classified as a “wealthy farmer (*punong*)” if they came from a household that,

”[L]eased over two but under five *chǒngbo* (between 19,835 and 49,587 square meters) of land while running an enterprise, or worked for an administrative institution while living off of land rental fees as [his] primary source of income...”³²⁴

Or:

“Someone held 4 *chǒngbo* (about 39,669 square meters) and farmed it within the family, and then after [his] grandfather and father passed away, could not make the effort and gave one *chǒngbo* to his in-laws and two to his uncle, and continued farming without receiving land rent, and then after liberation, had 3 *chǒngbo* (about 29,752 square meters) confiscated. The *songbun* of such a person, taking into

³²² Ibid, 17.

³²³ For the case of China during land reform under communism, see Julia Strauss, “Morality, Coercion and State Building by Campaign in the Early PRC: Regime Consolidation and After, 1949–1956,” *The China Quarterly* 188 (December 2006): 891–912.

³²⁴ Kim and Ri, *Chumindǔngnoksaöpch’amgosǒ*, 129.

consideration his standard of living, the extent of his exploitation, shall be classified either as a wealthy mid-level farmer (*puyu chungnong*) or mid-level farmer (*chungnong*).³²⁵

This all seems virtually impossible to determine. How could citizen registration officers, several decades after colonial rule ended, be certain about the extent of a person's land ownership? How could someone seeking a more favorable status prove, with seven witnesses to back them up, that their grandfather in fact did not own four chŏngbo of land, but merely three? Or how could one demonstrate with certainty the specific form of labor that their grandparent performed in the 1930s or 1940s, to make them "worker" stock in the songbun registry?³²⁶

On the one hand, the criteria had to be specific to make the process less arbitrary. Only with exact measurements could the state accurately categorize people with little room for error. On the other hand, this sort of information was likely impossible to verify fully ten to fifteen years after the fact, and even more so when several decades had passed. Still, in many cases where people had their songbun re-evaluated and downgraded, the government claimed to have verified and discovered information about conditions several decades prior. The process set standards that simply could not reasonably be upheld. In many cases, although no interviewees knew for certain, people likely had their songbun status downgraded based on testimonies by people who could not be fully confident about such details so many decades after the fact and who may have had ulterior motives, such as jealousy.

³²⁵ Ibid, 130.

³²⁶ Ibid, 18.

Second, the manual strongly suggests that registration officers and others involved in the process routinely abused their positions of power. It states, for example, that interviewing a subject is one of the most important ways of gathering information. At the same time, it warns agents not to question the subject in an abusive manner using foul language. Had abuse not been a problem to begin with, none of this would have needed pointing out.

Agents, moreover, should not meet with people from “complicated” class backgrounds without first speaking with a representative of the Party organization in charge of them, presumably the Party cell at their workplace or the equivalent, and studying their personal files closely. When meeting a female subject, agents must do so together with a high-level cadre, or a trusted member of the core class, presumably to avoid sexual harassment or other unseemly behavior.³²⁷ Reading the manual backwards, a picture emerges of a dysfunctional system whose functionaries sometimes abused the public. Corruption and arbitrary state abuse are behaviors usually associated with famine- and post-famine era North Korea, but the manual bears clear evidence that such behavior happened also at a time of relative stability.

Third, it seems that in the decades leading up to the manual’s publication, the bureaucratic and administrative routines for record-keeping were also messy. The manual goes into great detail about which forms to use for what specific part of the registration process, and even specifies that the citizen registration ledger of each person must be

³²⁷ Ibid, 27.

filled out by pencil, presumably so that details can easily be altered.³²⁸ It details everything from how and where the materials should be stored, to how files should be indexed and catalogued.³²⁹ This suggests that bureaucrats sometimes followed administrative routines – crucial for the system to function at all – poorly.

Fourth, the manual highlights that in the 1993 North Korean surveillance state, modern technology was not very important or central at all. As in other surveillance states, human beings and hand-written index cards were the most central resource.³³⁰ The manual never refers to listening devices or other technology that surveillance organs could scantily afford. Rather, it states: “Relying on a wide scope of citizens... is the most forceful method for investigating the citizens.”³³¹ The chief pool of informants for the MPS agents were people from the loyal, core class who had good knowledge of suspicious elements and basic classes with a murky past. Also central were individuals who had lived in the area in question for a long time, likely because they could testify about events and circumstances long in the past. Neighborhood group leaders, *inminbanjang*, were most crucial among informants from the general public.³³²

³²⁸ Ibid, 13.

³²⁹ Ibid, 112; 116.

³³⁰ See, for example, Amir Weiner and Aigi Rahi-Tamm, “Getting to Know You: The Soviet Surveillance System, 1939–57,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 13, no. 1 (February 16, 2012): 15–17. For more on the importance of people as the most crucial sources of information, see also Katherine Verdery, *Secrets and Truths: Ethnography in the Archive of Romania’s Secret Police*, 2014; Gary Bruce, *The Firm: The inside Story of the Stasi* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

³³¹ Kim and Ri, *Chumindŭngnoksao̅pch’amgosŏ*, 26.

³³² Ibid, 26, 50.

Songbun in Flux: State Ambitions and Bureaucratic Mistakes

The interviewees' stories paint a messy picture of the songbun system in the pre-famine era. Several recalled how the state downgraded their songbun by mistake, an experience that stood out as particularly common. People with such experiences may well be overrepresented both among the informants for this article, and in the North Korean refugee community in South Korea overall. Being subjected to unfair treatment due to bureaucratic slip-ups could easily predispose a person to seeing little future in this environment. One interviewee claimed, for example, that her decision to eventually leave North Korea was partially spurred by the bitterness of having her songbun status downgraded for faulty reasons.³³³

Given how gargantuan a task it was to register every family connection, socio-economic background and conditions, as well as attitudes of the entire North Korean population, it would have been very surprising had not some investigations been conducted erroneously. In addition to the testimony from informants, the government's songbun manual also tacitly confirm that mistakes occurred.

Because the process was relatively decentralized from the beginning, there could not but be differences in implementation. Although the state centralized the management of songbun investigations under the OGD in 1958, the task must, by nature, be handled locally. A vast number of people are involved in gathering the information that eventually determines the songbun of an individual. Whether intentionally or unintentionally, some witnesses solicited by the state for each person must have given inaccurate information.

³³³ Pak Jang-ri, interview by author, Seoul, Republic of Korea, February 26, 2019.

Some interviewees blamed their downgraded songbun on the jealousy and spite of these so-called witnesses that the state relied on for information. Even a witness with the best of intentions may not correctly remember the detailed information that the songbun manual instructs functionaries to rely on for classifications. As previously noted, the manual is remarkably specific on criteria for classification, down to the precise size of a person's farmland prior to liberation, or the number of employees in their factory.³³⁴ If witnesses harbored ill-intent or jealousy toward the person or family in question, lying would be easy and carry few negative consequences for the person in question, since it was virtually impossible to find fully solid proof.

In theory, there are recourses for rectifying mistakes. In reality, for most who could not bribe their way, formal recourse was never feasible. To alter songbun that was assigned by mistake required a person to investigate conditions several decades before and find exactly seven witnesses to testify that their relative in fact did have a "clean" background. The manual instructs officers to record both the age and residence of each witness and does not specify why the number seven is so crucial.³³⁵ The Party official assigning songbun had (and still has) the ultimate authority to make the final judgment on what information to trust in the registration process, with no accountability or possibility of appeal.

Pak Jang-ri's case is instructive. Her family always considered their background very good in the eyes of the government. Her maternal great grandfather had owned

³³⁴ See, for example, Kim and Ri, *Chumindǔngnoksaoǔpch'amgosǔ*, 125–127.

³³⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

significant land on the small island of Baengnyŏngdo near present-day South Korea, and her grandfather was educated as a doctor at a Japanese university.³³⁶ After he returned from Japan, he operated a hospital on what later became the northern side of the 38th parallel, in Hwanghae province.³³⁷ When the communists took over, the family gave up their property to the state, precisely as they were supposed to do.

None of this would be problematic for the family's future songbun. The songbun manual confirms that landlords and capitalists who supported the revolution should be assigned a favorable songbun status.³³⁸ Pak's family should have been of solid songbun since her father had done what Kim Il-sung demanded of citizens of the new state.³³⁹

Things changed when the government claimed after a new round of investigations in the late 1960s that Pak's grandfather fled to South Korea during the war. Their family narrative held that when the Americans moved across the Korean Peninsula during the war, they had the grandfather serve as a doctor in the army, along with two of his brothers. The family thought the father and his brothers were killed in the process, but they now found out that the grandfather had been registered as a wartime defector to the south.³⁴⁰

The family had an acquaintance who worked in the MPS who told them that they could have their old, better songbun reinstated if, as the manual states, they could find

³³⁶ Pak Jang-ri, interview by author.

³³⁷ Pak Jang-ri, pers. comm., December 30, 2019.

³³⁸ Kim and Ri, *Chumindŭngnoksapch'amgosŏ*, 123.

³³⁹ Pak Jang-ri, interview by author.

³⁴⁰ Ibid.

seven people to testify that Pak's grandfather did not defect to the south.³⁴¹ Pak's mother tried in vain to find people who could vouch for her father. It is unclear how the authorities imagined one would be able to find seven witnesses to testify about someone's circumstances several decades earlier, at a time of war and social chaos. The family eventually gave up after Pak's mother had traveled around the country looking for the right people. There was no other recourse for appeal. In reality, as Pak told the author later, the only realistic option at hand is to bribe seven people to testify in favor of someone's most likely long-deceased relative.³⁴²

Ri Young-hee's family went through a similar ordeal. In her family's case, no specific event prompted their status downgrade, at least not that she was aware of or conveyed during the interview. Ri described her life and childhood in Pyŏngyang as generally comfortable and happy, perhaps colored by the rosy glasses of hindsight. She lived in a rugged part of North Hamgyŏng province for most of her life in North Korea, but still called Pyŏngyang her hometown.³⁴³ She described her father as a law-abiding, loyal political believer and overall earnest person.³⁴⁴

In Ri's case, the problem was her maternal grandfather's background. He had been involved in political groups later condemned as reactionary by the North Korean government. The family's fall was all the greater because of their relative privilege. Her family was handed a red slip of paper called a "dispatch order" (*p'agyŏnjang*) sometime

³⁴¹ Ibid.

³⁴² Pak Jang-ri, pers. comm.

³⁴³ Ri Young-hee, interview by author, Seoul, Republic of Korea, July 12, 2019.

³⁴⁴ Ri Young-hee, interview by author.

in 1983.³⁴⁵ Ri said that the Party never portrayed this relocation order as a punishment.³⁴⁶ Her parents were Party members of good political standing, and no one claimed that they had done anything wrong themselves. The family immediately began to prepare for their return to Pyŏngyang, certain that the relocation order was a mistake. They sent letters appealing to the Party, and one of her brothers went to Pyŏngyang himself to deliver them. According to Ri, such decisions were indeed changed on occasion, though it was rare.³⁴⁷ The Party claimed, however, that they had not been sent away as a punishment, but just to spread revolutionary values as a loyal, earnest family up in the north.³⁴⁸

The manner in which Ri spoke about the event was itself significant. She said that at the time, she knew that these things happened to other people, people whose backgrounds were actually problematic, or who had really done something wrong to get deported. But her own family had done everything right. Her mother even left her home region in present-day South Korea (although she was born long before division) to live in the North and help build the country.³⁴⁹ Ri said the Party recognized that their deportation may have been a mistake, but that they could not simply reverse it. Only formerly high officials could be called back after political purges, she said, and this does happen intermittently in North Korea (as it did in other communist countries).

³⁴⁵ Ibid.

³⁴⁶ It is possible that the order was not intended as punishment. It is not unheard of in authoritarian or totalitarian states for the government to order more loyal, politically trustworthy elements, to go live among less reliable elements in the population. For the example of Iraq, see Sassoon, *Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath Party*, 63.

³⁴⁷ Ri Young-hee, interview by author.

³⁴⁸ Ibid.

³⁴⁹ Ibid.

Ri did not argue that purges and internal deportation are unjust or immoral forms of punishment. Rather, the problem was that her family was targeted unfairly and unjustly. Pak Jang-ri expressed similar thoughts in our interview, suggesting that perhaps unfairness is often worse than oppression. The big injustice was not only the system itself, but that other people could bribe themselves out of hardship although their backgrounds were truly problematic. Some of the events Pak spoke about took place long before the famine of the 1990s, and show that corruption was chipping away at the North Korean system much earlier than scholars commonly claim:

“There are people who are truly bad... they’re bad people, but they give bribes and disguise themselves. From the bottom to the top, people give money and manage to alter their documents...So there are people who are actually supposed to be punished for their involvement with anti-communist movements, but who hide it and go on, and make it all the way to Pyöngyang...”³⁵⁰

However, there is another way to read Pak’s words. As Scott notes, people in situations of oppression perhaps speak of the system itself as a natural, unchangeable order, simply because radical change lies outside the realm of the realistically imaginable.³⁵¹ Inevitable does not necessarily mean legitimate. Although we met in South Korea, interviewees often spoke about facets of life in North Korea as they recalled experiencing them directly. Indeed, had Pak and others seen the songbun system as part of an order that could feasibly change, perhaps they would have expressed stronger criticisms of the system itself.

³⁵⁰ Pak Jang-ri, interview by author. This quote has been edited for clarity.

³⁵¹ Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, 324.

Songbun and Social Mobility

Even with the dynamic, chaotic nature of the registration process, once the dust settled for the individuals under scrutiny, upward social mobility became virtually impossible. Falling downward was common, while moving upward was almost unheard of. Many interviewees described the Songbun as putting up a form of social glass ceiling, defining people's life trajectories in North Korea from the 1960s and onward. By virtue of having left the country for good, those interviewed for this project are perhaps more likely than other North Koreans to be critical of the society and system they left behind. Even so, in conversation, few people made outright critical, normative statements about the Songbun system during our interviews, seemingly taking it for granted as an inevitable fact of life.

Ri Jae-min's story is illustrative. He came to South Korea in 2004 and is involved with an organization for North Korean writers in exile. At the time of the interview, he had recently left a small apartment in Seoul and moved to the countryside.³⁵² He has a small patch of farmland on his property, in front of the old house where he lives, growing both chili pepper and corn. He spends most of his time writing novels and essays for South Korean publishing houses and newspapers.

Ri's life changed dramatically during his army service. The political officer (*chǒngch'ijidowǒn*) of his army unit called him to a meeting, after he had found a diary Ri had kept in secret. "He told me I was a talented writer, and that I should be doing more of it in the future. He offered to make the necessary connections, and that's when I

³⁵² Personal field notes.

wrote my first play”. It was about a familiar theme in North Korean culture: the relative poverty and deprivation of the Chosŏn era. Ri’s work was submitted to a literary competition within the army.³⁵³ Remarkably enough, Ri claims, one of his works even received praise by the Great Leader, Kim Il-sung, and Kim supposedly ordered that Ri be “treated well”.³⁵⁴

Later, Ri was selected to try out for the prestigious Pyŏngyang College of Film and Theater (*Yŏnghwayŏndaegŭk Daehak*). He made it into the Department of Creation and Composition (*ch'angjakhakpu*) but after only one month, he was recalled to his army base.

It turned out that the university had not properly scrutinized his documents for his application. When the authorities discovered that Ri’s father had been what the North Korean state classified as a wealthy landowner, his acceptance to the college was rescinded. Ri might have been allowed to stay if his father had only owned enough land to end up with the middle-class farmer label, as he pointed out during our interview. But the son of a former “wealthy” landowner – a *punong* – could never be allowed in such a prestigious environment.³⁵⁵ Instead, Ri was sent to work in a coal mine. Only later, through personal connections, was Ri able to attend college and eventually to work as a government propaganda writer.

Ri’s case reveals several interesting facts about the application of songbun in the 1970s. The government’s background checks had clear and significant flaws, as revealed

³⁵³ Ri Jae-min, interview by author, undisclosed location, South Korea, July 16, 2019.

³⁵⁴ Ibid.

³⁵⁵ Ibid.

by the fact that Ri could slip through the cracks at first and be chosen for the prestigious college. Moreover, it shows that bad songbun, although highly inhibiting, was not a sentence to a life of permanent deprivation. Ri, after all, did manage to gain Party membership during his time in the army and worked as a writer for most of his adult life in North Korea, albeit after several very difficult years of hard work in a coal mine. There was, however, a glass ceiling that he could never rise above. Ri even specifically claimed that it runs at medium-level administrative roles.³⁵⁶

He may have gotten away more easily because his father passed away in the mid-1960s. The original sinner, in other words, was not around for most of Ri's life. He said that had his father been alive during the late-1960s and 1970s when songbun investigations intensified, and more and more people were newly "discovered" as the sons and daughters of traitors, things could have become a lot worse. The social structures were still in flux, nothing was fully settled.

Kang Kyōng-ha's story shows songbun both as glass ceiling and social stigma. She was born in 1978 in South Hamgyōng province, with family origins that were problematic for several reasons. Her maternal grandfather went over to the south during the Korean War. Therefore, her family background was classified as *wolnamja* – defector to the south.³⁵⁷ Moreover, her paternal grandfather worked as a farmhand (*mōsūm*) until liberation. Ordinarily, this would have given Kang's family good songbun, but her father

³⁵⁶ Ibid.

³⁵⁷ Kang Kyōng-ha, interview by author, undisclosed location, South Korea, June 6, 2019, 5.

had joined the Democratic Party led by nationalist Cho Man-sik, later suppressed by the North Korean government.³⁵⁸

Kang's songbun shaped her life from early childhood. During her school years, some of her classmates would tease her for her deficient family background.³⁵⁹ Because of her Songbun, she said, she always felt that she had to do better than others, to overcompensate and prove herself despite her family background.³⁶⁰ She was the top student of her class.³⁶¹ Thanks to her achievements, she got to participate in the induction ceremony for the Kim Il-sung Youth League, the mandatory mass organization for students and young people, on the day usually reserved only for those of good songbun stock.³⁶² The other children present, however, never had to work as hard as she did to earn such rewards.

Her family's case also shows that poor songbun would not necessarily lead to a life of deprivation, but that it put up limits that were very hard to overcome. Her father had a relatively good and trusted job at a fuel distribution site, an assignment normally reserved for Party members, according to Kang. Her father was also an informant for the police, as a significant proportion of North Koreans are at some point in their lives.³⁶³ Even so, he was never allowed to join the Party, which Kang felt a great deal of embarrassment for, particularly as such information was often public.³⁶⁴

³⁵⁸ Kim and Lee, *Pukhanŭi Yŏksa*, 61–62.

³⁵⁹ Kang Kyŏng-ha, interview by author.

³⁶⁰ Ibid.

³⁶¹ Ibid.

³⁶² Ibid.

³⁶³ Ibid.

³⁶⁴ Ibid.

Kang's brother, however, was able to join later in life, after a long and tough 13-year service in the military. The third generation is supposed to not be impacted by the poor songbun of their parents, and army service can be a vehicle for social advancement.³⁶⁵ Kang's father's good connections with Party functionaries also helped, but the family still had to bribe their way through parts of the brother's process.³⁶⁶ Kang also managed to have the personal records of her siblings illegally changed, to erase the fact that one of their relatives had been deported to a political prison camp.³⁶⁷

Kang, like Ri, was first able to bypass the songbun glass ceiling, only to be cast down again once the Party discovered its mistake. Kang successfully gained admission to a prestigious training college for Party cadres. She studied there in the early 2000s. Apparently, someone had mixed up her name with another person who should have gotten properly admitted, with the exact date of birth as Kang's.³⁶⁸ Kang did not state explicitly that this was related to her songbun, but another job she held, working in the local police office, was taken away from her after she was about to switch duties, and her songbun was re-checked in the process.³⁶⁹ For reasons that were unclear in the interview, she could not get rid of the information from her own file about the prison camp inmate relative. With such family ties, people told her, she should just give up any pretenses of social advancement.³⁷⁰

³⁶⁵ Ibid. Other informants have also said that extensive army service is a common way to join the Party.

³⁶⁶ Kang Kyōng-ha, interview by author.

³⁶⁷ Ibid.

³⁶⁸ Ibid.

³⁶⁹ Ibid.

³⁷⁰ Ibid.

Pak Jang-ri also saw her opportunities for social advancement suddenly vanish after the state “discovered” that she had problematic songbun. She was born in Chongjin, in the northeast of North Korea, and lived there until she left for South Korea in the early 2000s. Since her mother was an academic, Pak said, she always assumed she would also go to college.

Her outlook changed drastically in the mid-1970s. Born in 1966, she was only around ten years old when her family’s songbun status changed as her father applied for Party membership. In a re-investigation of her family’s songbun, a claim had been made that her maternal grandfather fled to the South during the Korean War.³⁷¹ According to Pak, people did not generally know their songbun at the time, and North Koreans themselves would not commonly use the specific term.

Because the family had previously been of good songbun standing, the fall was harder than it otherwise might have been. Like Ri, Pak’s entire life did not necessarily crumble when her family’s status changed. She could still go visit her aunt in Pyŏngyang, for example, and traveling to the capital city was a privilege that those considered to be the worst traitors would never receive.³⁷² Still, the change was a massive blow to her family. She recalled that her parents fought a lot at the time. Her father said he regretted marrying her mother and considered filing for divorce to escape the stigmatizing status.³⁷³ After high school, Pak was allotted a physically taxing job in construction.³⁷⁴

³⁷¹ Pak Jang-ri, interview by author, Seoul, Republic of Korea, February 26, 2019.

³⁷² Ibid.

³⁷³ Ibid.

³⁷⁴ Ibid.

Both Ri and Pak claimed that it wasn't unusual for the state to suddenly change people's songbun status when they lived in North Korea. Given what we know about the songbun system, this is not surprising. Time and again, the state launched campaigns to "uncover" traitors, pull their descendants down on the class ladder, and purge the capital city of politically impure elements. Despite this, most people interviewed for this project tellingly spoke in a resigned manner about the role of songbun in society and in their lives, as a mere fact of life that could not be changed.

As in every culture, codes in language often speak louder than straightforward, literal definitions and categories of social and political status. Several interviewees attested that North Koreans themselves, inside the country, would not typically use the term "songbun" when talking about family background.³⁷⁵ It is simply a social fact, one so obvious and culturally embedded that it is not even spoken about outright.

During one joint interview, for example, the two interviewees made self-deprecating jokes about each other's bad background and socio-political standing, laughing about how much of a political loyalist one of them used to be in North Korea.³⁷⁶ In another conversation, one woman explained why it was especially dangerous for people like her to violate domestic travel restrictions in the 1980s. She referred to herself and her friends as "the worst possible people"³⁷⁷ because of their bad songbun, always under stronger scrutiny than others.

³⁷⁵ Several interviewees attested to this, though some claimed that the term is used even in North Korea.

³⁷⁶ Ch'ae Kyōng-wōn and Kim Yōng-suk, author's interview, undisclosed location, South Korea, July 3rd, 2019.

³⁷⁷ Yi Seul-gi and Han Mi-sun, author's interview, Seoul, Republic of Korea, February 24, 20

The resigned, almost self-deprecatory manner in which interviewees spoke about their poor songbun status speaks volumes about the role and function of songbun in North Korean society. It is not merely as a tool to keep the suspected enemy class in check, but as a social hierarchy as well.

Synopsis

The 1960s throughout 1980s were turbulent and painful decades for a significant proportion of the North Korean population. The state “uncovered” a never-ending stream of enemies in messy family background investigations, in the construction of the songbun system. The songbun system’s implementation was never static or perfectly smooth. Rather, for countless North Koreans, the system created disruption and chaos. This chapter demonstrates that for countless North Koreans, these decades were not the “golden era” they may appear to have been in contrast with the social decay that followed the collapse of the economy in the 1990s. This should cause us to re-think the general narrative of North Korean social history and recognize that it was always more or less tumultuous.

Songbun investigations were never a fully finished project, but rather a lengthy and ongoing process. Though the emphasis on family background may have diminished somewhat over the past few decades, there is reason to believe that the state still examines each person’s songbun intermittently, at junctures such as evaluations for Party membership and employment. Zbigniew Brzezinski argued in 1956 that a totalitarian regime must constantly purge enemy elements, real or imagined, to keep cadres on their

toes and sustain the political apparatus.³⁷⁸ North Korea provides a case where this applies not just to political cadres, but to the population as a whole.

Songbun investigations were often messy and riddled with errors and mistakes. Given the size and scope of investigating the family background of each citizen, it was inevitable that the process would run far from smoothly. To be sure, some citizens did successfully manipulate the powerful state system, and were able to use cracks in the bureaucracy to their advantage.

In this sense, the songbun system illuminates the difficulties involved in realizing ambitious projects of state-building. It shows that there is far more nuance to the process than binaries of resistance and stability can do justice to. On the one hand, the conclusions of this chapter reinforce Kotkin's description of Stalinism as an entire culture and civilization rather than merely a structure of governance.³⁷⁹ Indeed, the ways in which interviewees spoke about their own songbun status and that of others shows the extent to which the language of a bureaucratic system successfully entered everyday parlance. While the North Korean state's songbun registration manual inadvertently serves as proof of the difficulties involved in the process, it also shows that the state was regardless determined to continue and perfect the endeavor.

On the other hand, this did not constitute resistance against the state in any concrete sense. For most people who fell victim to sudden changes of songbun status through no fault of their own, the only realistic option was to accept their new conditions

³⁷⁸ Brzezinski, *The Permanent Purge*.

³⁷⁹ Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, 14.

and clench their fists in their pockets. The North Korean state was never a perfectly functioning Leviathan, but the operational errors often worked to the citizen's detriment rather than the other way around.

Thus, as a process of state-building and making society legible, songbun shows that such state projects are often complex and contested by the citizens. At the same time, the cracks in the bureaucratic façade do not constitute examples of social resistance. Citizens could try to fight the state apparatus, but as the interviewees for this article attest, the state usually won out.

At the same time, as Scott's *Weapons of the Weak* suggests, we should not be too quick to disregard the potential that more active forms of resistance against the system have existed, and still do. That North Korean leaders have deemed it necessary to speak out against unfairness and excessive emphasis on family background suggests that discontent with practices emanating from the system were widespread enough for the state to react, albeit only in rhetoric. Like the Malaysian peasants in Scott's study, North Korean grassroots have an understanding of their own situation and place and have attempted – although often not successfully – to manipulate the bureaucratic system in a way that serves their interests.³⁸⁰ To date, this has not turned into widespread collective action for radical change of the songbun system, but discontent among the grassroots have impacted state policies in the past and continues to do so today.

³⁸⁰ Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, 304.

Chapter 4: Counting Spoons and Chopsticks: Surveillance and Everyday Life, 1967–2019

The late-1960s marked a turn in North Korean society. The state tightened control over all social spheres and built a durable nexus of fear through its surveillance system. This system, still to this day, permeates almost all of everyday life.³⁸¹ Ri Jae-min recalled that foreign books such as *Sherlock Holmes*, which he could previously get from the public libraries, suddenly disappeared as the sociocultural environment grew more restrictive and uniform. Most people knew not to ask questions about what was happening.³⁸²

From the mid-1950s, the North Korean government narrowed the scope for cultural expression. Even culture from friendly nations such as the Soviet Union became less accessible.³⁸³ During roughly one decade, between the mid-1950s and late-1960s, North Korea became one of the most monolithic societies on earth, far exceeding the oppression in the Soviet Union at the time. Even after 1967 and the formalization of near-total power in the hands of the Great Leader, the state constantly increased its hold over the population. In 1975 (although first proposed in 1973), under the leadership of Kim

³⁸¹ These overarching social changes were accompanied, or arguably underpinned, by severely tightening Party control over the economy. Kim Il-sung increasingly saw increased Party control over all facets of social life as a solution to lagging economic growth. See T'ae-söp Lee, *Pukhanüi Kyôngje Wigiwa Ch'eje Pyönhwa* (Seoul, Republic of Korea: Sönin, 2009), 138. An, as many authors, An Hui-ch'ang credits this development primarily to the centralization of state power around the Great Leader. An Hui-ch'ang, *Pukhanüi T'ongch'i Ch'eje*, chap. 1.

³⁸² Ri Jae-min gave a detailed and thorough account of the shift in the information environment at this time. Ri Jae-min interview transcript, undisclosed location, South Korea, July 16, 2019, p. 3; Ri Jae-han interview transcript, undisclosed location, South Korea, July 29, 2019, p. 19.

³⁸³ Tatiana Gabroussenko, *Soldiers on the Cultural Front: Developments in the Early History of North Korean Literature and Literary Policy* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press : Center for Korean Studies, University of Hawai'i, 2010), <http://public.eblib.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=3413660>.

Jong-il, so-called “Three Revolutions Teams” were dispatched around the country to mobilize political fervor. These revolutions were to occur in ideology, technology and culture. Teams of young Worker’s Party cadres broadcast political messages from the party center in Pyöngyang, to raise class consciousness among the people.³⁸⁴

Kim Jong-il’s rise to power was closely intertwined with this campaign to re-making the people.³⁸⁵ As the economy lagged, increased political control was also a way to improve economic performance.³⁸⁶ At the same time, people’s family backgrounds were continuously investigated through the decades. Between 1976 and 1979, hundreds of thousands of people were moved from politically sensitive areas such as the privileged capital city Pyöngyang and the region near the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) between North and South Korea.³⁸⁷

The North Korean government first publicly acknowledged the existence of its version of the East German Stasi, the Ministry for State Security (MSS) in August 1987, when it publicized condolences after the death of the ministry’s head, Yi Jin-soo.³⁸⁸ According to Yun Tae-il, the former MSS agent who later defected to South Korea, Kim Jong-il took control over the ministry’s operations afterwards. Very little information is available on the history and operations of security organs, and secondary sources often diverge on minor details. Yun dates the creation of the MSS in its current form to May

³⁸⁴ Byöng-no and Kim Söng-ch’öl, “Pukhansahoeüi Pulp’yöngdüng kujowa Chöngch’isahoejöök Hamüi,” 81.

³⁸⁵ Lee U-yöng, *Chönhwan’gi üi Pukhan Sahoe T’ongje Ch’eje*, 38.

³⁸⁶ Lee, *Pukhanüi Kyöngje Wigiwa Ch’eje Pyönhwa*, 195.

³⁸⁷ Kim Byöng-yön, Pak Myöng-gyu, and Kim Byöng-no, *Kaesöng Kongdan*, 323–324.

³⁸⁸ Yun Tae-il, *Agüi Ch’uk Chiphaengbu: Kukkaanjönbowibuüi Naemo*, 37.

1973, when it was upgraded from the Bureau of Political Defense to its own ministry.³⁸⁹

The MSS's is responsible for protecting the leadership, and thereby the state, against anti-state, "reactionaries", and monitors the population's ideological attitudes.³⁹⁰ It both conducts and guards against foreign espionage and runs the country's concentration camps for political prisoners.

Meanwhile, the Ministry for Public Security (MPS) is responsible for maintaining social order and its agents resemble police officers. The MPS operates a wide variety of bureaus, monitoring everything from railway safety to state enterprise accounts. The MPS became its own ministry in October 1962. It was responsible for maritime and land border security until 1982 when this duty was transferred to the MSS.³⁹¹ Both the MSS and MPS maintain local stations throughout the country, with stronger presence along borders and other sensitive regions. In counties along national borders, every village has an MPS office staffed, among others, by one agent in charge of the area as a whole, another responsible for citizen registration, and one monitoring border security. Every *inminban* is assigned an MPS agent which the *inminbanjang* reports to on a regular basis. In sensitive regions, *inminban* are also assigned an MSS agent.³⁹² Citizens have to apply for a permit with their local MPS bureau for domestic travel and must report to the local MPS station at their destination.³⁹³

³⁸⁹ Ibid, 31.

³⁹⁰ Lee, *Chŏnhwan'gi ūi Pukhan*, 27–28.

³⁹¹ Kwak, "Pukhan *Inminboanwŏn'gwa Chuminŭi Kwan'gye Pyŏnhwa Yŏn'gu*," 22.

³⁹² Yun Tae-il, *Agŭi Ch'uk Chiphaengbu*, 115.

³⁹³ Ibid, 113.

Just as important, if not more so, are the supposedly civilian organs and institutions where people spend the majority of their time, whether it be schools or workplaces. This concept of the “organizational life” remains one of the North Korean state’s primary mechanisms for watching and re-educating supposed reactionaries, spies, wreckers, and people with so-called “old values” – religious or other traditional beliefs. The North Korean surveillance system is predicated upon the individual simply spending so much time in the hands of the state and various mandatory political groups that relatively little time is outside of an organized, public framework. This was always a central feature of the system. It may be the feature that has weakened the most after the famine, but still, it is not without significance.

Every citizen, still today, has to belong to and attend activities with one of the so-called mass organizations for school children and youth, women, workers, and peasants. These organizations serve to support the most central one of all: the Korean Worker’s Party, with the Great Leader at the center. Membership in one of these organizations is mandatory and bestowed automatically.³⁹⁴

It is a common assumption that the system of control was rendered highly ineffective by the economic collapse in the 1990s. Private markets, first illegal but incorporated into the formal system later on, rose to take the place of the public

³⁹⁴ For an overview of this system, see Andrei Lankov, In-ok Kwak, and Choong-Bin Cho, “The Organizational Life: Daily Surveillance and Daily Resistance in North Korea,” *Journal of East Asian Studies* 12, no. 2 (2012): 193–214.

distribution system (PDS) as the main providers of food for the majority.³⁹⁵ Smuggling of foreign consumer goods and culture grew common as soldiers and border guards began taking bribes and often became directly involved in smuggling themselves.³⁹⁶ Ballooning corruption also made it possible to travel around the country without a permit, and shirk from state-assigned work to trade on markets for much better pay.

But how has the system worked in practice, especially prior to the 1990s? And what does this tell us about surveillance and social control in general?

This chapter seeks to answer these questions through two central arguments: first, that attempts to control society, culture and people's everyday lives were never successful as perfectly as literature on North Korea prior to the 1990s often assumes. People engaged in behaviors associated with post-famine society – corruption, private farming and bartering – long before the famine. The breakdown of the economy of course took a large toll on the system for social control. At the same time, it was not as clear of an historical break as many believe. Even before the famine, North Koreans manipulated the system to their own benefit.

But ultimately, this disobedient private sphere did not necessarily constitute resistance or instability. The limits were always clear. Almost unequivocally, those interviewed for this chapter said they almost never dared to speak critically of the leadership, even in private.

³⁹⁵ For an excellent overview of this process, see Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland, *Witness to Transformation: Refugee Insights into North Korea* (Washington: Peterson Institute for international economics, 2011).

³⁹⁶ For an analysis of the changed relationship between MPS-agents and citizens through the famine, see Kwak, “Pukhan Inminboanwŏn’gwa Chuminŭi Kwan’gye Pyŏnhwa Yŏn’gu.”.

Second, this chapter argues that this private sphere beyond state control does not necessarily threaten state stability or state control. Rather, the case of North Korea suggests that discontent, disobedience and social structures beyond the control of the state can co-exist with stable totalitarian rule.

This carries significant implications for the scholarly understanding of totalitarianism, resistance and stability. In *Weapons of the Weak*, James Scott demonstrates how people often use subtle “little acts” such as foot dragging and organization through informal networks to exercise everyday resistance against the system that they live under.³⁹⁷ Poor people, Scott notes, have agency and understanding of their own situation and place, and many small acts can coagulate into meaningful social change in the aggregate.³⁹⁸ Scott, moreover, has also argued that subordinate groups often employ strategies of dual “hidden” and “public” transcripts to outwardly follow along with the system’s rules in public, while criticizing them and those in power in private.³⁹⁹ People use everyday forms of resistance to defy authority in private when it is too dangerous to do in public. In this sense, those in power cannot be said to hold full hegemony, however stable their social control might seem at the surface.⁴⁰⁰

Scott’s observations largely leave out the question of how significant these acts are. Gardner Bovingdon’s research among Uighur society in Xinjiang shows that while people often employ these little methods of resistance, they still do so in a “realm of

³⁹⁷ Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, xvii.

³⁹⁸ Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, 344.

³⁹⁹ Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*.

⁴⁰⁰ Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, 326.

dissent” structured by the state in the first place.⁴⁰¹ The line between mere “grumbling” and resistance, Bovingdon argues, is often unclear. Therefore, the significance of these acts is questionable. Bovingdon demonstrates that over time, Beijing’s control over Xinjiang has grown tighter and everyday resistance has produced relatively little for the Uighurs. Bovingdon’s book was published in 2010; this rings even truer today, eleven years later, as the Chinese state cracks down on the Uighurs with extreme ferocity, leading many to accuse it of genocide.⁴⁰²

This chapter makes a similar assessment of North Korea. Since the founding of the state, North Koreans have often engaged in little acts of resistance, and used hidden transcripts among trusted friends and family. At the same time, the regime has maintained social control to a remarkable extent. Acts of resistance may be common, and in the case of North Korea, their extent has been greatly underestimated. At the same time, such acts have had relatively minor impact. Resistance can co-exist with social stability.

This chapter relies on interviews both with grassroots citizens as well as those directly involved in surveillance through roles in the security organs, or through positions as neighborhood unit heads (*inminbanjang*). It gives particular focus to the social history of neighborhood units, *inminban*, since this institution is the most central intermediary between the state and grassroots citizens in their everyday lives and plays a crucial role for everyday surveillance.

⁴⁰¹ Gardner Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs: Strangers in Their Own Land* (Columbia, NY: Columbia University Press, 2020), chap. 3.

⁴⁰² Chris Buckley and Edward Wong, “U.S. Says China’s Repression of Uighurs Is ‘Genocide,’” *New York Times*, January 19, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/19/us/politics/trump-china-xinjiang.html>.

A number of excellent works, such as An, Chŏn, Lee, Chung and others survey the systemic, institutional design of surveillance and social control in North Korea, and show convincingly that the very design of the state apparatus around one leader renders political control exceptionally strong since the late-1960s.⁴⁰³ Lee and Scalapino give an excellent English-language account of the origins and structure of these institutions.⁴⁰⁴ This chapter aims to contribute to this body of literature by adding a social dimension and focusing on the role of surveillance in everyday life in pre-famine North Korea, as well as understanding the change beginning in the 1990s.

Ridding Society of “Old Values”: A North Korean Government Perspective on Surveillance

As in almost all revolutionary states, rooting out “old values”⁴⁰⁵ has been a challenge for the government since the state’s inception.⁴⁰⁶ For example, Kim Jin-gye recalls that he, as a propaganda officer in 1954 held a mass meeting with farmers skeptical of land reform and spoke about shedding old values.⁴⁰⁷ Government publications and speeches by the leaders continuously mention people’s old values as a

⁴⁰³ An, Pukhanŭi T’ongch’i Ch’eje; Chŏn Hyŏn-chun, *Pukhanŭi Sahoet’ongje Kigu Koch’al: Inminboansŏngŭl Chungsimŭro* (Seoul, Republic of Korea: T’ongil Yŏn’guwŏn, 2003); Lee U-yŏng, *Chŏnhwan’gi ŭi Pukhan Sahoet’ongje Ch’eje* (Seoul, Korea: T’ongil Yŏn’guwŏn, 1999); Chung, “The Suryŏng System as the Institution of Collectivist Development.”

⁴⁰⁴ Scalapino and Lee, *Communism in Korea*.

⁴⁰⁵ See, for example, Kim Il Sung, “Tangwŏndŭlssogesŏ Kyegŭpkyoyangsaŏbŭl Tŏuk Kanghwahalde Taehayŏ,” pp. 18–40 in *Kim Il Sŏng Chŏnjip*, vol. 18 (Pyŏngyang, DPR Korea: Chosŏn Rodongdang Ch’ulp’ansa, 1997), 21.

⁴⁰⁶ For a few examples, see Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 2; Amir Weiner and Aigi Rahi-Tamm, “Getting to Know You: The Soviet Surveillance System, 1939–57,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 13, no. 1 (February 16, 2012): 32; Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind*, 4–5.

⁴⁰⁷ Kim Jin-gye and Kim Ŭng-gyo, *Choguk*, 241.

challenge to socialism.⁴⁰⁸ Much like Stalin blamed policy failures on saboteur kulaks, North Korean leaders have attributed economic and social shortcomings on holdovers from the old society and a lack of proper implementation of the new values. Kim Il Sung said in the 1950s that without ridding people's minds of capitalist values – the vestiges of Japanese colonialism – it would be impossible to construct a new society because the “dying class” would cling onto its power.⁴⁰⁹ Thus, Party members and the working masses had to be “armed” with the weapon of Marxism-Leninism to defend the revolution.⁴¹⁰ Kim also accused South Korea of sending spies and intentional wreckers who sabotaged farming, industrial production and infrastructure.⁴¹¹

The leadership cautioned the people to remain vigilant against enemies hiding among the masses. In a speech to inminbanjang from around the country in 1962, Kim Il-sung admonished them to carefully monitor people in their neighborhoods.⁴¹² Inminbanjang must register visitors and not let “bad people” even set foot within the inminban. Former capitalists, landlords and other exploiting class categories may seem on the surface as if though they support the communist system, Kim said, but deep inside, they want the old ways back. The inminban has to watch every move of bad people, and struggle against and report anyone who expresses discontent to the authorities.⁴¹³

The North Korean government perceived threatening remnants of the old society as a permanent threat. In 1967, the regime instituted the “*Suryöng* System [*suryöngje*]

⁴⁰⁸ See, for example, “Iut hanjiban,” *Rodong Sinmun* 6 August, 1961.

⁴⁰⁹ Kim Il Sung, “Tangwöndülssogesö Kyegüpkoyangsaöbül...”, 21.

⁴¹⁰ Ibid, 21.

⁴¹¹ Kim Il-sung, “Tangwöndülssogesö Kyegüpkoyangsaöbül...”, 23.

⁴¹² Kim Il-sung, “Inminbanjangdürüi Yökharül Nop'yöya Handa,” 81.

⁴¹³ Ibid, 82.

and the “Ten Principles on Establishing the Monolithic Ideological System”, formally subjugating all of North Korea’s state institutions to the power of the Great Leader, or *suryŏng*.⁴¹⁴ This subordination of North Korea’s entire governance structure under the power of one man came after the last major purge of the last hints of diversity of thought within the Korean Worker’s Party of Korea.⁴¹⁵

The same year, Kim Il-sung gave a speech where he outlined his views on the dictatorship of the proletariat.⁴¹⁶ Because the capitalist countries will never give up their struggle against socialism, Kim said, the dictatorship of the proletariat has to stay as long as capitalist countries remain in the world.⁴¹⁷ In other words, the threat of old ideology and hidden remnants of capitalism will remain a threat for an undefined, long-term future.⁴¹⁸ Under such conditions, tight surveillance would be crucial.

Language and Surveillance

In conversations with North Koreans in South Korea, the author was frequently struck by how deeply terms such as “reactionaries” and “spies” have penetrated North Korean everyday language and taken on meanings far beyond the literal. Stephen Kotkin has shown how Stalinism invented a new language with words and terminology suited for

⁴¹⁴ Chung, “The *Suryŏng* System as the Institution of Collectivist Development.”

⁴¹⁵ Person, “Introduction, NKIDP e-Dossier No. 15 The 1967 Purge of the Gapsan Faction and Establishment of the Monolithic Ideological System.”

⁴¹⁶ Kim Il-sung, “Chabonjuŭirobut’ŏ Sahoejuŭieroŭi Kwadogiwa P’ŭroret’ariadokchae Munjee Taehayŏ.”

⁴¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 449.

⁴¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 447.

the new civilization of communism.⁴¹⁹ Both in the Soviet Union or North Korea, most people would likely not reflect much on terms such as “spy”, “wrecker”, “counter-revolutionary” or “deviant behavior”, especially after the system had stood for decades. If everyone knows what these words mean, there is no need to question them.⁴²⁰

People learn to use terms such as “reactionary” from a very early age, as several interviewees attested to.⁴²¹ Of course, many assume that the government often lies. At the same time, it was striking how often people would presume that rumors they had heard about counter-revolutionary, reactionary crimes would be true, or not reflect over their veracity.

Ch’oe Dong-u, for example, insisted that reactionaries were numerous, and became more numerous with time. Ch’oe was born in the late 1960s and left for South Korea only a few years before our interview, as his still thick North Hamgyŏng accent showed. People who engaged in private trade were reactionaries all along but only showed their true selves when private economic activity became common, explained Ch’oe. He did not seem to make a normative judgment on this, and he himself engaged in smuggling activity while in North Korea.

⁴¹⁹ Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, chap. 5.

⁴²⁰ Sandra Fahy has demonstrated that in the case of North Korea, such language evolved during the famine to represent the experiences of hunger and death in a context where talking about such matters was itself a political crime. See Fahy, *Marching through Suffering*.

⁴²¹ See, for example, interview with Kang Hyŏn-soo, interview transcript, Seoul, South Korea, June 5th, 2019, 14.

Kim Su-yŏn was born in a northern province in 1961.⁴²² She was an *inminbanjang* for part of her life in the country. As *inminbanjang*, she was ordered to target a particular person for surveillance. He worked as a photographer, taking pictures for people on wedding days and other special occasions. The authorities claimed he had taken pictures of sensitive spots and sent them to his employer abroad. Kim found nothing suspicious when surveilling him but the man was arrested anyway. Kim told me she did not see any reason to question the accusations. A suspicion of “spying” was enough.

The interviewees whose testimony I reference above did not question whether wreckers or spies actually existed. Why would they? In totalitarian systems, political control is a natural part of life. Few would ever question its necessity. When it was revealed that she had once given information to the East German secret police Stasi, German resistance icon Christa Wolf claimed that she did not even remember it. If true, it is a testament to how unremarkable it was to be ordered by the authorities to inform on an acquaintance.⁴²³

The Organizational Life

Although I rarely asked explicitly about surveillance, many interviewees were quick to mention the mass organizations as a central mechanism when the topic came up. These organizations enforce political conformity through mutual criticism sessions and

⁴²² Interview with Kim Su-yŏn, interview transcript, undisclosed location, South Korea, July 2nd, 2019, 12–13.

⁴²³ Neil MacGregor, *Germany: Memories of a Nation* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2017), 36.

extensive propaganda meetings.⁴²⁴ They also socialize North Koreans into a hyper-organized way of life. Being active, passionate and hard-working in these mass organizations was part of the climb up the social ladder for some. Several interviewees, mainly those who served in surveillance functions of some kind also held posts within one of these mass organizations. Chu Sin-il, a firm loyalist who served in the Ministry of Public Security (MPS), said that many of his family members served as team leaders (*banjang*) in various organizations and workplaces, as people of good political standing often would. Such organizational structures are fostered from an early age. Chu also served as class president in primary school.⁴²⁵

Ch'ae Kyöng-wön, a self-described loyalist for much of her life in North Korea who also later served as *inminbanjang*, told me her surveillance responsibilities were just as central when she held a post within the Women's League (*ryömaeng*) as when she was *inminbanjang*.⁴²⁶ Ri Jae-han, another MPS employee, served as secretary for the Kim Il-Sung-Kim Jong-il Thought Youth League (usually referred to as *Ch'öngnyöndongmaeng* in North Korean parlance) at his bureau. People stay members of the Youth League,

⁴²⁴ Lankov, Kwak and Cho, 205. There are many different words for this activity, and its historical and theoretical foundations, as well as corollaries in other communist countries, are discussed further in chapter 3. As in Lankov, Kwak and Cho, this chapter uses the term “mutual criticism sessions”, though the most common term in the academic literature is likely “self-criticism”. As noted in chapter 3, North Korean works often use this term (*chagibip'an*). The term “mutual criticism” is more apt, however, because criticizing others is a central part of the exercise. When it came up in conversation, this is also the term that most interviewees used (*hosangbip'an*).

⁴²⁵ Chu Sin-il interview transcript, Seoul, Republic of Korea, July 11th, 2019, 4.

⁴²⁶ Interview, Ch'ae Kyöng-wön and Kim Yöng-suk (pseudonyms) interview transcript, undisclosed location, Republic of Korea, July 3rd, 2017, 17.

according to Yi, until they turn 30.⁴²⁷ Being a Party member, Yi said, was the best way for men to attract women in North Korean society.

The “organizational life” is one of the clearest expressions of the collectivist social vision of the North Korean government. In a 1989 speech, Kim Il-sung described the organizational life as a way to organize each person into a fixed system where the people to educate themselves throughout life.⁴²⁸ Kim describes it as a “web” of education, that needs to be strengthened to prevent both workers and Party members from falling ideologically “ill” (*pyŏngdŭlda*). Thanks to this, “when people breathe in our country, they all breathe the same breath, and when they speak, they speak the same words.”⁴²⁹

When Sherlock Holmes, and Ostrovsky, Left North Korea

In many ways, the adoption of the Monolithic Ideological System in 1967 was the culmination of a process that begun much earlier. Several interviewees, primarily those whose backgrounds were in urban, intellectual circles noticed the change when foreign books began to disappear from the shelves. The system for social and political control was constructed through a process filled with critical junctures. Several of the interviewees recalled critical junctures of change in the construction of the system for

⁴²⁷ Interview, Ri Jae-han interview transcript, Seoul, Republic of Korea, July 15th, 2019, 13.

⁴²⁸ Kim Il-sung, “Ilgundŭrui Hyŏngmyŏngsŏng, Tangsŏng, Rodonggyegŭpsŏng, Inminsŏngŭl Nop'yo Tangŭi Kyŏnggongŏp hyŏngmyŏngbangch'imŭl Kwanjŏrhaja,” pp. 191–212 in *Kim Il Sŏng Chŏnjip*, vol. 88 (Pyŏngyang, DPR Korea: Chosŏn Rodongdang Ch'ulp'ansa, 2010), 208. On p. 209, Kim’s speech also mentions the well-known practice of Saturdays being reserved for political studies with each person’s mass organization.

⁴²⁹ Ibid.

political control. Chin Hye-suk recounted that the information environment changed significantly already in the 1950s.⁴³⁰ Born in the 1940s, she was one of the few interviewees who could recall clear memories from the pre-war period. She had clear memories of the Soviet presence in North Korea after liberation from Japan. When I came to her apartment for the first interview, she was using a Russian-language dictionary to brush up on the language skills she once acquired in primary school North Korea. She received a master's degree in natural science at the prestigious Kimch'aek University and was on track to pursue a doctorate, but her husband at the time did not think it appropriate for a married woman. Other North Korean refugees know her as academically minded, and she even discussed her scientific research in a segment on North Korean TV.⁴³¹ Her and her family lived relatively well through the famine. She used her knowledge of chemistry to manufacture and sell alcohol.⁴³² At least for part of her life, she was a manager at a military-operated factory.

During and for the first years after the Soviet occupation, Chin recalled, Soviet culture was everywhere. Political study circles, like they were done in the Soviet Union, became mandatory.⁴³³ Chin recalled that once, in a school theater production, she was assigned to play the part of a young Soviet girl, although she did not want to play a non-Korean character. She fondly recalled reading Soviet classics such as Nikolai Ostrovsky's *How the Steel Was Tempered*. Chin could also still hum Soviet tunes that she heard as a child.

⁴³⁰ Ibid.

⁴³¹ Chin Hye-suk post-interview notes, Seoul, Republic of Korea, July 11th, 2019.

⁴³² Chin Hye-suk interview transcript, Seoul, Republic of Korea, July 11th, 2019, 2.

⁴³³ Ibid, 9.

At the same time as the introduction of North Korea's first five-year plan in 1954, however, the room for Soviet culture started to shrink. Instead of Soviet books and music, Chin recalled, Korean culture was pushed by the authorities. Chin did not experience this transition was not anti-Soviet by any means.⁴³⁴ From introduction of the Ten Principles in 1967, however, the social and political climate much more drastically and rapidly.

For Ri Jae-min, the novelist and propaganda writer, this was a defining time in his youth. *Sherlock Holmes* and *The Count of Monte Cristo*, among other foreign books, were some of his favorites. He was in the army in 1967 when the Ten Principles were introduced and him and the other soldiers got to listen to a recording of Kim Il-sung speaking about the principles.⁴³⁵ From the onward, most of his favorite books disappeared quietly. The government never explained why foreign books suddenly were no longer available.⁴³⁶ Before that, he would get them from the local library, and the Korean versions of foreign books were popular.⁴³⁷ He began reading foreign crime novels when he was in middle school in the 1960s and would often skip schoolwork to read.⁴³⁸

⁴³⁴ BR Myers has previously pointed out that the turn away from Soviet cultural influence in the mid-1950s was not an anti-Soviet move in its own right, as the Soviet Union in fact advocated that states within their sphere of influence adapt strongly nationalist ideologies. B. R Myers, *North Korea's Juche Myth* (Busan, Republic of Korea: Sthele Press, 2015), 31.

⁴³⁵ Ri Jae-min interview transcript, undisclosed location, South Korea, July 16, 2019, 20. This practice of a separate information and propaganda track for the military is still in use in present-day North Korea. See, for example, Jeong Tae Joo, "Ko Young Hee and Ri Sol Ju Featured in Same Documentary for First Time," *Daily NK*, August 25, 2020, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/ko-young-hee-ri-sol-ju-featured-same-documentary-first-time/>.

⁴³⁶ Interview, Ri Jae-min, interview transcript, undisclosed location, South Korea, July 16, 2019, 3.

⁴³⁷ Ibid, 15.

⁴³⁸ Ibid, 2.

At the time, people did not understand why foreign books suddenly disappeared.⁴³⁹ In Ri's assessment, the tightening of the cultural space happened because the state simply re-directed all cultural content to focusing on propaganda for the Party, leaving no room for diversity. Ri lamented that as part of the process, countless talented authors were sent away to work at coal mines – as he was – or to political prison camps.⁴⁴⁰

Several other informants also read foreign books before the late-1960s. Kim Sŏn-ok recalled that her father would read *The Count of Monte Cristo*, a book that other interviewees also mentioned, and his extensive knowledge of foreign culture and history made her wonder if he was a secret “reactionary.”⁴⁴¹ Ri Young-hee, too, said that foreign books and culture were common in the 1970s.⁴⁴² She also specifically mentioned *The Count of Monte Cristo*, as well as Russian novels such as *Anna Karenina* and the Soviet classic Ostrovsky's *How the Steel Was Tempered*.⁴⁴³ Ri said that for the first half of the 1970s, foreign books and movies alike were readily available in libraries and at school. In her recollection, it was from the second half of the 1970s that such culture began to

⁴³⁹ Ri dates the disappearance of these books from the public eye to the mid-1970s, some years after the Ten Principles were introduced. Presumably, implementation of stricter regulations for foreign literature took some time to implement. See Ri Jae-min, interview transcript, undisclosed location, South Korea, July 16, 2019, 3.

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid, 23–24.

⁴⁴¹ Interview, Kim Sŏn-ok, interview transcript, Seoul, South Korea, July 19, 2017, 4. Kim did not actually explicitly mention that such books disappeared from her surroundings.

⁴⁴² Ri Young-hee, interview transcript, Seoul, Republic of Korea, July 30, 2019, 27.

⁴⁴³ The fact that several informants mentioned the same number of specific, few works, indicates that foreign culture still existed only in very restricted supply, with a small, highly limited number of titles available.

disappear.⁴⁴⁴ Soviet songs, in particular were common until that time but soon left the public sphere.⁴⁴⁵

But there were still those who could access foreign culture. Both Ri Jae-min and Ri Jae-han recounted that within the Ministries of Public Security and State Security, foreign crime novels readily available and often even used as study materials. Ri Jae-min wanted to keep reading mystery novels and had a friend at the powerful Ministry of State Security (MSS) who lent him such books. His friend made it very clear that should it somehow be revealed that he had lent out such sensitive materials – books that were publicly available only some years earlier – he would be hunted down by the MSS. There were even American books at their library, and each copy was carefully registered with a specific number.⁴⁴⁶ Ri could only keep the books for a couple of days, and he would get one in the evening and read it overnight. If any security agency personnel would have discovered his book, both him and his friend would have been in significant danger.⁴⁴⁷

This was an act of disobedience by both Ri and his friend, but it is difficult to see that they engaged in intentional, systemic resistance. Scott argues that we should not see

⁴⁴⁴ It is not quite the case, of course, that literally all foreign culture became banned. Some informants indicated that politically appropriate culture could still be found even decades later. Rather, it seems that *certain* foreign books that were once popular later disappeared from public view, though others could still be accessed.

⁴⁴⁵ Ri Young-hee, interview transcript, Seoul, Republic of Korea, July 30, 2019, 28.

⁴⁴⁶ Interview, Ri Jae-min, interview transcript, undisclosed location, South Korea, July 16, 2019, 3.

⁴⁴⁷ Interview, Ri Jae-min, interview transcript, undisclosed location, South Korea, July 16, 2019, 3. The account of another North Korean who later resettled in South Korea, Jang Jin-sung, contains a similar story and confirms that the risks were significant. In fact, Jang *did* forget a publication lent to him by a friend employed in a state organ where he had access to foreign materials on the subway in Pyŏngyang and claims that this is what led him to decide to defect to South Korea and escape the likely dangerous consequences. See Jin-sung Jang, *Dear Leader* (London, UK: Rider Books, 2015).

obedience as legitimation.⁴⁴⁸ If oppressed people believed that a different reality was within their reach, surely, they would act to achieve it. At the same time, Ri's story highlights how effectively the North Korean government set up strict boundaries. Ri and his friend knew the risks they were taking by Ri illegally borrowing fairly innocuous novels. How much more impossible would it not seem to actively resist government oppression? Interestingly, both Ri Jae-min and Ri Jae-han, who himself worked for the MPS, said that sensitive books were kept by the security organs for educational purposes. In the MPS and MSS, people would be instructed to read them to learn about how to conduct criminal investigations.⁴⁴⁹ Should the general public read them, Ri claimed, the authorities worried that people would get inspired to criminal acts themselves.⁴⁵⁰

As an as an employee of the MPS, Ri Jae-han saw all this from the inside. He read “many” foreign books as an MPS employee. The reading room of the MPS office held books not only from the Soviet Union and Cuba, but also from Japan and the United States.⁴⁵¹ There, employees could also watch foreign movies. Ri recalled watching one movie about the assassination attempt of French president Charles de Gaulle, most likely the 1973-film *The Day of the Jackal*. Officially, such movies were known as “reference films”. The point was for agents to learn how to counter enemies of the state. Ri acknowledged that many employees would watch these movies and read these books just for entertainment, using professional training as an excuse. Sometimes, Ri's office would hold screenings in their assembly hall.

⁴⁴⁸ Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, 323.

⁴⁴⁹ Ri Jae-min, interview transcript, undisclosed location, South Korea, August 5, 2019, 1.

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid, 12.

⁴⁵¹ Ri Jae-han interview transcript, undisclosed location, South Korea, July 29, 2019, 20.

Outside these institutions, in society, social control strengthened throughout Kim Jong-il's rise in the power apparatus in the 1970s.⁴⁵² Kang Kyŏng-ha, for example, recalled the decade a time of especially intense propaganda and ideological education, and at the time of our meeting, could still recall some political songs she once had memorized.⁴⁵³ Ri Jae-han, the former MPS-officer, recalled that the feared "Group 109", or "Anti-Socialist Group" (because their mission was to look for anti-socialist tendencies in society) consisting of surveillance officers from several organs, was formed at this time to strengthen the ideological grip of the state.⁴⁵⁴

In the mid-1970s, moreover, young political officers were sent around the country in the "Three Flags Revolution", to further inculcate Party ideology.⁴⁵⁵ Indeed, Ri Young-hee recalled how a group of propaganda officers came to the mine where she worked in the northern part of the country. These cadres were also sent out for their own sake, so they would experience life among the working masses.⁴⁵⁶ David Priestland has argued that Stalin used campaigns of terror to inject the Party and bureaucracy with dynamism, strengthening ideological alertness and adherence.⁴⁵⁷ In a similar way, Kim Jong-il headed the Three Flags Revolution and sent out teams of Party activists to ignite the ideological flame among the masses.

⁴⁵² Lee, Chŏnhwan'gi ūi Pukhan Sahoe T'ongje Ch'eje, 38.

⁴⁵³ Kang Kyŏng-ha interview transcript, undisclosed location, South Korea, June 6, 2019, 25.

⁴⁵⁴ Ri Jae-han interview transcript, 7.

⁴⁵⁵ Ri Jae-han interview transcript, 19.

⁴⁵⁶ Ri Young-hee, interview transcript, Seoul, Republic of Korea, July 12, 2019, 11.

⁴⁵⁷ David Priestland, *Stalinism and the Politics of Mobilization: Ideas, Power, and Terror in Inter-war Russia* (Oxford University Press, 2007).

Surveillance on the Ground: the Inminban

The inminban system is arguably the most central institution for surveillance. A significant proportion of those interviewed were inminbanjang, or inminban heads, in North Korea. Their testimonies illuminate that surveillance was always a very broad endeavor, incorporating both labor mobilization and spying on suspected political enemies, as well as neighborhood upkeep. The informants were asked specifically about their experiences as inminbanjang prior to the 1990s and 2000s, and in cases where the timing is not fully clear, I derive it from context.

For an illustrative example of the historical role of the inminban, consider the story of Kang Hyŏn-soo. She grew up in Musan, a northern mining town. Her husband had a stable government job with a fair bit of clout, likely in the MSS, though Kang did not want to say.⁴⁵⁸ They leveraged his connections during the famine and lived relatively well on illegal market trade and goods smuggling from China. She was born in the late 1950s or early 1960s and married in 1979.⁴⁵⁹ She began to work as an inminbanjang either in 1989 or 1990 when the economy began to seriously deteriorate.⁴⁶⁰ Kang said that surveillance was the most central task for an inminbanjang although many other interviewees claimed differently.⁴⁶¹ She also said that Kim Il-sung's words about the inminbanjang knowing how many spoons and chopsticks was in each person's home was

⁴⁵⁸ Kang Hyŏn-soo, interview transcript, Seoul, Republic of Korea, June 5, 2019, 2.

⁴⁵⁹ I neglected to ask for her precise birth year in the interview, but she graduated middle school in 1972, meaning she must have been born around this time.

⁴⁶⁰ Kang Hyŏn-soo interview transcript, 5.

⁴⁶¹ This this might have been a conscious exaggeration to project a certain, markedly dark, image of North Korea, especially given Kang's claim that she literally had to know the number of spoons and chopsticks in each person's home, something that seems to fall on its own impossibility.

a literal guideline. By counting spoons and chopsticks, she could assess whether the number of people in a given household matched government records.⁴⁶²

As *inminbanjang*, Kang mobilized *inminban* residents for construction and farm work outside of their ordinary work assignments. She also communicated information from the state such as news and propaganda. All such orders came through her local neighborhood office (*tongsamuso*), a sort of local administration authority.⁴⁶³ She would meet regularly with the MPS-officer in charge of her neighborhood, who biked around to wherever he needed to go for his daily tasks.⁴⁶⁴ He would also order her to watch over certain specific people particularly carefully. She was also in contact with the MSS-agent for her neighborhood once a week or so, though only *inminbanjang* near border areas seem to have had handlers from both institutions. Surveillance mainly constituted looking out for any outsiders coming through the neighborhood. She would also be on the lookout for people travelling without permits and make sure that her *inminban* residents were going to their assigned workplaces. The *inminban* also had its own savings account at least for part of Kang's time as *inminbanjang*, and members would gather empty bottles and sell them for a profit.⁴⁶⁵

Kang's testimony about her time as *inminbanjang* raises important points about governance, loyalty and efficiency in the surveillance system. As most *inminbanjang* I interviewed, Kang emphasized that she was on the side of her residents, sometimes against pressures from the state. She would intentionally neglect, occasionally, to report

⁴⁶² Kang Hyŏn-soo interview transcript, 6.

⁴⁶³ *Ibid*, 16.

⁴⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 11.

⁴⁶⁵ Kang Hyŏn-soo interview transcript, Seoul, Republic of Korea, June 5, 2019, 10.

certain information about them to the state, and would warn people who were targeted for special surveillance. As people who have lived through totalitarian systems often have, however, it is quite likely that Kang exaggerated her own benevolence and downplayed her role in the surveillance system.⁴⁶⁶ Nonetheless, even if only true to a certain extent, Kang's statement highlights that the *inminban* makes it possible for grassroots citizens to act against the state's interests while in the service of the state.

Kang said that she was in fact elected by the *ban* members as *banjang*, a process that some, but far from all, *inminbanjang* confirmed.⁴⁶⁷ Over time, Kang said, people's attendance at the mandatory self-criticism meetings declined.⁴⁶⁸ This mirrors an overall decline in discipline in attending such organized activities, as well as economic activity becoming more accepted. It would be easy to compare black-market trade to Scott's concept of foot dragging as a form of resistance. At the same time, it largely happened because the authorities let it happen, and people increasingly knew that they could get away with it unscathed.

Kang's story is also illustrative of changes over time in the *inminban*'s mission and the relationship between the state and the public. For Kang and many others, surveillance was the central but hardly the only task: more mundane work included neighborhood hygiene and labor mobilization, arguably itself a form of surveillance. That

⁴⁶⁶ As Gary Bruce points out about memories of East Germany (GDR), people tend to remember and recall the nicer parts of their pasts, and one would hardly expect to see a Stasi guard talking about shoot-to-kill orders along the Berlin Wall on a talk-show on TV. Bruce, *The Firm*, 5.

⁴⁶⁷ Kang Hyün-soo interview transcript, Seoul, Republic of Korea, June 5, 2019, 9.

⁴⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 16.

Kang was elected as *inminbanjang*, suggests that the general public did have some power and voice on local governance although extremely limited.

In order to smoothly do her job as *inminbanjang*, Kang often had to balance between her government-mandated tasks on the one hand and being on good terms with their *inminban* members on the other. Many other former *inminbanjang* attested to this as well. If someone in her *inminban* got arrested for a political crime without her having alerted the authorities first, the MPS agent in charge of her *inminban* would suspect that she had not been doing a thorough enough job because she did not.⁴⁶⁹ Several *inminbanjang* said they would intentionally refrain from reporting residents for certain types of crimes. At the same time, as Kang's testimony illustrates, this benevolence had limits. What Scott might call "foot dragging" still occurred within frames clearly controlled and upheld by the state.

Assessments often diverged radically between interviewees, but several former *inminbanjang* claimed that the mission of surveillance only became central to the *inminban* in the 1990s after the economy broke down. Before then, most likely, there simply was not as much petty crime and social diversion to monitor. Kim Su-yŏn, an *inminbanjang* from the early 1980s, said that even before the 1990s, when market trade began to spread, she was tasked with preventing people from private trading, though she did not see much at the time anyway.⁴⁷⁰ There may have been considerable variation across regions and cities, and these testimonies themselves suggest that the system was

⁴⁶⁹ Kang Hyŏn-soo, interview transcript, Seoul, Republic of Korea, June 5, 2019, 11.

⁴⁷⁰ Kim Su-yŏn, interview transcript, undisclosed location, South Korea, July 2nd, 2019, 14.

fragmented. The interview testimonies also highlight that social disobedience was relatively common in the country even before the famine.

When the system was more stable, said Ch'ae Kyōng-wōn, the *inminbanjang* was a much more coveted role than after the famine. Her and Kim Yōng-suk, two former *inminbanjang* I interviewed together, agreed that at that time, being an *inminbanjang* held social status. Ch'ae may have been somewhat biased since her mother was also an *inminbanjang* and local Party cell secretary at the same time, while her father was a school headmaster. During that time, according to Ch'ae and Kim, being *inminbanjang* was much more about practical neighborhood management, and delegating orders to inhabitants about practicalities, than it was about political surveillance. It only became a difficult job when the system came under strain.⁴⁷¹

Sin Myōng-ok, unlike most other interviewees, came from a farming background. She was born in a farming community near the northern town of Hyesan in 1956, during the years of intense economic construction. Like many interviewees, she spoke about the pre-famine era in sentimental, romantic terms, as a time when both the North Korean people, and the society, were truly, ardently communist.⁴⁷²

She called North Korea of the 1980s an “equal society”, before the birth of large-scale market trade. Back in that time, at least in Sin's rural setting, the central task of the *inminban* was mass mobilization for construction works and the like.⁴⁷³ Surveillance was

⁴⁷¹ Ch'ae Kyōng-wōn and Kim Yōng-suk, interview transcript, undisclosed location, South Korea, July 3rd, 2019, 24–25.

⁴⁷² Sin Myōng-ok, interview transcript, Seoul, Republic of Korea, June 11, 2019, 11, 4.

⁴⁷³ *Ibid*, 15.

important but not the only function. Sin highlighted the rise of economic inequality through the prevalence of the markets as a later cause for social strain.

The process through which *inminbanjang* were chosen reveals several interesting things about the system. Situated between the grassroots population and the state, the *inminban* constitutes an interesting example of how the state has historically aspired to some form of active consent from the population in local governance. Sin Myöng-ok became *inminbanjang* through the *inminban* residents voting to accept her. She was suggested after she did well as an activist in the Women's League, the mass organization for women, and someone from the local neighborhood office, *tongsamuso*, came to speak to her. At the time, only married women staying home as housewives could be *inminbanjang*. She first did not want to do it because she did not want to be a “messenger” and run errands for the authorities. But refusal was not a genuine option and during our interview, Sin appeared surprised at my question about whether she had a choice.⁴⁷⁴ Kim Su-yön also said that there was an election process but that candidates are chosen first by the authorities after thorough background vetting.⁴⁷⁵ Kang Hyün-soo claimed that she was chosen through a public process, but that she was suggested by the *inminban* residents themselves to the authorities, the other way around.⁴⁷⁶ Pak Jang-ri claimed that *inminban* elections were genuine, and had little involvement from the

⁴⁷⁴ Sin Myöng-ok, interview transcript, Seoul, Republic of Korea, June 11, 2019, 21.

⁴⁷⁵ Kim Su-yön, interview transcript, undisclosed location, South Korea, July 2nd, 2019, 10.

⁴⁷⁶ Kang Hyün-soo, interview transcript, Seoul, South Korea, June 5th, 2019, 9.

state.⁴⁷⁷ Kim Sŏn-ok whose mother was an inminbanjang claimed, on the contrary, that no election process whatsoever was involved.⁴⁷⁸

Judging from these interviews, it seems that there was considerable variation in the process for choosing inminbanjang, but that the state at least considered the preferences of the public and sometimes involved them directly. The authorities were always concerned with, or at the very least took into account, the moods and beliefs of the grassroots citizens. Despite all this, surveillance of the public was always a crucial task. The focus of the surveillance mission changed considerably over time, while the structures and basic methods did not. Economic crime and market trade became a more central focus as the crisis deepened.

The inminbanjang, like virtually all North Koreans with a state-designated, institutional role, functions much like other semi-official informants would have in other surveillance states. Everyone would know that the inminbanjang was in regular contact with the security organs. Indeed, they would often see her doing evening house searches together with security agents, looking for people sleeping over without permission. Each inminbanjang would meet on a regular basis with the designated MPS-officer assigned to their inminban; some would have an MSS-officer assigned as well. The inminbanjang would both conduct general surveillance and targeted surveillance of specific people deemed suspicious by the authorities. This is also how the surveillance task worked for general informants, not just the inminbanjang.

⁴⁷⁷ Pak Jang-ri interview transcript, Seoul, Republic of Korea, February 14, 2019, 25.

⁴⁷⁸ Kim Sŏn-ok, interview transcript, Seoul, South Korea, July 19, 2017, 22.

At the same time, the *inminbanjang* was always a resident of the neighborhood, often with long-standing friendship ties in the community. Though it is impossible to verify these claims, several former *inminbanjang* said they would often intentionally withhold information from the authorities or warn people to help them avoid crackdowns and punishment. If an *inminban* resident truly said something politically problematic, or committed another form of serious crime, several former *inminbanjang* said that obviously, they would have to report them to the authorities.

Consider again the story of Kang Hyŏn-soo. As *inminbanjang*, she had a fixed schedule for her meetings with her MPS-handler, and she would also receive orders for specific surveillance targets. Kang's relationship with her MSS and MPS handlers was one of the most interesting topics of her interview. Perhaps because she lived in an area near the border to China, she had handlers from both organizations. The first time she met her MSS-handler, they looked through the *Songbun* ledgers of the local residents together to give her an idea of who the more problematic people were. Although she described him as a harsh and difficult person, always pushing for more reports of suspicious people, they would still eat dinner together sometimes when he came for the weekly visits to the *inminban*. After dinner, they did house searches together for unauthorized visitors and travel permit violators.⁴⁷⁹

Kim Su-yŏn described a similar surveillance routine. She became an *inminbanjang* in the early 1980s, at the same time as she served as the local Women's League chairwoman. Her duties included inspecting portraits of Kim Il-sung and Kim

⁴⁷⁹ Kang Hyŏn-soo, interview transcript, Seoul, South Korea, June 5th, 2019, 12.

Jong-il that hang in all North Korean homes, to make sure that they were properly polished.⁴⁸⁰ She would sometimes let households know about inspections in advance. She was reluctant to talk about specific incidents in her neighborhood, but said that one time in the 1980s, someone used an old newspaper with a picture of Kim Il-sung on it to store coal. In this case, the person's wife reported him for it to the authorities after they had a fight. Because she was in a border region, she also had a separate MSS-handler in addition to the ordinary MPS-agent, the former changed out less often than the latter. In the 1980s, prior to the famine, one of the main focuses of her own surveillance work was to make sure that no one engaged in illegal, private trade. Back then, she attested, this was not a major issue, and most of what she heard about was some smuggling to China of sensitive items like phone books and army publications.⁴⁸¹ Her MSS-handler, on the other hand, was most interested in signs of political disobedience such as people not showing up for mandatory political activities.

Sin Myōng-ok became an *inminbanjang* in the early 1990s, after she got married and quit her regular job. She described the *inminbanjang*'s surveillance role as a proxy for the security authorities. Neither the MPS nor the MSS could reasonably pay each suspicious person a house visit – their personnel resources are limited – so they would order the *inminbanjang* to keep watch instead.⁴⁸² These institutions do not want to be seen too much among residents, she explained.⁴⁸³ She also noted that to do her work

⁴⁸⁰ Kim Su-yōn, interview transcript, undisclosed location, South Korea, July 2nd, 2019, 6–7.

⁴⁸¹ *Ibid*, 13–14.

⁴⁸² In general, *inminbanjang* have tended to be women who do not have to report for work, enabling them to spend more time at home and around the neighborhood. Sin Myōng-ok, interview transcript, Seoul, Republic of Korea, June 11, 2019, 13–14.

⁴⁸³ *Ibid*, 28.

successfully, an *inminbanjang* had to be lenient toward residents when needed, perhaps excusing people from labor mobilization in exceptional circumstances. Later, when she began to trade on the market, her contacts as *inminbanjang* helped her access necessary permits. Like other *inminbanjang*, she claimed to often have closed her eyes to illegal and inappropriate activity.⁴⁸⁴

Song Yŏn-ok was born in northeastern North Korea in 1959. She was a farmer just like her parents. She lived on a collective farm for most of her life. Some research on the *inminban* claims that the institution does not exist in the countryside, Song confirmed it does.⁴⁸⁵ She was twenty when she became *inminbanjang* in 1979 after she graduated high school, because she excelled in political activities.⁴⁸⁶ Song, too, claimed that she would help *inminban* residents with day-to-day problems. When people caused trouble by, for example, not showing up for work mobilization and mandatory political activities, she would request to have them assigned to other duties. Shirking from political activity was not unheard of, and comparatively easy to do in the countryside as opposed to the much stricter political environment in Pyŏngyang.

Although she was happy to get suggested as *inminbanjang*, she felt significant pressure from her handlers at the *bowibu* (Ministry of State Security) and *anjonbu* (Ministry of People's Security), and she often received orders to watch specific people. Rumors, are a central source of information in North Korea – unsurprisingly so, because of the highly suppressive climate of information – and the *inminbanjang* had to stay well-

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid, 33–34.

⁴⁸⁵ Song Yŏn-ok, interview transcript, Seoul, Republic of Korea, July 12, 2019, 9.

⁴⁸⁶ Ibid, 41.

informed.⁴⁸⁷ Her MSS and MPS-officers both called upon her her regularly, and the MSS-officer would ask her for information about specific families. She claimed that her relationship with the MPS-officer was fairly frictionless, but seemed uncomfortable talking about it, and her description may have been intentionally obfuscated.⁴⁸⁸

Ri Young-hee, whose family was deported from Pyŏngyang to the north, became *inminbanjang* in 2006. She took on the role at a socially turbulent time, but when I asked about the *inminbanjang*'s core tasks, she first mentioned assisting the government's population census data collection.⁴⁸⁹ She did not get along well with her MPS- and MSS-handlers, who she described as very unpleasant. She claimed that the theoretically more powerful MSS-officer was relatively powerless because the hunt for true political criminals was so insignificant since the very thought that someone would dare criticize the government was too remote.⁴⁹⁰ The true power of surveillance, in other words, came from the fear and caution imbued in the citizens rather than actual surveillance. MSS-officers, moreover, would never serve in their hometowns or villages, to avoid loyalty conflicts. At the same time, she said she was called to meetings with the authorities around twice a week to report on her *inminban*. Her main surveillance task was to report outside people coming through the neighborhood.⁴⁹¹

⁴⁸⁷ Song Yŏn-ok, interview transcript, Seoul, Republic of Korea, July 12, 2019, 46–47.

⁴⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 49–50.

⁴⁸⁹ North Korea released a new population census in 2008 – this may be why in her time as *inminbanjang*, the task would have been central. Ri Young-hee interview transcript, Seoul, Republic of Korea, July 30, 2019, 20.

⁴⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁴⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 22.

Cho Myŏng-hŭi described her work as *inminbanjang* differently, most likely because she was a generation older than most other interviewees. She was born in 1936 and served as *inmnbanjang* from 1977 to 2007.⁴⁹² She primarily described her role as being about labor mobilization and production quotas, and relatively little about surveillance tasks. Most likely, this mirrored the fact that the *inminbanjang*'s surveillance duties became more central over time. Based on the interviews for this dissertation, however, mobilization efforts for construction and assisting farmers with the harvest was always a more central task for the *inminbanjang* than usually acknowledged. labor mobilization outside of one's work routine is simply a routine fact of life. Every citizen, even school children, are routinely mobilized for additional labor in the evenings and on weekends. Pak Jang-ri recalled being mobilized for the planting season, or "farming mobilization period."⁴⁹³ For school children, farming mobilization would entirely replace school entirely for some periods.⁴⁹⁴ Song Yŏn-ok, formerly a farmer northern North Korea, recalled that agricultural mobilization was very ordinary, common, and even sometimes pleasant during her childhood, and she said it was not necessarily always forced for school children when she was a child in the late-1970s. They would be playing during the break, and the teacher would ask her and her friends to help with farming work.⁴⁹⁵

Local authorities would also regularly establish quotas for items to collect, such as herbs to be exported for foreign currency. Several *inminbanjang* described this as one

⁴⁹² Cho Myŏng-hŭi, interview transcript, Seoul, Republic of Korea, September 2018, 3.

⁴⁹³ Pak Jang-ri interview transcript, Seoul, Republic of Korea, February 14, 2019, 26.

⁴⁹⁴ Yi Seul-gi and Han Mi-sun interview transcript, Seoul, Republic of Korea, February 24, 2019, 21.

⁴⁹⁵ Song Yŏn-ok, interview transcript, Seoul, Republic of Korea, July 12, 2019, 19.

of the most central tasks, on par with surveillance, especially prior to the 1990s. Cho Myŏng-hŭi said “struggle targets”, manufacturing orders, and quotas for industrial production were very frequent and caused the main difficulties she experienced as *inminbanjang*. Local authorities would hold a meeting for all *inminbanjang* where they would hand out these orders, to be passed on to the *inminban* residents through the *inminbanjang*. There were special production targets around the time of Kim Il-sung’s birthday on April 15th (“Day of the Sun”), North Korea’s biggest public holiday. The proceeds from herbs sold abroad funded the snacks and special gifts from the state in honor of the holiday.⁴⁹⁶ Shirking from such labor, said Song Yŏn-ok, could be considered politically suspect. Prior to the 1990s, this was, according to Song, one of the more common political transgressions, much more so than illegal crossings to China, which Song never heard of before to the famine, and she would have to inform the authorities if an *inminban* resident failed to show up for mobilization.⁴⁹⁷

The Surveillance Nexus

The MPS and MSS, always hovered over the civilian surveillance institutions as the ultimate enforcers of political and social order. Only a small number of those interviewed for this dissertation actually worked for the MPS, and none worked for the MSS, though several interviewees had friendships and family ties with MSS-agents. Nonetheless, the interviews with former MPS-employees, as well as testimonies of

⁴⁹⁶ Cho Myŏng-hŭi, interview transcript, Seoul, Republic of Korea, September 2018, 10.

⁴⁹⁷ Song Yŏn-ok, interview transcript, Seoul, Republic of Korea, July 12, 2019, 42.

interviewee's contacts with such agencies, reveal several fascinating facets of formal surveillance and the ways in which it changed over time. Border security, for example, became increasingly important as illegal economic activity became more common, but the government was concerned about such problems earlier than the 1990s. Ri Jae-han, from Sinŭiju, worked in a small MPS-office near his hometown. He came from a problematic family background since he had relatives abroad. Still, he was, as he put it, very "red" and truly believed in the North Korean system.⁴⁹⁸ He originally enrolled in a teacher's college in the city just to get out of the countryside but eventually dropped out for family reasons in 1975 and went to work for the personnel department at the local MPS office as a youth league secretary. Ri was as a workplace representative of sorts for the younger (under 30) employees of the office. He described that over time, the system grew increasingly harsh and tight. In the 1970s, an era often associated with social stability and calm, the state formed a cross-institutional group to counter anti-socialist crimes and tendencies, known as group 109, which still exists today.⁴⁹⁹

This encompasses a broad and vague spectrum of misdemeanors, likely intentionally so. In practice, much of the group's work at the time focused on countering corrupt behavior throughout the government apparatus and economy. Certain institutions would "receive anti-socialist scrutiny", which in practice meant a rigorous auditing process. The inspection unit would monitor financial statements in search of irregularities. Ri himself got caught in such scrutiny one time, after he used a contract-

⁴⁹⁸ Ri Jae-han interview transcript, undisclosed location, South Korea, July 15, 2019, 12.

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid, 2.

system to pay employees, considered illegal because of its capitalist traits.⁵⁰⁰ Since he knew the investigating MPS-officer, he could bribe his way out of trouble, avoiding potentially severe criminal charges.⁵⁰¹ This serves as an example of what would constitute a crime in the pre-famine era, before smuggling and private economic activity became more pervasive. Among other crimes, Ri mentioned people getting arrested for hiding their reactionary family background.⁵⁰²

Ri recalled that a special security unit was formed in the 1980s to surveil the border with China. As several interviewees attested, North Korea's economy began its decline earlier than the 1990s. At one time, this unit consisted of both MPS-officers and soldiers. In the early 1990s, however, because smuggling was so rampant, the MSS instead took over responsibility.⁵⁰³ As a rule security agents would not work in their home regions, to avoid dual loyalties.⁵⁰⁴ As at any other workplace, the employees at Ri's MPS-station engaged in leisure activities to raise morale. Ri explained that soccer games, too, were ideological team building exercises and that they often used sports to raise morale and a sense of unity. Other such activities included study circles, and theater performances about political topics.⁵⁰⁵

These institutions leaked a significant amount of information through employee's friendship and family ties. Ri Jae-min, for example, heard many rumors about purges in

⁵⁰⁰ Several details of Ri's story are unclear in the interview transcripts. For example, it is not entirely clear if this was at a factory run by the local MPS, or if he was handling salaries in another capacity.

⁵⁰¹ Ri Jae-han interview transcript, undisclosed location, South Korea, July 29, 2019, 9.

⁵⁰² Ibid, 13–14.

⁵⁰³ Ibid, 2.

⁵⁰⁴ Ibid, 2019, 8.

⁵⁰⁵ Ibid, 20–21.

the political top and the like through internal information circulated among military officers. According to Ri, there always was an informed stratum in the country of well-connected people.⁵⁰⁶

Kim Ryong-rin was an MPS-agent doing the sort of financial auditing that Ri Jaehan got caught up in, in the southern town of Haeju. Today, he is a prominent scholar of North Korean society based in South Korea. Kim, too, described the main task of the police and organs as protecting the Party and the Leader.⁵⁰⁷ A significant part of the North Korean surveillance system is dedicated to scrutinizing the books of enterprises and state agencies for corruption, and it was such a bureau that Kim worked for, one responsible for surveillance of state property. Kim primarily monitored foreign currency earning operations at a specific state enterprise. He routinely ordered informants within the enterprise to look for specific irregularities. The number of informants that one officer would have depended on the scale of the institution they were in charge of, the largest being around 30 people. Kim claimed there was no fixed routine for meetings between informants and their handlers but that such contacts happened whenever needed. In addition to drawing upon human sources, Kim would examine the accounting books for irregularities, finishing up each audit with a 200-300-page report to his superiors.

Recruiting informants, Kim said, was not difficult since refusal was never really an option. Anyone refusing would be accused of being unpatriotic, and besides that, Kim claimed, until the 1990s, people would themselves *want* to contribute to defending the

⁵⁰⁶ Ibid, 14.

⁵⁰⁷ Kim Ryong-rin interview transcript, Seoul, South Korea, January 22, 2019.

system, out of patriotism. Kim also claimed, contrary to several other interviewees, that there were no rewards for reporting people to the government. Before the famine, people reported others because they genuinely believed that they had transgressed, or sometimes for jealousy and other personal reasons.

In some interviews, the matter-of-fact manner in which the interviewees spoke about their work as government informants was striking. I sometimes carefully raised questions about morality and justness, which in retrospect seems naïve. To those living within the system, there is no choice or moral contemplation. Kim Sŏn-ok spoke about her duties as an informant in the most open manner out of any of the interviewees, but few appeared to think that a background as a government informant was necessarily shameful or worth hiding. Most adult North Koreans through their lives likely come into positions where they have to inform on others. Surveillance is such a natural part of the system that most people likely don't reflect over it at all; it just "is". Kim Sŏn-ok described her informant duties in greater detail than most others. She came from an excellent Songbun background and was asked by the local MPS-agent in her Hyesan neighborhood in the mid-1980s, right after she finished high school, to start informing on her neighbors. Her MPS-handler would order her to watch over specific households. One time, the reason was that a family had roots in South Korea, making them suspect by default. But Kim believed her family also had such roots but that her father had concealed his true birthplace. This made her nervous that her family would come under similar

scrutiny.⁵⁰⁸ The MPS-agent who recruited her as an informant was a family acquaintance, who warned her not to divulge anything about it to her parents or anyone else.

She described herself as having been a “neighborhood spy” and would routinely be ordered to watch over specific houses, often to see if their habits and consumption changed in any way that would suggest they were receiving income from illicit sources – perhaps from foreign governments. She also received actual forms to fill out about the ideological adherence of surveillance targets. Already by the time she became an informant in the mid-1980s, however, the North Korean economy was in steep decline. Crimes usually associated with the social disorder of the 1990s became common. Copper theft from train track wires and state-owned factories was one of the more common crimes she looked out for. The former is not a political crime per se, but when it concerned the train line used for the leadership family, the authorities took it as potential political sabotage.⁵⁰⁹ Any crime against the state was a crime against the leadership and therefore high treason. As several other interviewees, Kim said she was often be lenient in her reports, and at least one time, saved a friend from getting arrested.⁵¹⁰ Kim, however, did not deny that her reports caused harm. After all, the authorities would have been unlikely to keep her on for as long as they did unless her reports were of value.

The authorities looked for people of a specific profile. Ch’ae Kyōng-wōn’s grandfather was a full-time informant position for the feared MSS, under the cover being

⁵⁰⁸ Kim Sōn-ok, interview transcript, Seoul, South Korea, July 19, 2017, 6.

⁵⁰⁹ Ibid, 9.

⁵¹⁰ Ibid, 10.

of tree nursery supervisor.⁵¹¹ He had previously been deported from Pyŏngyang for a financial crime involving state funds and remained trusted by the government. No one in his family knew that he was a trusted informant. They only found out after he passed away. At the funeral wake in the family home, agents from the MSS suddenly showed up to pay their respects and handed over the medals that had been awarded to him. Her uncles had previously been unable to get promotions or good work positions because of their family relationship with a deportee. With the grandfather dead, the original sinner was gone and the brothers could advance to Party cadres. One brother got promoted to work team leader, another to a managing position at a farm.⁵¹²

Using a deportee as an informant made sense, Ch'ae explained. Her grandfather had a good resume from his work in Pyŏngyang before getting deported. Moreover, using politically reliable people with clean records would have been too obvious. Ch'ae's grandfather was tasked with watching especially over the many other deportees in the area and survey their political reliability. He therefore had to blend in, and the job could not be done by someone who would stand out too much from their high status. Ch'ae said many informants were former transgressors themselves, whom the authorities told that they could restore some of the damage to themselves and their families through this service for their country.⁵¹³

Several interviewees said that informants would often be people whom the government had some form of catch on. Pak Jang-ri, whose family lived through the

⁵¹¹ Ch'ae Kyŏng-wŏn and Kim Yŏng-suk, interview transcript, undisclosed location, South Korea, July 3rd, 2019, 9.

⁵¹² Ibid, 10–11.

⁵¹³ Ibid, 10–12.

famine by making alcohol and selling it on the market, was married to a man with alcoholism, whom the government recruited as an informant. He was recruited because, Pak explained, he would not be suspected because of his alcohol problem. Several interviewees attested that so-called political “speaking mistakes” often happened when people were drunk. Pak’s husband drank with neighbors and was therefore able to befriend and monitor people with problematic ideological tendencies. Pak said her husband received specific orders every week for people to monitor with extra caution.⁵¹⁴

The Private Sphere

Though little studied, a private sphere always existed in North Korea. Even before the 1990s, many people had a sphere where they would sometimes vent and share critical thoughts about society but with clear limits. Consumption was also never fully controlled by the state. Especially in the countryside, people always grew a portion of their own food, and had to supplant whatever the state provided. This behavior was not born with the economic collapse of the 1990s. Though the economic collapse certainly exacerbated crime and corruption, they predated the crisis itself. North Korean society was never fully conformist.

To understand this trajectory, a brief background of North Korea’s economic history is necessary. The vast growth of state control over society described earlier in this dissertation was accompanied by a strong increase in economic control. In 1966, the state

⁵¹⁴ Pak Jang-ri interview transcript, Seoul, Republic of Korea, February 24, 2019, 15–16.

switched from taxing collective farm production to fully centralize food distribution. Partially due to decentralization measures undertaken later by Kim Jong-il, the space for markets grew through the 1970s, and they became an increasingly important source of food and other necessities through the late 1980s and 1990s.⁵¹⁵ Even before marketization took off in the 1990s with the famine, there was some space, albeit very limited, for citizens to engage in economic production and consumption outside state frameworks. Indeed, as the state grip on food production tightened considerably through the mid-1960s, the state also created the private plot system (known as *teobat*) to let the rural population supplement state rations.⁵¹⁶ The dependence by the citizens on the state was certainly much stronger prior to the famine than after, but the historical break during marketization was never as total as often portrayed in the current literature. Kang Hyŏn-soo, the former *inminbanjang* from Musan, said that in her part of the country, people always had to supplant state rations with private farming since provisions from the PDS were never enough. Although some aspects of private farming were illegal, people did it in secret also before the 1990s.⁵¹⁷

North Koreans also always bartered with neighbors, friends and acquaintances, especially in the countryside. Kim Su-yŏn told the author that it was commonplace in the 1970s and 80s, and that you simply had to add to what you got from the state. People borrowed from friends and neighbors when there was not enough food.⁵¹⁸ Sin Myŏng-ok,

⁵¹⁵ Peter Ward and Christopher Green, "From Periphery to Centre," in *Decoding the Sino-North Korean Borderlands*, ed. Christopher Green, Adam Cathcart, and Steven Denney (Amsterdam University Press, 2021), 317.

⁵¹⁶ Ward and Green, "From Periphery to Centre...", 317.

⁵¹⁷ Kang Hyŏn-soo, interview transcript, Seoul, South Korea, June 5th, 2019, 5.

⁵¹⁸ Kim Su-yŏn, interview transcript, undisclosed location, South Korea, July 2nd, 2019, 11.

who grew up in a farming village near Hyesan, said that life was always hard, even in the comparatively successful 1960s and 70s. Her family received distribution from the PDS once a year, never in the form of the more desired staple good, white rice, and never enough.⁵¹⁹ Supplementing state distribution by growing food along train tracks was always common, said Pak Jang-ri.⁵²⁰ Yi Seul-gi and Han Mi-su said that even during times of relative abundance, state rations were never enough, and people always lent and borrowed food from one another.⁵²¹ This does not prove the existence of anything akin to a civil society, but these testimonies highlight that North Koreans always had to provide for themselves to a significant degree.

Choi Dong-woo, the former military officer, was one of the most outspoken of the interviewees. He had friends from privileged backgrounds and was very politically loyal while in North Korea.⁵²² He also came from an excellent Songbun background and had in fact once wanted to marry a woman of lower socio-political stature, which his family would not allow. Choi is very articulate well-educated in topics like Korean history, religion and politics.⁵²³ He was fascinated with the author's birth country of Sweden, recalling that he had seen Swedish advisors and managers who worked in the mines in his hometown of Musan in the 1970s.⁵²⁴ Choi did not explicitly see himself as a

⁵¹⁹ Sin Myōng-ok, interview transcript, Seoul, Republic of Korea, June 11, 2019, 3.

⁵²⁰ Pak Jang-ri interview transcript, Seoul, Republic of Korea, February 14, 2019.

⁵²¹ Yi Seul-gi and Han Mi-sun interview transcript, Seoul, Republic of Korea, February 24, 2019, 1.

⁵²² This, of course, begs the question of why he defected. The present author usually did not bring up questions such as defection processes or motives, very sensitive topics, in order to not make interviewees uncomfortable, and risk distracting from the main research topics.

⁵²³ He spoke, for example, at great length and with clear knowledge on the Ch'ōndogyo religion and movement, a topic not widely known among the general public in either Koreas. Choi Dong-woo, interview transcript, Seoul, Republic of Korea, April 5, 2019, 15.

⁵²⁴ For more on this, see Lovisa Lamm, *Ambassaden i paradiset Sveriges unika relation till Nordkorea* (Stockholm: Norstedts, 2012).

critic of the North Korean state or ideology. The laws and the social model are all good in theory, but have perhaps failed to work in practice, he seemed to believe.⁵²⁵ He lamented that social values in North Korea have changed under the current generation and complained that people nowadays are fixated on money and material wealth.⁵²⁶

Choi always had certain friends he would share private thoughts with. He could even speak freely and critically about the Great Leader with some, especially with one specific long-time friend. Choi did not give concrete examples of what exactly they would discuss, but said that they would talk in a way that would certainly be very dangerous should anyone be listening in. Choi also lived in Pyŏngyang for 18 years and said that despite the particularly harsh control in the city, people would frequently gossip about sensitive matters. Like many other interviewees, he had multiple friends in high places such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and MSS, giving him significant access to information through the rumor mill.

He knew that critical conversation about the regime was dangerous and knew several people who got arrested after such conversations. One friend in the 1970s made an offhand remark to Choi, saying that they would do well to go live in another country that he had heard good things about [specifics omitted for privacy reasons]. This friend was arrested for their comments. Someone had likely overheard them and reported him to the authorities.⁵²⁷ Choi also had a friend privileged enough to study abroad in Poland before the fall of communism there. This friend once described the roads of Warsaw to

⁵²⁵ Choi Dong-woo, interview transcript, Seoul, Republic of Korea, April 5, 2019, 11.

⁵²⁶ Ibid, 21.

⁵²⁷ Ibid, 10.

Choi and others, saying that they had seven lanes, many more than in Pyŏngyang. He thought the conversation topic fairly harmless. This friend, too, was arrested later and labeled a reactionary for talking positively about life abroad. Choi believes one of their close friends reported the former exchange student. MSS agents questioned Choi as well because he was present at the conversation but did not report the friend. He escaped trouble thanks to his family background. In theory, the MSS should have labelled a political criminal as well. But this would have entailed punishing his family too, which they were not prepared to do against someone with such privilege.⁵²⁸ Although Choi always shared certain critical thoughts with friends, they all were acutely aware of the risks. They got period reminders through arrests of people in their vicinity. They would always know that not only could the offender himself get arrested – anyone present without having reported that person to the authorities could come under suspicion too.

Money was always important in society, long before the planned economy broke down. Although Choi certainly recognized that money had become much more important in recent years, he also spoke at length about how people, especially in Pyŏngyang, always bribed their way to consumer goods and social opportunity. For example, Choi thought it a matter of course – since before the famine – that one would give cash under the table for a domestic travel permit. He has family all around the country and would go visit them regularly while he lived in North Korea.⁵²⁹ People frequently bribed their way to a more favorable songbun status, and this was usually possible (for a very hefty fee) unless the person's background was too problematic. He said that people would regularly

⁵²⁸ Ibid, 17.

⁵²⁹ Ibid, 18.

pay bribes for high scores on exams. Alcohol, cigarettes and foreign currency (dollars and yen) were in particularly high demand. Choi said that such things were particularly common in Pyŏngyang, a world he hardly knew of until he moved there in 1983.

People outside of Pyŏngyang, however, seem to have broken the rules to greater extents. Kim Sŏn-ok, the former informant, explained that because the northeastern provinces are on the margins, it was more common and less dangerous to talk about politically inappropriate topics there. The fall would be lower for someone already living in an inhospitable part of the country; they could not be deported to where they already lived. Kim's father, who she suspected was originally from the south, was much more outspoken and candid than most, she said.⁵³⁰ He would talk about things like South Korean society, Japanese-style bento lunch boxes, groups of gangsters in Seoul's Myŏngdong neighborhood before 1948, and other topics. Kim said the whole neighborhood would gather in their house to listen to his stories, as a substitute for television. Apparently, because her father spoke in such a clear southern Korean dialect, Kim was asked by South Korean authorities when she arrived as a refugee if she had already lived in South Korea.⁵³¹ Once, her father told her on a major North Korean holiday that in other countries, the main festive day of the year was called Christmas. Her father worked at the local public distribution center (PDS) where citizens were given food rations, giving the family substantial benefits such as additional white flour.⁵³² Indeed, in the provinces, demands were smaller because the state did not expect as much

⁵³⁰ That her descriptions of her father are highly subjectively and likely romanticized should be presumed as a matter of course.

⁵³¹ Kim Sŏn-ok, interview transcript, Seoul, South Korea, July 19, 2017, 2.

⁵³² Kim Sŏn-ok, interview transcript, Seoul, South Korea, July 30, 2017, 2.

from people in the margins as from the residents in the capital who were supposed to be political loyalists. Had her father spoken as critically about the state in Pyöngyang, the danger would have been much greater.⁵³³

Ri Jae-min, the author and poet, also said there existed a private sphere for honest conversations and trust. He recalled, for example, that people who had fought in the Korean War would talk about their anger over the government's lies; they knew the North had invaded the South and not the other way around, as North Korea claims. Bonds were particularly strong among certain groups, like authors, Ri said, who would generally not report one another. Ri had to be particularly careful because of his bad Songbun, since any crime or mistake would be punished more harshly. It all depended on who was around, if they were people you could trust, and eventually you learned. Ri seemed to think reporting someone out of the question. Within the intelligentsia, no one would, Ri said, because they had to stick together. Authors and other propaganda professionals knew their work entailed lying, Ri said, and would use alcohol as an outlet for frustration. Those who had any exposure to foreign literature or had been abroad could not believe the lies helped tell. But as Ri put it, everyone has to survive, and openly criticizing the system or ideology was not worth the risk.⁵³⁴ Ri also said, like Kim, that people in Pyöngyang had to behave better, because they had more to lose if they were deported.⁵³⁵

The boundaries were clear. No outright critical talk of the regime or the Kim family would ever be tolerated, no matter your background. In an almost religious sense,

⁵³³ Ibid, 18.

⁵³⁴ Ri Jae-min interview transcript, undisclosed location, South Korea, August 5, 2019, 8.

⁵³⁵ Ibid, 12.

several interviewees described how speaking badly about the leadership family felt genuinely wrong and desecrating after their years of life in North Korea and almost physically uncomfortable. Even when she was alone when she lived in North Korea, said Kim Sŏn-ok, she would not speak ill of Kim Il-sung.⁵³⁶ Ch'ae Kyŏng-wŏn said that political topics, through her life in North Korea, were completely off-limits both before and after the famine.⁵³⁷ Song Yŏn-ok, the former farmer said, as if self-evident, that no one would speak ill of the state or leadership. "Even when you're at home with the family, you would shut someone up if they tried to speak that way..."⁵³⁸ Parents teach this to their children as they grow up, and Song explained the process of becoming aware of this as part of becoming an adult. "Even when you're in South Korea, and someone speaks ill of Kim Jong-un, you'll [instinctively] tell them, 'are you crazy?'"⁵³⁹

For the regime, certain types of semi-secret gossip fill a deterrent function since it is often how rumors spread of arrests for political crimes. Every interviewee knew someone who had gotten deported to the countryside or sent to a labor camp, or worse. People's exact whereabouts often remained unknown, but the main fact was that they got sent away.

What follows are only a few brief examples out of many. Kim Sŏn-ok recalled seeing, when she was a child, how someone came to their village to take a family away to

⁵³⁶ Kim Sŏn-ok, interview transcript, Seoul, South Korea, July 19, 2017, 18.

⁵³⁷ Ch'ae Kyŏng-wŏn and Kim Yŏng-suk, interview transcript, undisclosed location, South Korea, July 3rd, 2019, 37.

⁵³⁸ Song Yŏn-ok, interview transcript, Seoul, Republic of Korea, July 12, 2019, 32.

⁵³⁹ Ibid, 33.

a labor camp.⁵⁴⁰ She knew of at least three households in her neighborhood who got deported. One was her close friend, who was given time to pack up a few items while the MSS waited for the family. She was a hardworking student and began packing up her school supplies. But one of the agents stopped her and said: “you won’t be needing any school materials where you’re going.”⁵⁴¹ Another childhood was deported to Hyesan from Pyöngyang. One time when they watched TV together and Pyöngyang came on the screen, her friend during preparations for the 13th World Festival of Youth and Students held in Pyöngyang in 1989, several people got deported to her town. She also knew that people often got arrested speaking ill of the government while drunk. Two other cases she knew of were of people talking about material conditions abroad, one about Russia, the other about South Korea. Both were arrested as spies. Kim made no distinction between the 1990s and prior eras, indicating that such political speech was always suppressed with equal force. Whether or not all cases she heard of were true does not matter. What is important is that she, and others, were aware that such things happened.⁵⁴²

Ri Jae-min also remembered several deportations and arrests from his earliest childhood and onward. He recounted one memory from the 1960s, when he would have been between seven and thirteen years old.⁵⁴³ One day, Ri recalled, the neighboring house was suddenly empty. He asked his mother what happened, and she told him in a sharp tone to not go near it. He understood that something very bad must have happened to his

⁵⁴⁰ Interview, Kim Sön-ok, interview transcript, Seoul, South Korea, July 19, 2017, 5.

⁵⁴¹ Ibid, 16.

⁵⁴² Ibid, 16–21.

⁵⁴³ It is unclear when exactly these restrictions were put in place. Ri said they were instituted in 1968. Ri Jae-min interview transcript, undisclosed location, South Korea, July 16, 2019, 26–27.

friend's family and later found out that the father was the son of a suspected former landlord whose background was discovered in new songbun investigations. The daughter did not get arrested because she was already married into another family. The house, Ri recalled, stood empty for about five years as a monument to what would happen to traitors.

Ri also met a political prison camp survivor. He was a neighborhood resident in his 60s, who always walked with a strangely crooked back.⁵⁴⁴ He was a generally friendly person but had no family, and Ri one day asked him about his crooked back. That is when Ri first learned about what a “detention facility for political prisoners” really was. He was shocked to learn that such places existed in his home country.⁵⁴⁵ Ri he let it be understood that what he learned was too gruesome to speak of. This experience clearly demonstrates that in the North Korean system, the role of fear itself is more important than actual risks. The system of surveillance and social control does not have to truly watch over everyone and function perfectly to work. As Skidmore observed for Burma in the 1990s, the fear that most subjects feel in a totalitarian dictatorship tends to be disproportionately higher than the actual likelihood of being subjected to political violence.⁵⁴⁶

⁵⁴⁴ Ri Jae-min interview transcript, undisclosed location, South Korea, July 16, 2019, 28.

⁵⁴⁵ Ibid, 29.

⁵⁴⁶ Monique Skidmore, “Darker than Midnight: Fear, Vulnerability, and Terror Making in Urban Burma (Myanmar),” *American Ethnologist* 30, no. 1 (2003): 5–21.

Synopsis

The North Korean system for everyday surveillance never functioned perfectly. Grassroots citizens always leveraged connections to their benefit, and people had a limited private sphere to turn to for honest conversation. However, the state still successfully set up and strictly controlled the limits of the permissible.

It would be wrong, however, to regard resistance and social disobedience on a binary and completely opposed to obedience and consent. As Dennis Deletant has shown, Romanians under Ceausescu were not necessarily passive only because civil resistance was comparatively more vigorous in other European communist states.⁵⁴⁷ Most interviewees expressed their strong distaste with the presence of the surveillance apparatus in people's everyday lives, and several claimed that they had used their limited opportunities for action to oppose at least some facets of the system's functioning in practice. Had they felt that speaking out critically was a meaningful and realistic option, they may very well, as Scott suggests, have done so with more force.

⁵⁴⁷ Dennis Deletant, *Ceausescu and the Securitate: Coercion and Dissent in Romania, 1965-1989* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1995).

Chapter 5: Culture Shock: Ethnic Korean Immigration from Japan and Social Control in North Korea

The historical development of social control in North Korea is typically explained through internal events such as leadership transitions, political purges, and changes in North Korea's relationships with China and the Soviet Union.⁵⁴⁸ Shocks from outside, however, have also influenced and shaped North Korean society, long before foreign media and culture started seeping into the country in the 1990s. Between the late-1950s and 1970s, around 90,000 ethnic Koreans from Japan immigrated to North Korea.⁵⁴⁹ During these decades of intense industrialization, the country needed to increase its labor force. Some came out of ideological desire to build socialism. Others sought to escape discrimination and poverty in Japan.⁵⁵⁰ The largest organization for ethnic Koreans in Japan at the time, *Chongryon*, has close ties to the North Korean regime. Together, they organized and pushed for the immigration effort.⁵⁵¹

This chapter argues that the immigrants themselves shaped North Korean society more than commonly acknowledged.⁵⁵² Most research focuses on their fate through their journey from Japan to North Korea. Their vast impact on North Korean society has received less attention. They brought a glimpse of conditions in the outside world, and a

⁵⁴⁸ For a few example of excellent accounts on this, see Tertitskiy, "1967: Transition to Absolute Autocracy in North Korea"; An Hui-ch'ang, *Pukhanüi T'ongch'i Ch'eje*, 14; Lee U-yöng, *Chönhwan'gi üi Pukhan Sahoe T'ongje Ch'eje*, 38.

⁵⁴⁹ For an excellent overview of this history, see Morris-Suzuki, *Exodus to North Korea*.

⁵⁵⁰ For more on these conditions, see Ibid, ch. 6; Sonia Ryang, "Introduction: Between the Nations: Diaspora Koreans in Japan," in *Diaspora Without a Homeland: Being Korean in Japan*, ed. Sonia Ryang and John Lie (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009).

⁵⁵¹ For more on the campaign for mass migration, see Morris-Suzuki, *Exodus to North Korea*, ch. 13.

⁵⁵² Although the term "returnees" is sometimes used to describe the group, some had not even set foot on the Korean peninsula, and most hailed from the southern parts of Korea. Although many saw themselves as returning to the Korean ideological homeland, I use the term "immigrants" which, in an academic context, more accurately and neutrally describes their status.

consumerist culture alien to the norms and values of North Korean society. As one interviewee put it, from their arrival, “money started to matter.”⁵⁵³ With consumerist culture also followed friction, jealousy and contempt. This chapter uses interview testimony both from people who made the journey themselves, and from North Koreans who remembered the arrival of the emigres, to study the episode from two opposite angles.⁵⁵⁴

Ethnic Korean Immigration from Japan: A Comparative Background

For North Korea, immigration had two main rationales. A propaganda victory loomed in tens of thousands of ethnic compatriots choosing the North over the South. The immigrants, moreover, would boost North Korea’s labor force. Some would bring crucial technical skills and sometimes even factory equipment.⁵⁵⁵

In retrospect, the North Korean government was badly prepared for integrating the new arrivals. In many cases, ideological indoctrination was not enough to make them conform. Many complained publicly and requested to return to Japan. When discontent rose, North Korea’s security organs turned to coercion, the only tool they knew. The regime branded the immigrants as politically unreliable and placed on the lower rungs of

⁵⁵³ Ri T’ae-sŏng, interview transcript, undisclosed location, South Korea, July 5th, 2019. This is confirmed by Chŏng’s fascinating interview study with ethnic Koreans who immigrated to North Korea from Japan and later defected, often back to Japan. See Chŏng, “Chaeiljosŏnin Kwigukchaui Salmul T’onghaesŏ Pon Pukhanch’ejŏi Chaejomyŏng.”

⁵⁵⁴ For recollections from emigres, I rely, as the references will show, not only on testimonies I gathered myself, but also, to a great extent, on other literature where such testimonies appear.

⁵⁵⁵ Morris-Suzuki, *Exodus to North Korea*, 233.

the songbun ladder. Some estimates hold that ten percent of the entire immigrant population was sent to political labor camps.⁵⁵⁶

This turn of events was not unique to North Korea. During the Cold War, ethnic or national compatriots often “returned” to participate in the construction of what many of them saw as new, forward-looking societies. Democratic Kampuchea, Cambodia under Pol Pot (1975–1979) saw dozens of citizens return from abroad, thousands of whom were subsequently killed by the regime. Many refugees returning from neighboring countries were massacred upon arrival.⁵⁵⁷ Additionally, some 1,000 middle-class citizens, often well-educated and professionally experienced, returned to help in national construction. All were branded as “intellectuals”, a suspect category in the eyes of the regime, and many were executed.⁵⁵⁸

In contrast with North Korea, the Cambodian regime seems to have been much more aware of the challenge it faced. Middle-class returnees, for example, were all gathered at special re-education sites, where they went through extensive education about material and ideological conditions in Democratic Kampuchea. They were also put through backbreaking labor.⁵⁵⁹ While those emigrating to North Korea were allowed to bring large possessions (some of which the regime confiscated), returning Cambodians were ordered to give up any private property including money.⁵⁶⁰

⁵⁵⁶ Yun Tae-il, *Agüi Ch’uk Chiphaengbu: Kukkaanjönbowibuüi Naemo*, 206.

⁵⁵⁷ Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime*, 107.

⁵⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 147.

⁵⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 147.

⁵⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 151–154.

In another example, tens of Swedish communists and around 20,000 Finns emigrated to the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 30s with the help of the Swedish Communist Party. They were not returning emigrants but nonetheless newcomers into a totalitarian society. Many were arrested by the NKVD (later KGB) and deported to Gulag camps soon after they arrived. Among the Swedes, those who managed to make their way back were often met with silence by the local communists who doubted their stories of suffering in the Soviet Union, not unlike the Chongryon's silence regarding emigrees who disappeared in North Korea.⁵⁶¹

Groups of ethnic Koreans had “returned” to North Korea before but in much smaller numbers and from vastly different backgrounds. As this dissertation describes in chapter 2, around 400 ethnic Koreans from the Soviet Union came with the Soviet occupation forces to serve in leadership positions in politics and the military. They also often worked as interpreters and civil servants.⁵⁶² Koreans who had fought with the Chinese communist guerilla against Japan in northeast China, as well as prominent leftist intellectuals who had moved to China in the 1920s and 30s, also returned in significant numbers in 1945.⁵⁶³ Both these groups, however, had limited social impacts since they were much fewer than the ethnic Koreans from Japan. Unlike the immigrants from Japan, both the Soviet Koreans and those who returned from China could to some extent rely on their former home countries to protect them and allow them to return.

⁵⁶¹ “Kirunasvenskarna,” Forum för Levande Historia, 2013, <https://www.levandehistoria.se/faktafordjupning/kommunistiska-regimers-brott-mot-manskligheten/kirunasvenskarna>.

⁵⁶² For an overview of this group, see Lankov, *From Stalin to Kim Il Sung*, chaps. 1, 3, 4.

⁵⁶³ For an overview of the political history of this group, see Guangxi Jin, “‘The August Incident’ and the Destiny of the Yanan Faction,” *International Journal of Korean History* 17, no. 2 (2012): 47–76.

The ethnic Koreans from Japan were a large group and during the “repatriation movement” between 1959 and 1984, immigrants numbered 93,340 in total.⁵⁶⁴ As Tessa Morris-Suzuki shows, the program happened through an alignment of several interests. The Japanese government wanted persuade the Koreans to leave. The North Korean government sought both a massive propaganda gain, and an economic boost, through the capital that some immigrants brought with them. The North Korean government and Chongryon launched a massive propaganda campaign convincing many would-be immigrants that living standards in North Korea were higher than those of most ethnic Koreans in Japan.⁵⁶⁵ The majority arrived in 1960 and 1961, and numbers dwindled as knowledge about the dire living conditions in North Korea spread.⁵⁶⁶

Many immigrants brought clothes, electrical appliances, cosmetics and other items considered luxuries in North Korea. Indeed, one was explicitly told by his mother, an activist in Chongryon who knew the reality behind the propaganda, to bring items to sell in North Korea.⁵⁶⁷ Some even brought their own cars from Japan but were sometimes forced to turn these over to the state as “gifts” to the North Korean leadership.⁵⁶⁸ Many, however, believed the propaganda about superior living conditions and packed lightly.⁵⁶⁹

The fact that their relatives back in Japan could send packages and items to sell made a crucial difference. Ŭn-Lee Chŏng estimates that over 60 percent relied on support from overseas family members, and they regularly sent letters to Japan requesting various

⁵⁶⁴ Morris Suzuki, *Exodus to North Korea*, 11.

⁵⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 159–160.

⁵⁶⁶ Ŭn-Lee Chŏng, “Chaeiljosŏnin Kwigukchaŭi Salmŭl...,” 198–204.

⁵⁶⁷ Morris Suzuki, *Exodus to North Korea*, 237.

⁵⁶⁸ Yun Tae-il, *Agŭi Ch’uk Chiphaengbu...*, 206.

⁵⁶⁹ Ŭn-Lee Chŏng, “Chaeiljosŏnin Kwigukchaŭi Salmŭl...,” 203.

items, often to sell on the black market. In this way, as Chǒng notes, the population was in a politically inferior situation due to their background, but economically superior in the beginning.⁵⁷⁰ Immigrants could send letters to family members in Japan but had to phrase their letters to pass by the censors. As a result, the ethnic Korean community who remained in Japan were often unaware of the state of living conditions. Phone calls to Japan were forbidden. On the rare occasions that relatives were able to visit from Japan, conversations had to be held through coded language to evade the state security agents.⁵⁷¹

Arrival, adjustment, culture and friction

Many emigres fell into trouble with the authorities because they complained about the poor living standards. According to later testimonies, some realized at first sight in the Chongjin harbor that things were not as they were led to believe. One émigré, for example, thought the crowds of North Koreans waiting to greet them in the harbor were all beggars.⁵⁷² Indeed, people on the ships noted the low quality of North Korean clothing and hygiene, their “dark faces” and “dirty rag clothes.”⁵⁷³ At least in one instance, one Japanese woman screamed and begged to be sent back to Japan before even leaving the ship.⁵⁷⁴ Despite their expectations, most emigres were not sent to live in the capital city Pyōngyang, but in mining and industrial towns in remote, rugged provinces.

⁵⁷⁰ Ibid, 202.

⁵⁷¹ Yun Tae-il, *Agüi Ch`uk Chiphaengbu...*, 206.

⁵⁷² Ŭn-Lee Chǒng, “Chaeiljosǒnin Kwigukchaüi Salmül...,” 200.

⁵⁷³ Quoted in Morris-Suzuki, *Exodus to North Korea*, 231.

⁵⁷⁴ Ibid, 233.

The unexpected difference in living standards between Japan and North Korea would seem a sufficient explanation for why the state regarded the emigres as politically suspect. One group of Japanese women, according to a former labor camp inmate, even staged a protest at the Komdok mine during a visit by Kim Il-sung in 1974 to be sent back to Japan.⁵⁷⁵ Reality, however, was more complex. Consider how the North Koreans waiting in the harbor might have seen themselves. The interviewees for this dissertation remembered the 60s and 70s as a time of relative progress and relative material wealth would not have described themselves as “beggars”. Rather, they saw themselves as the builders of a forward-looking society, and many were proud of how fast living conditions had improved in North Korea after the war. The new arrivals clashed not just with the state, but in many ways with the public as well.

Kwak Ch’öl-sam’s story is illustrative of several aspects of the immigration episode. Kwak, in his early 80s when we met, is an avid reader of books and newspapers both in Korean and in Japanese, and a strikingly well-educated intellectual. He escaped from North Korea in the early 2000s and was eager to talk about his experiences. Even now, decades later, his anger at the North Korean government and Chongryon was palpable.⁵⁷⁶ Though some aspects of Kwak’s background might seem redundant, they are worth examining in some detail since they speak to the clashes between the immigrants and overall North Korean society. Kwak was, and still is, an ardent Korean nationalist. Still, at several points in our interview, he expressed a strong longing for Japan. As many

⁵⁷⁵ Hyok Ahn, “I Met Korean Repatriates and Their Japanese Wives in the North Korean Concentration Camp,” *Life & Human Rights in North Korea* 4, no. Summer (1997): 26–31.

⁵⁷⁶ Kwak Ch’öl-sam, interview notes, Seoul, South Korea, August 22nd, 2019.

interviewees who went through the famine of 1990s North Korea, Kwak reminisced in detail about food, Japanese food more than anything and spoke of the special sorts of noodles and bread he would eat as a child. He also recalled fondly the “highball” cocktails and beer of Japan. Although living conditions were dire, Kwak recalled many aspects of life in Japan that were strikingly international, from food, to language, and cultural consumption.

Kwak was also a communist activist in his youth and believed in the North Korean project. He read the works of several Italian communists and other European socialist ideologues (he did not specify which ones). He also read authors such as Victor Hugo and Leo Tolstoy. At the same time, he emphasized that he primarily spoke Korean in his everyday life and with his family while in Japan; “it was the language of the masses.” At this point in the interview, I jotted down in the margins of my notebook that it was clear what would happen with someone like him in North Korea.⁵⁷⁷ He could hardly have come to the country at a worse time, as the boundaries for permissive expression and culture were narrowing even more. It was not the dire living conditions that Kwak found the most difficult about North Korea, but how, in his view, the society failed to live up to its ideals.

Kwak was 23 years old when he boarded a Soviet ship, through a process handled by the Red Cross. He did not recall any shock or acute disappointment over the first impressions of his new home country. He still remembered the prevalence of infectious

⁵⁷⁷ In order to preserve the spontaneity and atmosphere, I decided not to ask Kwak to let me record our conversation. There are obvious disadvantages to this, as some details are inevitably lost.

diseases he otherwise associated with wartime, such as cholera and diarrhea, but said that everyone received medication. Big apartment buildings had been readied for the emigrees to live in while preparations were made for their placement in North Korean society. Everyone was interviewed about where they wanted to live and what skills they had. Kwak confirmed that most were sent to work in mines and factories.

At this point, Kwak was not worried and trusted that the authorities would decide for the best. Kwak was dispatched to a steel factory in Kimch'aek in North Hamgyong province, a city famous for its steel works. He recalled his excitement at the opportunity to build socialism through a classically proletarian profession. At the factory, however, problems ensued. Kwak began to realize that his co-workers and him were on different intellectual wavelengths and of very different mentalities (*"kamjǒngi anmatta"*). Kwak simply felt that they were unrefined; "badly educated" in socialist doctrine and thought, and highly provincial, with no access to information from the world outside. He had moved to North Korea to be with his peers in the Korean homeland, but few true socialist ideologue peers were to be found.

He "knew everything about the world" and was used to reading foreign books and watching foreign movies. Now he found himself cut off from all of that and could not even get access to those books that had fueled his inspiration to build socialism in North Korea in the first place.⁵⁷⁸ Indeed, the combination of Kwak's intellectual passions and the social changes in North Korea were deeply at odds with one another. Censorship became ever tighter, foreign books and films were cleaned out from the library shelves

⁵⁷⁸ Here my margin notes say, I "cannot even begin to imagine this clash."

and movie theaters, and North Korean ideology centered less and less on socialism, and increasingly around Kim family worship. There was a cultural revolution and ideological struggle going on, Kwak said, and all he could really do was sleep and eat.

Only one year after his arrival, Kwak decided to leave. North Korea had little of the socialism that Kwak had espoused, but was, in his view, simply Kim Il-sung's personal dictatorship. He set out for what he believed was a true socialist society, the Soviet Union. Surely there were problems, and he knew what Khrushchev had revealed about Stalin, but it still lived up to his ideals far better than North Korea. But Kwak was arrested trying to seek asylum at the Soviet embassy and, as he put it, "branded for life."⁵⁷⁹ Especially from the late-1960s, when the social climate hardened even further, there "was no forgiveness" for people like him. From then onward, emigres could not even gather amongst themselves without government authorization and would be investigated by the MSS if they spoke Japanese in public.

Still, some details of Kwak's story are puzzling in contrast to the fate of other emigres. He did not spend time in a labor camp despite his attempt to defect, although he did recall many of his compatriots getting deported as "spies" from the early 1970s. It is possible that those who were sent to camps were caught up in purges related to North Korean domestic politics or the leadership of the Chongryon. It is also noteworthy that Kwak's children, still in North Korea, seem to have done relatively well despite their

⁵⁷⁹ This is my best recollection of the course of events, but my notes are unfortunately not clear on the matter. As with other interviewees, I chose not to press Kwak on the details of his escape attempt, out of a concern that it would take the interview off track from the main focus of life inside North Korea.

father's crimes. His son is a doctor, and he indicated that her daughter is married to a man of relatively high status as a graduate of a prestigious music college.⁵⁸⁰

Many children of emigres fared considerably worse. Han Mi-sun was born in North Korea, but her parents were immigrants from Japan. I was introduced to Han by a mutual friend in the North Korean refugee community, and she spontaneously brought up the harsh nature of surveillance in North Korea and told me that she, as a daughter of an immigrant from Japan, was subject to special surveillance by the state. Han's father had been a taxi driver in Japan and was a highly skilled mechanic. This was a stroke of luck. Except for Han's father and four other individuals, everyone from his cohort of arrivals were sent to work in a coal mine in the country's rugged north known for particularly cruel conditions.⁵⁸¹ Han's father, instead, was sent to Ryanggang province as a truck driver. Han herself later ended up graduating from a textiles design college and worked in a store that sold suits and repaired watches.⁵⁸²

Han and I sat down for a conversation together with our mutual acquaintance, Yi Seul-gi. They compared their experiences of surveillance, and it was clear that Han, as a child of immigrants from Japan, was under much closer scrutiny while in North Korea. Yi, for example, would take illegal rides on the roof of train cars in the 1970s, and knew she would get away with it by claiming that as a child, she did not know better. Han, on the other hand, always had to stay close to home. Even children of Japanese immigrants

⁵⁸⁰ This detail is also uncertain and not clear from my notes, and I have unfortunately been unable to double-check certain aspects of his recollections due to the current (fall of 2020) difficulties in international travel.

⁵⁸¹ Yi Seul-gi and Han Mi-sun interview transcript, Seoul, Republic of Korea, February 24, 2019, 14.

⁵⁸² *Ibid.*, 4–5.

were watched much more closely than others. Any unexplained absence or travel without a permit would cause alarm with the authorities.⁵⁸³

Han also relayed a remarkable incident that speaks loads of the immigrant experience. Sometime in the late 1960s or early 1970s, while the political climate was hardening, Han's father and one of his émigré friends were among thousands of citizens to be summoned to the public square to shout slogans against America and South Korea, a regular occurrence in the country. Han's father's friend directed his slogan against Kim Il-sung rather than Park Chung-hee, the South Korean military dictator at the time. An informant for the Ministry of State Security (MSS) reported him to the authorities.⁵⁸⁴ Han's father's friend simply thought he was able to exercise his right to free speech just as he would in Japan. He was arrested by the MSS as a spy, never heard from again.⁵⁸⁵ This only happened one month after they arrived. As Han put it, they were two young bachelors used to a life with freedom of speech and thought in Japan and knew nothing about the rules in North Korea. The man's brother was never able to join the Party, a fact that Han attributed to this decades-old event.⁵⁸⁶

Adjusting to the new socio-economic reality was difficult for many immigrants. Informants in Chõng's study said that the hardest thing about their new lives was subsisting on grains. Unlike North Koreans, they had already gotten used to white rice as

⁵⁸³ Ibid, 17.

⁵⁸⁴ Yi Seul-gi and Han Mi-sun (pseudonyms) interview transcript, Seoul, Republic of Korea, February 24, 2019, 27.

⁵⁸⁵ Lots of details about this incident are unclear in the interview transcript. I have chosen to recount it here in the most basic, stripped-down version although it leaves many questions unanswered.

⁵⁸⁶ Yi Seul-gi and Han Mi-sun (pseudonyms) interview transcript, Seoul, Republic of Korea, February 24, 2019, 28.

their staple food in Japan, a luxury in North Korea.⁵⁸⁷ During their first decades in the country, many of the immigrants became a slightly wealthier class among the lower classes. They would sell items shipped over by relatives in Japan – high-quality clothes such as sweaters and pants, watches, stationary materials and other items – in exchange for food. According to one testimony, a sweater or a pair of pants could sell for the equivalent of 10–20 kilos of rice.⁵⁸⁸ From 1973, they could even use Japanese *yen* in foreign currency shops, gaining access to a plethora of products that ordinary North Koreans could not afford. Some would purchase cloth of higher quality in foreign currency stores, manufacture clothes and sell them on markets. North Korean society at the time, however, generally looked down on trading as something going against social norms, and one interviewee in Chǒng’s study describes feeling shameful when buying cloth, since the store clerks knew she would manufacture clothes for a profit.⁵⁸⁹

All of this caused significant hostility among the general North Korean public. The term *chaep'o* is short for *chaeil tongp'o*, simply meaning “overseas Korean resident in Japan”. Han Mi-sun indicated to me several times in our conversations that being a *chaep'o*, a status she inherited from her father, was seen as shameful. Chǒng’s interviewees said that ordinary North Koreans often used the term as a slur, to emphasize that the immigrants were outsiders. At first the immigrants received special treatment from the North Korean authorities, such as extra rations and, remarkably enough given the authorities’ suspicious attitude, travel permits. This contributed to animosity from the

⁵⁸⁷ Ŭn-Lee Chǒng, “Chaeiljosǒnin Kwigukchaŭi Salmŭl...,” 201.

⁵⁸⁸ Ibid, 204.

⁵⁸⁹ Ibid, 212.

surrounding society.⁵⁹⁰ Many of these perks ended two or three years after they arrived, but the impression stuck. A rumor even went around that ordinary North Koreans were thrown out of their apartments to make room for the arrivals.⁵⁹¹ Many North Koreans considered them snobby and lazy, and thought they only lived off of their relatives back in Japan.⁵⁹²

As immigrant groups often do, many of the first-generation arrivals stuck together and immigrants did remain a distinct community at least for a time. They had a shared cultural background and were often far from fluent in Korean but comfortable in Japanese. Moreover, they could likely speak relatively freely about their dire situation only amongst themselves, creating bonds of shared suffering and solidarity. Inter-marriage was also uncommon, though this appears to have changed in the second generation.⁵⁹³

Whatever advantages they had were only temporary. Human ties and connections matter immensely anywhere, but even more so in North Korea and can even spell the difference between survival or hardship and possible death in a labor camp. Thus, when in the late-1960s, numerous arrests began among the immigrant population, they had no relationships in the higher echelons to call on for help. Later, while others relied on human networks and relatives for trading and bartering food during the famine, the immigrants from Japan had no such ties. Their arrival was framed as a return but most actually hailed from the southern part of the peninsula. Few had relatives in North Korea. Around the same time as North Korea's economic situation rapidly declined, many of the

⁵⁹⁰ Morris-Suzuki, *Exodus to North Korea*, 238.

⁵⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 238.

⁵⁹² Ūn-Lee Chōng, "Chaeiljosōnin Kwigukchaūi Salmūl..." 209.

⁵⁹³ *Ibid.*, 208.

immigrant's relatives in Japan began to die from old age, further weakening family ties. Moreover, the increasingly difficult economic situation in Japan made it more difficult for their relatives to ship necessities to North Korea.⁵⁹⁴

Embrace with One Arm, Punishment with the Other: The State's Attitudes to the Emigrees

Only some years after the immigration began did the North Korean government seem to grasp the challenge of integrating the newcomers. Significant waves of arrests and purges began in the early 1970s, only a little more than a decade after the inception of the immigration program.⁵⁹⁵ The new arrivals likely caused much more social strain than the authorities anticipated. Already in the early 1960s, the North Korean government had suggested that Japanese wives of Korean emigres be allowed to travel freely to Japan, but as Morris-Suzuki points out, North Korea likely knew the Japanese government would not agree.⁵⁹⁶ Ri Il-gyeong, North Korean Minister of Foreign Trade, was arrested and hanged in 1964.⁵⁹⁷ The ostensible reason was his failure to strike a financially beneficial trade deal with the Soviet Union. But the fact that he also played a prominent role in the immigration project may have been a reason for his purge.⁵⁹⁸

Official propaganda does not spell out these problems but often alludes to them.

One speech attributed to Kim Il-sung in 1967, for example, criticizes Party functionaries

⁵⁹⁴ Ibid, 206.

⁵⁹⁵ Morris-Suzuki, *Exodus to North Korea*, 238.

⁵⁹⁶ Ibid, 236.

⁵⁹⁷ Szalontai, *Kim Il Sung in the Khrushchev Era*, 202.

⁵⁹⁸ Morris-Suzuki, *Exodus to North Korea*, 240.

for not helping immigrants from Japan adjust in society.⁵⁹⁹ Despite their love and patriotism towards Korea, the people do not treat them well, Kim says, and acknowledges that because they lived for a long time in the capitalist society of Japan, they still have capitalist ideology in their heads. Thus, they need education and help to become “like us.”⁶⁰⁰ Kim laments that people do not want to associate with the emigres because “they smell of capitalism.”⁶⁰¹

In one speech attributed to Kim Jong-il in 1974, Kim criticizes the Party for emphasizing family background too much in cadre recruitment, and said nepotism and regionalism prevail in the Party. The speech specifically criticizes Party organization for poorly integrating returnees from Japan, stating that rather than discriminate against them, the Party should work together with them for the revolution.⁶⁰²

Perhaps the central government and top leadership did genuinely clamp down on discrimination against the emigres and their families. This is doubtful, however, given that it persisted with largely unchanged force for several decades and even today. More likely, the leader needed to be seen as aware of, and sympathetic to, the immigrant’s circumstances.

⁵⁹⁹ Kim Il-sung, “Tangsaöbül Kaesönhamyö Tangdaep'yojahoe Kyöljöngül Kwanch'örhalde Taehayö,” 252–372 in *Kim Il Söng Chönjip* 38 (Pyöngyang, DPR Korea: Chosön Rodongdang Ch'ulp'ansa, 2001), 276.

⁶⁰⁰ Kim Il-sung, *Tangsaöbül Kaesönhamyö...*, 277.

⁶⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 278.

⁶⁰² Kim Jong-il, “Tangsaöbül Künbonjöngüro Kaesön'ganghwahayö on Sahoeüi Kimilssöngjuüihwarül Himitke Tagüch'ija,” 207–247 in *Kim Jöng-il Sönjip* 4 (Pyöngyang, DPR Korea: Chosön Rodongdang Ch'ulp'ansa, 1994), 248.

Reception and social change in North Korea

Many North Koreans interviewed for this dissertation saw the Japanese emigres as wealthy outsiders. Kim Sŏn-ok clearly recalled emigres as distinctive because of their material wealth. Some moved to the neighborhood where her family lived and she often met and interacted with them. At least one family in her village had an ethnic Korean father from Japan, and the mother was Japanese. They had far nicer clothes than everyone else, and appliances and technology that many ordinary North Koreans had never seen before. They were cautious never to speak Japanese in public.⁶⁰³

Kim mentioned the family when discussing people around her under special surveillance. She mentioned their amenities and wealth without being prompted to do so, suggesting that such traits defined the immigrant family in the eyes of their neighbors. In an environment as relatively impoverished as the North Korean northeast, this naturally caused jealousy and social friction.

Ri T'ae-sŏng went further. According to him, money only started to matter in North Korean society when the emigres started to arrive.⁶⁰⁴ Ri claimed, in contrast with many others, that many emigres were placed in Wonsan, a much more hospitable place to live than the rugged north, so that they would be near the city's port to receive goods and visitor groups from Japan. He compared the sensation of Japanese goods at the time to how North Koreans today value smuggled goods from South Korea, and people would

⁶⁰³ Kim Sŏn-ok, interview transcript, Seoul, South Korea, July 30, 2017, 15–16.

⁶⁰⁴ Ri T'ae-sŏng, interview transcript, undisclosed location, South Korea, July 5th, 2019, 40.

marvel at their superior quality. He recalled visiting the house of a friend whose family came from Japan:

“In the 1970s, when I went to my friend’s house, I saw that they lived gloomy lives but the [things] they used were all Japanese-made.... They’d walk around with Seiko watches and the quality of their clothes was also high. They were not ordinary clothes. If you think about it, for human beings, seeing something leads to wanting it [“kyõnmulssaengsim”, figure of speech roughly translating into “the object gives rise to the desire”], so when you see things, you want them, and you see [nice] clothes, you want to wear them, because of greed. So that’s [from when the emigrees arrived] when greed quietly (ũnyõnjunge) started to arise. The image of Japan, envy of the Japanese returnees... people derogatorily called them “tchaep'o” [short for “chaeildongp'o”], as a term of disparagement...”⁶⁰⁵

There is nothing to suggest that Ri is a particularly jealous person. On the contrary, he was perceptive, humble and self-critical enough to identify a general trend in the way that North Koreans looked down upon the emigrees from Japan, and his choice of words – greed, desire – implied that he thought this wrong. He is not necessarily talking (only) about his own feelings, but more likely, about a general sentiment in the 1970s. When ordinary North Koreans witnessed the wealth that their new neighbors brought with them, they not only started to desire their level of consumption. They also got a direct glimpse of living conditions in the outside world, and in an enemy country like as Japan at that.

The socio-economic implications went far beyond jealousy and desire for goods from the outside world. The emigrees contributed to the rise of foreign currency shops, as

⁶⁰⁵ Ri T'ae-sõng, interview transcript, undisclosed location, South Korea, July 5th, 2019, 41.

discussed above, which in turn exacerbated consumption and corruption. Choi Dong-woo, a former military officer, said that imported items such as foreign cigarettes, alcohol, pens and high-quality lighters were high in demand among the privileged classes, and could only be bought in these specialty stores with American dollar or Japanese yen in the mid-1980s.⁶⁰⁶

Synopsis: Eternal Outsiders in a Perfect Storm

The ethnic Koreans in Japan who moved to North Korea in the 1960s, 70s and 80s were not only passive victims, but agents in their own right who impacted North Korean society. They introduced a glimpse of foreign consumerist culture. Moreover, their arrival caused friction with the local population and a culture shock to the system. Their fate is tragic, but in retrospect, it could hardly have been different. The North Korean leadership wanted the immigration to proceed for reasons of ideology, propaganda and economics. Whatever consequences would play out on the ground were likely not taken into account.

Meanwhile, the surveillance apparatus had to keep doing its job. The MSS and other agencies tasked with surveillance were not more lenient to offenders who could not have been expected to know better, such as those not yet used to the North Korean system. Complaints about social conditions and political deviation were crimes, and it did not matter that the offenders were new emigres in the country. The central state sought

⁶⁰⁶ Choi Dong-woo, interview transcript, Seoul, Republic of Korea, April 5, 2019, 19.

the positive consequences of the immigration but was never prepared for the drawbacks and left them to the security agencies to handle.

Given all this, it should not be surprising that the North Korean government still regards ethnic Koreans from Japan as suspect. This impression was strongly reinforced when I visited the Chongryon community of one Japanese city in the summer of 2019.⁶⁰⁷ My hosts were kind, gracious and open, and had no trouble talking about poverty and political control in North Korea, though they disagreed with commonly acknowledged facts such as the extent of North Korea's famine in the 1990s and the severity of its dictatorship.

Korean language teaching used to be one of the main selling points for the group's schools, but the number of parents who care enough about their kids knowing proper Korean is dwindling. Increasing numbers of Korean parents send their kids to regular Japanese schools. Chongryon has also been badly decimated by court battles with the Japanese authorities over taxes and other matters. Its schools receive no funding from the Japanese government, not surprising, perhaps, given the group's strong support for an enemy state.⁶⁰⁸ The organization is also suspected to have aided North Korea in abducting Japanese citizens.⁶⁰⁹ The schools I visited – all with students who were both enthusiastic, open, and happy to talk – were visibly aching for building renovations and

⁶⁰⁷ Location not disclosed to protect the privacy of my interlocutors.

⁶⁰⁸ Elizabeth Shim, "Japan's Supreme Court Endorses Exclusion of pro-North Korea Schools," UPI, accessed December 6, 2020, https://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2020/09/04/Japans-Supreme-Court-endorses-exclusion-of-pro-North-Korea-schools/9691599235443/.

⁶⁰⁹ "Japan Police Raid N.Korea-Linked Group over Kidnap," *Reuters*, April 25, 2007, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUST133329>.

material supplies, a strange contrast to the wealth surrounding them in the rest of Japanese society.

It is easy to marvel at the fact that this community maintains close ties to the North Korean regime, while living in Japan where they can read freely about the poverty and severe human rights abuses perpetrated by the North Korean state. The portraits of the North Korean leaders no longer adorn every classroom in their schools, as they did when I visited in 2011. But North Korean-style banners still hung in the teacher's lounge in one of the schools I visited in 2019, though without messages about the Great Leader.

⁶¹⁰ The school still, however, appeared to use North Korean study materials. Most striking, however, is not the proximity to North Korea, but the distance. Many Chongryon members have taken on a tremendous opportunity cost to do their jobs: surely their salaries would be higher if they worked for ordinary Japanese employers. The social cost is also high. Right-wing protestors often target Chongryon institutions, and the stigma is understandably strong around the organization in Japanese society.

Even still, whenever these relatively high-up officials visit North Korea, they told me, they are always accompanied government minders. They frequently go for visits, and Chongryon schoolteachers come to North Korea for training. They are always treated well, like honored guests, but guests all the same, and not like members of the North Korean family. To my interlocutors, their ability to travel to North Korea, meet family members and give speeches at official functions was a mark of honor. One person simply

⁶¹⁰ Benjamin Katzeff Silberstein, "'Nordkorea Gav Oss En Identitet'," *Svenska Dagbladet*, May 18, 2012, <https://www.svd.se/nordkorea-gav-oss-en-identitet>.

explained that North Korea, by necessity, in his view, is a totalitarian society. It is necessary for survival, because all of society, including the norms of traditionalism and purity that he hailed in our conversation, would collapse if the country opened up to the outside world.

This confirms the narrative of this chapter. The state at first welcomed the ethnic compatriots but quickly began to regard them as outsiders with polluting influence. The frames of North Korean society, and the surveillance system, lacked the flexibility to absorb newcomers and relegated them to strict surveillance on the margins of society, where they remain to this day.

Chapter 6: Outlook and Epilogue: North Korea, Totalitarianism, and the Future

This dissertation has argued that North Korea's system for surveillance and social control never functioned as smoothly as commonly believed. Grassroots citizens always skirted around the rules set up by the state and manipulated circumstances in their favor. At the same time, this never caused any large-scale social instability that shook the regime's foundations.

This trend has continued over the last decades. In 1994, Kim Il-sung passed away and some questioned whether the North Korean regime would survive the leadership transition to his son, Kim Jong-il. Similar speculations arose after Kim Jong-il's death in late 2011, about Kim Jong-un's prospects for governing a North Korea where a large share of the public secretly consume South Korean tv-dramas and pop music, and where a growing market system has to a great extent replaced the planned economy.⁶¹¹ Two years after coming to power, in 2013, Kim showed both North Korea's elites and the outside world that he was fully in power, by having his uncle Jang Song-taek purged and executed in a public manner not seen in North Korea for decades.⁶¹² Kim has presided over a North Korean economy experiencing some of its most difficult years since the famine, with ever-tightening economic sanctions but he made history in 2017 when he became the first North Korean leader to meet a sitting US president.

⁶¹¹ Anna Fifield, *The Great Successor: The Divinely Perfect Destiny of Brilliant Comrade Kim Jong Un* (New York, NY: Public Affairs, 2020).

⁶¹² Chong-il Na, *Chang Sŏng-t'aekŭi Kil: Sinjŏngŭi Puroghan Kyŏngyein* (Seoul, Republic of Korea: Alma, 2016).

What about the future? Through the arch of North Korean history, the regime has survived seemingly insurmountable challenges. At the moment, odds again seem stacked against the state. The ramped-up pressure from economic sanctions particularly since 2017 are taking a clear toll on the country's already badly damaged economy.⁶¹³ The government's self-imposed lockdown of the border to China, virtually ceasing all but very little foreign trade, has made a bad situation worse.⁶¹⁴ Kim Jong-un himself has called it North Korea's "worst" situation ever, most likely to temper hopes and expectations of economic growth.⁶¹⁵ Early on in his tenure, Kim pledged that people would never have to tighten their belts again.⁶¹⁶ This now seems more unlikely than any time before in his tenure.

Nevertheless, Kim Jong-un appears to have staked out a direction for North Korea. This chapter argues that above all, Kim seeks to restore the totalitarian state's capacity to govern after the economy collapsed in the 1990s. The fragmentation of the economy in the wake of the famine has decentralized power, but this process has clear limitations and may be reversible. Whether or not is possible for Kim to succeed in this endeavor, his aspiration to restore the state's ability to govern will likely shape domestic policy in the short- to medium-run, or the coming 5-10 years. Over the coming few years,

⁶¹³ Benjamin Katzeff Silberstein, "The North Korean Economy and U.S. Policy: Stability Under 'Maximum Pressure,'" in *The East Asian Whirlpool: Kim Jong-Un's Diplomatic Shake-Up, China's Sharp Power, and Trump's Trade Wars*, ed. Gilbert Rozman, 2019th ed., vol. 30, Joint U.S.-Korea Academic Studies (Washington, D.C.: Korea Economic Institute of America, 2019), 275–301.

⁶¹⁴ Benjamin Katzeff Silberstein, "The North Korean Economy: The Pandemic and North Korean Food Security," *38 North*, May 28, 2020, <https://www.38north.org/2020/05/bkatzeffsilberstein052820/>.

⁶¹⁵ Reuters, "North Korea's Kim Cites 1990s Famine in Urging Work to Alleviate Economic Crises," *Reuters*, April 9, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-kimjongun-idUSKBN2BW03E>.

⁶¹⁶ Sang-hun Choe, "North Korean Leader Stresses Need for Strong Military," *The New York Times*, April 15, 2012, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/16/world/asia/kim-jong-un-north-korean-leader-talks-of-military-superiority-in-first-public-speech.html>.

surveillance in North Korea will likely move toward a great reliance on modern technology. As the state grants citizens some freedoms, such as cell phone use, it will also strengthen the efficiency and repressive capacity of the system.

To show this direction, this chapter studies policy developments in three main areas: technological change, information control, and economic policy. Consider again Brzezinski and Friedrich's list of totalitarian traits. As noted, although they are somewhat outdated, these traits still hold up relatively well more than half a century after they were first published:

- “1. An official ideology;
2. A single mass party led typically by one man;
3. A system of terroristic police control;
4. A technologically conditioned near-complete monopoly of control of all means of effective mass communication;
5. A similarly technologically conditioned near-complete monopoly of control of all means of effective armed combat;
6. A central control and direction of the economy.”⁶¹⁷

Together, these traits form a cluster of totalitarian control. That the government under Kim Jong-un seeks to strengthen economic and social control is not surprising. They are part of the same story. Building capacity to govern, for the North Korean state, by definition entails enhancing social control. Kim Jong-un may not want to get rid of the market economy altogether, but he seeks to re-establish state capacity to rule it. Kim has expanded the scope for legal use of cell phones and other technology, but at the same

⁶¹⁷ Friedrich and Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy*, 9–11.

time, he seeks to leverage such technology for state surveillance. In the long run, this may lead to somewhat more pragmatic, effective and less violent governance, but with full control all the same. It may give citizens somewhat more freedom on the margins, to communicate with each other, engage in private economic activity, and perhaps to access more modern culture. Such surveillance would demand less active participation by the general public, and would therefore be less invasive, punishing and restricting certain expressions and activity while not enforcing participation in political and organizational life. Simultaneously, the Korean Worker's Party would likely away from ideological utopianism. Several generations have now passed since Japanese colonial rule and the Korean War, and relatively few North Koreans are likely to still be enthralled by utopian visions of Korean unification under North Korean communism.

At the same time, more limited but more efficient surveillance could make social control more stable. By lowering ambitions, the state would reduce the pressure and range of responsibilities of the surveillance apparatus. At the same time, citizens are more likely to willingly comply with the rules set up by the state if they are simultaneously granted some of the very limited freedoms to trade, consume, communicate and access entertainment of higher quality.

Modern Technology and Surveillance

Over the past few years, modern technology has made inroads into North Korea in conflicting ways. Between 2009 and 2012, North Korea imported over 100,000

surveillance cameras from China to the tune of \$10 million.⁶¹⁸ In the summer of 2020, North Korea reportedly purchased additional surveillance cameras from China, at a smaller cost of around \$3 million.⁶¹⁹ Overall, this signifies a broader trend. Most historic surveillance states, including North Korea, have relied relatively little on modern technology.⁶²⁰ In the early 2000s, the state also reportedly digitized the ledgers where it records the political attitudes and family background of each citizen.⁶²¹ The surveillance system seems to be going more high-tech.

State-sanctioned cell phones have also become much more commonplace in the country. The regime largely banned cell phone use until 2008 citing security risks, and the only ones used in the country were those illegally smuggled in from China. With the collaboration of Orascom, an Egyptian telecom giant, the state launched a domestic cell phone network called Koryolink in 2008. That year, the service had around 2,000 subscribers. By August 2017, South Korean intelligence estimates held that the country had 4.7 million cell phone subscribers in total, around one-fifth of the entire population.⁶²²

⁶¹⁸ “Chinese Cameras Help N.Korean Regime’s Surveillance,” *Chosun Ilbo*, January 14, 2013, http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2013/01/14/2013011401068.html.

⁶¹⁹ Mun Dong Hui, “N. Korea to Install New Surveillance Cameras on Sino-NK Border,” *Daily NK*, June 26, 2020, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korea-install-new-surveillance-cameras-sino-nk-border/>.

⁶²⁰ As a general rule, the sternest of surveillance states have tended to rely more on human networks and manual files than modern technology such as wiretapping equipment and the like. See, for a few examples of country cases, Bruce, *The Firm*; Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime*; Krzysztof Persak and Łukasz Kamiński, *A Handbook of the Communist Security Apparatus in East Central Europe 1944-1989* (Warsaw: Institute of National Remembrance, 2005); Katherine Verdery, *Secrets and Truths: Ethnography in the Archive of Romania’s Secret Police*, 2014; Robert Gellately, *The Gestapo and German Society: Enforcing Racial Policy, 1933-1945* (Oxford; New York: Clarendon Press ; Oxford University Press, 1990).

⁶²¹ Hyōn In-ae, “Pukhanūi Chumindūngnokchedoe Kwanhan Yōn’gu,” 30.

⁶²² Yon-ho Kim, “North Korea’s Mobile Telecommunications and Private Transportation Services in the Kim Jong-Un Era,” *HRNK Insider*, accessed June 2, 2020, <http://www.hrnkinsider.org/2019/01/north-koreas-mobile-telecommunications.html>.

Though only available to a certain proportion of the North Korean public, cell phones have spread far beyond the very top elite. Only a decade ago, as it seemed unlikely that the North Korean government would accept the risks that modern technology brings for a dictatorship.

For some time, it seemed as though the regime's hold on social and political control was weakening. As a consequence of the collapse of the economy in the 1990s and subsequent famine, smuggling increased dramatically across the Chinese border. The increased flow of goods brought unprecedented information from the outside world through South Korean (and to a lesser extent, Chinese) movies and TV-series, often smuggled in on VHS-tapes and later, on USB-sticks.⁶²³ Foreign media consumption, in particular, seemed to spell the end of information controls, as the power to shape the worldviews of the citizens was no longer only in the hands of the regime.

Some saw the increasing inroads of cell phones as part of this process. Even though they lack connectivity with the outside world, they let North Koreans communicate independently with one another and make it easier for them to conduct economic activity independent of the state.⁶²⁴ In theory, cell phones also create a sphere of communication between citizens where they can freely express their sentiments about the state and the leadership. Cell phones could also help such sentiments spread both further and wider, as they enable people to overcome their "atomization" – the sense of

⁶²³ For an overview of this process, see Jieun Baek, *North Korea's Hidden Revolution: How the Information Underground Is Transforming a Closed Society* (Yale University Press, 2016).

⁶²⁴ For an account of this narrative, with a critical, in-depth discussion, see Nat Kretchun, "The Regime Strikes Back: A New Era of North Korean Information Controls," 38 North, June 9, 2017, <https://www.38north.org/2017/06/nkretchun060917/>.

loneliness that totalitarian states foster, to convince the individual that no potential exist for collective action against the dictatorship.⁶²⁵

At this time of writing, the prospects for such developments appear slim. The North Korean state under Kim Jong-un is tightening its control over society, and specifically over information and communication. Modern technology is a central part of the story, as the state-sanctioned cell phones and other electronic devices come equipped with highly potent surveillance equipment.

In late 2018 as the government negotiated with both the United States and South Korea, for example, the regime launched a “war of annihilation against anti-socialist behavior,” one of several campaigns to quash the influx of foreign media and culture into the country.⁶²⁶ Such campaigns are common in North Korea. Over the past few years, however, they have been particularly intense, especially during the period of engagement between the U.S. and North Korea. The campaign has struck against both foreign media smuggling and economic transactions outside of the state framework and led to complaints that the state is disrupting market activity.⁶²⁷ State media has repeatedly warned that even though economic growth is crucial, it must never come at the expense of letting anti-socialist values into the culture.⁶²⁸

Under Kim Jong-un, the use of CCTV inside the country has expanded rapidly. The regime strengthened security along the border to China with both expanded CCTV

⁶²⁵ This concept is famously developed by Hannah Arendt. See part III of Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

⁶²⁶ Yoo Jin Kim, “North Koreans Protest Unfair Market Crackdowns,” *Daily NK*, July 3, 2018, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-koreans-protest-unfair-market-crackdowns/>.

⁶²⁷ Mi Jin Kang, “‘Anti-Socialist’ Crackdown Disrupts Market Activity,” *Daily NK*, April 24, 2018, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/antisocialist-crackdown-disrupts-m/>.

⁶²⁸ For a recent example, see Sŏng-bŏm Sŏ, “Sasangmunhwajinjirŭl Paekpangŭro Tajinŭn Saŏbŭi Chungyosŏng,” *Rodong Sinmun*, May 26, 2020.

and barbed wire.⁶²⁹ In early 2019, *Daily NK*, a South Korean online news outlet with contacts in North Korea, reported that the entire border region had successfully been covered with CCTV cameras.⁶³⁰ In part as a result of these strengthened surveillance methods, defections from North to South Korea have dropped dramatically under Kim Jong-un's tenure. In 2009, 2,914 people defected, while for 2019, that figure was only 1,047 as of December of that year.⁶³¹ CCTV use has expanded significantly around Pyöngyang as well.⁶³² Reportedly, the government is also getting better at tracking and tracing cell phones making unpermitted international calls, and it may be manufacturing some high-tech surveillance equipment domestically.⁶³³

This is the context in which one has to understand the North Korean government's expanded introduction of cell phones, homemade tablets and other technology. It is not a sign of expanded freedom but may lead to stronger overall control. Virtually all such technology officially permitted in North Korea contains advanced surveillance equipment.

⁶²⁹ Hyon Jo, "Video Surveillance Network Expanded on China-North Korea Border," *Daily NK*, December 28, 2018, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/video-surveillance-network-expanded-on-china-north-korea-border/>; Mi Jin Kang, "Barbed Wire Swallows Yanggang Province," *Daily NK*, August 19, 2015, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/barbed-wire-swallows-yanggang-prov/>; Song Min Choi, "More Barbed Wire for the Border," *Daily NK*, January 17, 2012, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/more-barbed-wire-for-the-border/>; "[Photo] North Korea Constructs New Barbed Wire Fences to Prevent Defections in Flood-Hit Regions," *Daily NK*, May 20, 2017, [https://www.dailynk.com/english/\[photo\]-north-korea-constructs-new/](https://www.dailynk.com/english/[photo]-north-korea-constructs-new/).

⁶³⁰ Dong Hui Mun, "Surveillance Cameras Installed to Cover Entire Sino-North Korean Border Region - Daily NK," accessed June 4, 2020, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/surveillance-cameras-installed-to-cover-entire-sino-north-korean-border-region/>.

⁶³¹ "Pukhanit'aljuminüi Kungnaeipkuk Ch'use," Ministry of Unification (Republic of Korea), accessed June 4, 2020, <https://www.unikorea.go.kr/unikorea/business/NKDefectorsPolicy/status/lately/>.

⁶³² Chad O'Carrol, "Video Surveillance Equipment on Rise inside North Korea," *NK News*, October 9, 2018, <http://www.nknews.org/2018/10/video-surveillance-equipment-on-rise-inside-north-korea/>.

Mun Dong Hui, "N. Korea's New 'Spectrum Analyzer' May Be a Surveillance Tool," *Daily NK*, December 2, 2019, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korea-new-spectrum-analyzer-may-be-surveillance-tool/>;

Hui.⁶³³ Mun Dong Hui, "N. Korea Uses 'Recorded Calls' to Better Track down International Callers," *Daily NK* (blog), May 21, 2020, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korea-uses-recorded-calls-better-track-down-international-callers/>.

In 2011, not long after cell phones were first introduced, the state reportedly banned transfers of pictures and audio between users.⁶³⁴ According to one 2017 assessment of North Korean mobile phone software, all unsanctioned files and apps were made unusable on the phones between 2013 and 2014. The technique employed by the operating system even deleted unsanctioned files from micro-SD cards, meaning that only government-approved media and apps could be used. Thus, no foreign dramas, and not even novels in text-file formats, could be viewed. Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, the operating system logs activity and takes periodical screenshots of user activity which the user cannot delete. Thus, security services can easily browse through a person's phone activity for politically suspect items.⁶³⁵

North Korea's Ullim tablet is another example, manufactured and sold in the country at least since 2014. The tablet is based on a Chinese model, but the communications hardware has been removed from the North Korean version and users need to plug in an external hardware piece to access the government-controlled internal internet. Virtually all user activity is constantly monitored through a background software called "Red Flag", which takes a screenshot every time a user opens an app, much like the surveillance equipment in cell phones.⁶³⁶ The app records all browser history. Another app, "Trace Viewer", saves both search history and screenshots, and none of this data can be deleted. Thus, this app reminds the user that any activity is recorded and can be reviewed by the authorities. Only pre-approved apps can be installed. The tablet

⁶³⁴ Yonho Kim, "Cell Phones in North Korea: Has North Korea Entered the Telecommunications Revolution?" (Washington, D.C.: U.S.-Korea Institute at SAIS, 2014), 20.

⁶³⁵ For an excellent overview of the more recent surveillance technologies embedded in North Korean phones, see Kretchun, "The Regime Strikes Back."

⁶³⁶ Martyn Williams, "All That Glitters Is Not Gold: A Closer Look at North Korea's Ullim Tablet," 38 North, March 3, 2017, <https://www.38north.org/2017/03/mwilliams030317/>.

cannot open files other than those created and approved by the government. The censorship and surveillance software is reportedly fairly sophisticated.⁶³⁷

When North Korea's first cell phone network Koryolink was established, much of the discussion between Orascom and North Korean government representatives centered around the ability to provide solid encryption for high-level regime users and tight surveillance over the rest of the population. The regime was so concerned to ensure that adequate surveillance systems would be provided that high-level regime officials, such as the representative of North Korea to the U.N. in Geneva at the time, were personally in attendance during discussions between Orascom and the state. As North Korea technology expert Martyn Williams notes, the birth of North Korea's cell phone network "[...] established one of the most surveilled cellular environments in the world."⁶³⁸

Information control

Another clear trend during Kim's tenure has been tighter censorship information control.⁶³⁹ Kim brought this ambition to the top of the political agenda at the 8th Party Congress of the KWP in early 2021. Such control never ceased but only weakened as a result of the famine in the 1990s. Kim's congress speech highlighted the need for "a firm political climate" and "the struggle for eliminating [sic!] all kinds of anti-people

⁶³⁷ Williams, "All That Glitters Is Not Gold...".

⁶³⁸ Martyn Williams, "North Korea's Koryolink: Built for Surveillance and Control," *38 North*, July 22, 2019, <https://www.38north.org/2019/07/mwilliams072219/>.

⁶³⁹ This section is, in part, an adaption of an article previously published on 38 North. See Benjamin Katzeff Silberstein, "Kim Jong Un's Congress Report: More Economic and Social Controls on the Horizon," *38 North*, February 9, 2021, <https://www.38north.org/2021/02/kim-jong-uns-congress-report-more-economic-and-social-controls-on-the-horizon/>.

factors.”⁶⁴⁰ Kim also demanded “a revolution in newspapers, news services, radio and TV broadcasting and publishing”, implicitly saying that the state should strive to compete with illegal foreign alternatives.

This emphasis, however, began much earlier. Repression against outside influences has been a hallmark of Kim Jong-un’s tenure. In the winter of 2020, *Daily NK* reported, the Presidium of the Supreme People’s Assembly adopted a law against “reactionary thought,” defined as illegal “[...] listening to, recording or distributing foreign [radio] broadcasts; importing and distributing ‘impure’ foreign recordings, video content, books or other published materials; and copying or distributing music unapproved by the state.”⁶⁴¹ Those caught disseminating such materials can be sentenced to death, and the law even punishes people with up to two years in a labor camp for using South Korean expressions or speaking in a South Korean accent.⁶⁴²

The North Korean government has always severely punished smuggling and illicit consumption of South Korean TV dramas and pop music, but Kim’s regime has significantly intensified such crackdowns. These moves not only reflect the strong priority he attaches to repressing outside information but have also reportedly been taken in response to specific events whose narratives the regime has been eager to control—for

⁶⁴⁰ “Great Programme for Struggle Leading Korean-Style Socialist Construction to Fresh Victory: On Report Made by Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un at Eighth Congress of WPK,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, January 9, 2021, <http://www.mfa.gov.kp/en/on-report-at-eighth-congress-of-wpk/>.

⁶⁴¹ Seul-gi Jang, “A Deep Dive into N. Korea’s New ‘Anti-Reactionary Thought’ Law,” *Daily NK*, December 15, 2020, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/deep-dive-north-korea-new-anti-reactionary-thought-law/>.

⁶⁴² Seul-gi Jang, “Exclusive: Daily NK Obtains Materials Explaining Specifics of New ‘Anti-Reactionary Thought’ Law,” *Daily NK*, January 19, 2021, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/exclusive-daily-nk-obtains-materials-explaining-specifics-new-anti-reactionary-thought-law/>.

example, the rapprochement with South Korea and the summits between Kim Jong-un and Moon Jae-in 2018, and the general downturn in North Korea's economic situation and relations with the US and South Korea at the present moment.⁶⁴³

Kim Jong-un's emphasis on information control goes back to the earliest days of his tenure. In 2014, Kim gave a speech at a large-scale meeting for "ideological workers" where he accused the "imperialists" of attempting "to infiltrate corrupt reactionary ideology and culture into our country" and singled out "young people" and "service personnel" as a particularly receptive target group. He also called for "[...] putting up [sic] 'mosquito net' double and treble to prevent the viruses of capitalist ideology which the enemy is persistently attempting to spread from infiltrating across our border."⁶⁴⁴

These policy pronouncements appear to have had practical implications. For example, a 2017 study based on refugee interviews indicated that crackdowns against foreign media and unsanctioned information, as well as general smuggling, had become significantly harsher during Kim Jong Un's time in power. Indeed, "[n]ot a single survey respondent believed that it had become less dangerous to watch South Korean and other foreign dramas under Kim Jong Un, and the majority believed it had become more dangerous."⁶⁴⁵ As one source inside North Korea told Daily NK in early 2018, "[i]t used to be that you just needed money to watch South Korean dramas, but that's no longer the

⁶⁴³ Mi-jin Kang, "Crackdown on South Korean Media Continues despite North-South 'Thaw,'" *Daily NK*, January 17, 2018, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/crackdown-on-south-korean-media-co/>.

⁶⁴⁴ "Speech of Kim Jong Un at Conference of Ideological Workers," *Korean Central News Agency*, February 27, 2017.

⁶⁴⁵ Nat Kretchun, Catherine Lee, and Seamus Tuohy, "Compromising Connectivity: Information Dynamics between the State and Society in a Digitizing North Korea" (Washington, D.C.: InterMedia, 2017), 24.

case. Now only Ministry of State Security (MSS) officials or agents can openly watch them, while ordinary people have to find secretive methods to view them.”⁶⁴⁶

Economic control

Although counterintuitive, Kim Jong Un’s early experimentation with economic relaxation is consistent with the trend of greater control over information.⁶⁴⁷ Some of the most significant changes were encapsulated in the so-called “Our Style Economic Management Methods” of institutional changes from June 2012, which allowed significant decentralization of management and production planning in the state sector, granted permission for farming units to freely dispose or keep 30 percent of their production, and permitted some limited private investments in the small business sector, to name a few examples.

Kim may have intended such market mechanisms to boost economic efficiency and productivity. At the same time, these policy experiments primarily formalized private economic activity already taking place. In doing so, the state also sought to administer and gain oversight over such activity, partially to reap financial benefits through taxes and fees. In addition, in recent years, the state has scrapped previous reforms in areas such as foreign trade and recentralized control. The state never legalized common practices like private management of firms.

⁶⁴⁶ “North Koreans Search for Alternatives amid S. Korean Media Crackdown,” *Daily NK*, March 30, 2018, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-koreans-search-for-alternati/>.

⁶⁴⁷ Katzeff Silberstein, “Kim Jong Un’s Congress Report.”

The most obvious and visible example of this dual attitude in economic governance is the growth of general markets. Many facets of market trade were illegal when they first became common after the famine, and vast marketplaces sprung up despite this to fill the gap when the state failed to provide food. Now, most markets are administered by the government, which collects taxes and fees, and issues permits for market trade. Indeed, as one of the most thorough empirical studies of the market system concluded, “[...] the General Market system has developed as a direct result of North Korean government policy.”⁶⁴⁸ Although very little is known about the contents of the amendment and its implementation, a recent example appears to be the revisions to the country’s enterprise law that the Supreme People’s Assembly adopted in early November 2020. It reportedly incorporates semi-private businesses contracting with state-owned foreign trade companies into the larger state-owned enterprises they are affiliated with, placing them under Workers’ Party administration.

Thus, the formalization of private economic activity in the Kim Jong Un era has never been about liberalization for liberalization’s sake. Stronger government oversight has always been central, and the recent pronouncements of strengthened control in Kim’s congress report fulfill this ambition as well. The state appears to be rolling back much of the freedom it previously gave to economic actors. In retrospect, it is doubtful that Kim Jong Un was ever interested in major economic reforms. It is important not to exaggerate the regime’s permissive attitude toward market mechanisms in the first years of Kim’s rule.

⁶⁴⁸ In-ho Park, “The Creation of the North Korean Market System” (Seoul, Republic of Korea: Daily NK, June 7, 2018), https://www.dailynk.com/english/?kboard_content_redirect=68.

Synopsis: North Korea and Totalitarianism

As this chapter has sought to show, Kim Jong-un espouses a more efficient form of totalitarian governance in North Korea. Totalitarianism as a system is far from dead. The concept is also not an outdated category of scholarly analysis. Critics of totalitarianism as a societal model see it as overly simplistic, and claim that it assumes a monolithic, efficient state as well as a mind-altering official ideology.⁶⁴⁹ Two such critics, Fitzpatrick and Geyer, describe Brzezinski and Friedrich's six points as a narrowing "straitjacket."⁶⁵⁰ Gleason claims that Western scholars often changed their minds upon having spent time in the Soviet Union, perhaps realizing that the actors they studied had far more agency than they had attributed to them.⁶⁵¹

But much of the criticism against totalitarianism misses the mark. The framework cannot be evaluated by comparing the reality of totalitarianism, made up of human beings, with a perfectly functioning model. Few would, for example, claim that the United States cannot be a capitalist society because inefficiencies still exist on its labor market. Totalitarianism is a necessary and useful concept to understand exceptionally harsh dictatorships, such as North Korea, where the state seeks to control every aspect of human life. Writings by its own leaders, as well as a wide range of government publications, make clear the North Korean state's ambitions to fully manage and control almost every aspect of people's everyday lives. The North Korean state did not retreat

⁶⁴⁹ Geyer and Fitzpatrick, *Beyond Totalitarianism*, 8.

⁶⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 6.

⁶⁵¹ Gleason, *Totalitarianism*, 6.

after it largely lost the ability to centrally plan and direct the economy. Kim Jong-un made what appears to be a relatively pragmatic assessment of the situation when he came to power: the state was broken and desperately lacking in capacity, and he seeks to regain the state's standing and authority.

As a system of governance, totalitarianism appears more durable than scholars often claim. Scott's rendition of everyday resistance, in private, is a powerful statement about human nature. This dissertation confirms many of his claims, as people in what the outside world often see as the most oppressive state in the modern world have exercised their individuality by engaging in acts that the state has sought to stamp out. This was also true during the 1960s, 70s and 80s, a period otherwise often described as stable. At the same time, this always occurred within a framework set up by the state. The limits of the permissible were always clear, and people knew that outright criticism of the government was never a realistic option.

Can Kim Jong-un succeed in rebuilding the state's totalitarian governmentality? There are strong reasons to believe that the regime's main threats lie among its own ranks. As the country's economic situation continues to deteriorate, it is becoming increasingly clear that Kim's promises to the elite and growing class of people making significant amounts of money, of a life with ever-improving material conditions, remains a distant dream. Perhaps with little to lose and scant hope for the future, discontent will finally boil over in the upper ranks. Kim is unlikely to launch a general attack on the market system as such, given its centrality in providing for people's sustenance. But current movements to suppress and reign in aspects of the private economy, partially in

order to reap resources for the state, may end up with the government overplaying its hand and the general public fighting back, seeing few other options. Because this has not happened on any large scale before in North Korean history does not mean that it never will.

But we should also not exaggerate the potential for anti-state resistance out of wishful thinking. It is time to recognize two possibilities that, while they may seem inherently contradictory, may actually hold true at the same time. The North Korean public may despise its leadership and may have put up more organized, forceful resistance should it have seen this as a realistic possibility. There may also be aspects of the North Korean regime that hold some popularity. Although the general attitude of the German public toward Nazi rule was one of apathy and complicity, its war against Soviet Bolshevism, for example, was generally popular.⁶⁵² Survey data suggests that the North Korean regime has been somewhat successful, despite its enormous failures in governance and provision of basic social services, in rousing a sense of patriotism among the population.⁶⁵³ Although it may be difficult to reckon with even a small degree of popular support for a regime such as the North Korean one, we must recognize that most people, including those from totalitarian states, hold a complex set of emotions and attitudes about the country where they live. It is, after all, the place they call home.

⁶⁵² Eley, "Hitler's Silent Majority?," 11.

⁶⁵³ Christopher Green and Steven Denney, "North Korean Patriotism: Assessing the Successes and Failures of a Nation," *Korea Journal* 61, no. 1 (March 2021): 154–85.

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Ri Young-hee. Interview by author, Seoul, Republic of Korea, July 12, 2019.

Ri Young-hee. Interview transcript, Seoul, Republic of Korea, July 30.

Sin Myŏng-ok. Interview transcript, Seoul, Republic of Korea, June 11, 2019.

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