

## **CHALLENGES REMAIN: NORTH KOREAN REFUGEES IN SOUTH KOREA**

**GRADES:** High School

**AUTHOR:** Frances Knechel

**SUBJECT:** History, Society/Culture, North Korea

**TIME REQUIRED:** Two 65-minute classes.

### **INTRODUCTION:**

“I felt like someone from the 1970s who was put on a time machine and dropped in the 21st century.”-Kim Kyeong-il, as quoted in the *New York Times*

North Korean refugees resettling in South Korea have successfully managed to relocate, but their past in North Korea continues to present challenges for their readjustment in South Korea. With nearly 23,000 North Korean refugees moving to South Korea in the last decade, this transitional challenge affects many people and presents a challenge for South Korean policy and society. For this lesson, students will examine political, economic, cultural, religious, and other facets of life in North Korea and South Korea to more broadly imagine the complexities of adjusting to life in a country that is very different from the one the refugee left. Students will specifically use excerpts from Barbara Demick’s *Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea*, as well as newspaper articles and other online sources to research and examine the surprises and challenges that refugees entering South Korea after a life in North Korea would confront. Many realize that it is difficult to leave North Korea and ultimately reach South Korea – that the physical escape is quite a hardship and a risk. The goal of this lesson is to realize that the challenges of adjusting to a new life are also a great obstacle.

In roughly sixty years, South Korea went from being a war-torn country that was quite poor and reliant on foreign aid to the 15th largest economy in the world. Meanwhile, under very different government policies, North Korea suffered from famines, lost support when other Communist countries fell, and today has an economy and infrastructure that has lost power during South Korea’s quick rise. While it is difficult to imagine the changes that someone living in Seoul, South Korea faced if alive between the 1950s and today, that change is indescribably more drastic and likely alarming to a North Korean refugee who arrives at the Seoul airport and sees the wealthy, democratic South Korea for the first time.

### **OBJECTIVES:**

- Students will be able to analyze videos, articles, book excerpts, websites, and photos to make inferences about life in North Korea and life in South Korea.

- Students will cite their sources to indicate where they found information on North Korea and South Korea.
- Students will write their findings on life in North Korea and South Korea and discuss their findings with their classmates.
- Students will reflect on their discussion in writing by suggesting what they see as the primary challenges for South Korean policy-makers and organizations to address as they continue to work to integrate North Korean refugees into their society.

## **STANDARDS:**

Common Core:

W1. Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

W4 Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose and audience.

WHST 1 Write arguments focused on discipline-specific content.

WHST 9 Draw evidence from informational texts to support analysis, reflection, research

WHST 10 Write routinely over extended time frames and shorter time frames for a range of discipline-related specific tasks

SL1 Initiate and participate in effectively in a range of collaborative discussion

SL 2 Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media

SL 4 Present information, findings, and supporting evidence

RH 1 Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources

RH 7 Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media

## **MATERIALS REQUIRED:**

- Laptop or tablet with Internet access and link to lesson and its resources. OR

- Printed copies of Handouts 1-6 if there is not class access to the Internet. One copy per student except for Handout 6 where printed color copies should be made and shared among three to four students. Printed or electronic copies of Handouts 1-8 if there is class access to the Internet.
- Computer and projector to share images of North Korea and South Korea with the class to analyze.

## **PROCEDURE:**

### First Class Day:

- Briefly share some background on the lesson reviewing any previous material they have learned about the end of the Korean War, the policies of North Korea to try to keep their citizens from leaving and the South Korean policy of welcoming North Korean refugees, and review the introduction to the lesson with students. (5 minutes)
- Distribute links to the lesson resources to students if they are using computers OR distribute handouts for the lesson. (2 minutes)
- Have students use Handout 2 as they analyze Handout 6, the photos of North Korea and South Korea. Ask them to record details of the images and make inferences and ask questions based on the photos. Discuss how there are multiple interpretations of photos; caution students against making general assumptions about all of life in North Korea and South Korea based on photos alone. (20 minutes)
- Ask students to use Handout 3 and record some of their impressions of elements of life in North Korea and South Korea based on their photo analysis work. (8 minutes)
- Instruct students to annotate Handout 1, Handout 4, and Handout 5 to develop their descriptions of life in North Korea and South Korea, adding notes to the chart on Handout 3. (30 minutes)
- IF students are using computers with Internet access, provide them Handout 6 and Handout 7 for further research. (Optional: Additional 25 minutes OR this may be assigned for homework.)

### Second Class Day:

- Divide the class in two groups. Ask one group to gather in a group for a discussion. Make sure each student in the discussion can see the other students. Chairs can be arranged in a circle or around a common table. The second group should pull their chairs about five feet away from the central discussion group. Assign the first discussion group North Korea – they will review the notes they took on life in North Korea as they recorded them on Handout 3. The discussion group will challenge each other's thinking, offer different interpretations, and build their notes from the conversation. During the discussion on

North Korea, the second group should be listening and also building their notes on Handout 3. They should write down any clarifying questions or differing interpretations to share at the end of the first group's discussion. (15-20 minutes)

- Ask discussion groups to switch spots – the inner circle now becomes the outer circle and gets to listen to the second group have a discussion about their findings on life in South Korea and take notes and record their clarifying questions and comments. (15-20 minutes)
- Gather both groups together in one discussion. Pose the question: How do challenges continue to plague North Koreans once they are living as refugees in South Korea? (10 minutes)
- Ask students to type or write a short essay response to the following questions. If they do not have time to complete this in class, they may finish for homework. Ask students to reference the sources they used in class to support their arguments when possible.
  - To what extent are North Korean refugees freed when they reach South Korea?
  - How do refugees both face a challenge and present a challenge in South Korea?
  - How should policy-makers and non-governmental organizations prioritize helping North Korean refugees?

#### **EVALUATION:**

- For a class participation grade, collect or circulate the room to review that students thoroughly completed their SPICER comparison of North Korea and South Korea (Handout 3).
- Follow student participation in the discussion and evaluate the group collectively for building on ideas; listening effectively; providing supported arguments referencing the handout sources; inviting all participants to contribute and asking clarifying questions. Simultaneously, evaluate the students who are outside the circle to make sure they are building their examples, recording questions, and listening to the conversation.
- Collect student essays and review to make sure students are making a claim and supporting their claim with evidence available to them (to include the handouts if those were the only resources shared OR the handouts and further independent research if that was expected of students).

#### **RESOURCES:**

Barbara Demick, *Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea* (Spiegel & Grau, 2010)

Martin Fackler, "Young North Korean Defectors Struggle in the South," *New York Times*, July 13, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/13/world/asia/young-north-korean-defectors-struggle-in-the-south.html>.

David Guttenfelder, "Inside North Korea," *Atlantic*, August 2, 2011,  
<http://www.theatlantic.com/infocus/2011/08/inside-north-korea/100119/#>.

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

Selig S. Harrison, "International Concern over divided peninsula. North Korea: in need of opening up the economy," *Le Monde diplomatique*, November 2003,  
<http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/55a/155.html>.

Inside North Korea, National Geographic, 2007.

Donald Kirk, "Inside North Korea, more cellphones and traffic lights, but real change lags," *Christian Science Monitor*, August 1, 2012, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia/Pacific/2012/0801/Inside-North-Korea-more-cellphones-and-traffic-lights-but-real-change-lags>.

Justin McCurry, "North Korean refugees adapt to life, school, and prejudice in South Korea," *Christian Science Monitor*, August 5, 2010, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia/Pacific/2010/0805/North-Korean-refugees-adapt-to-life-school-and-prejudice-in-South-Korea>.

"North Korea," Annual Report 2012, Amnesty International,  
<http://www.amnesty.org/en/region/north-korea/report-2012>.

"Strangers at Home: North Koreans in the South," International Crisis Group, July 14, 2011,  
<http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/asia/north-east-asia/north-korea/208-strangers-at-home-north-koreans-in-the-south.aspx>.

**HANDOUT 1: EXCERPTS FROM BARBARA DEMICK'S *NOTHING TO ENVY: ORDINARY LIVES IN NORTH KOREA* (2010)**

**On North Korea**

If you look at satellite photographs of the Far East by night, you'll see a large splotch curiously lacking in light. This area of darkness is the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Next to this mysterious black hole, South Korea, Japan, and now China fairly gleam with prosperity. Even from hundreds of miles above, the billboards, the headlights and streetlights, the neon of the fast-food chains appear as tiny white dots signifying people going about their business as twenty-first century energy consumers. Then, in the middle of it all, an expanse of blackness nearly as large as England. It is baffling how a nation of 23 million people can appear as vacant as the oceans. North Korea is simply a blank. (Demick 3-4)

North Korea faded to black in the early 1990s. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, which had propped up its old Communist ally with cheap fuel oil, North Korea's creakily inefficient economy collapsed. Power stations rusted into ruin. The lights went out. Hungry people scaled utility poles to pilfer bits of copper wire to swap for food. When the sun drops low in the sky, the landscape fades to gray and the squat little houses are swallowed up by the night. Entire villages vanish into the dusk. Even in parts of the showcase capital of Pyongyang, you can stroll down the middle of a main street at night without being able to see the buildings on either side. (Demick 3-4)

When outsiders stare into the void that is today's North Korea, they think of remote villages of Africa or Southeast Asia where the civilizing hand of electricity has not yet reached. But North Korea is not an undeveloped country; it is a country that has fallen out of the developed world. You can see the evidence of what once was and what has been lost dangling overhead alongside any major North Korean road – the skeletal wires of the rusted electrical grid that once covered the entire country. (Demick 3-4)

North Koreans beyond middle age remember well when they had more electricity (and for that matter food) than their pro-American cousins in South Korea, and that compounds the indignity of spending their nights sitting in the dark. (Demick 3-4)

By the accounts of defectors, there is at least one informer for every fifty people – more even than East Germany's notorious Stasi, whose files were pried open after German reunification. (Demick 52-53)

In fact, proper Communists didn't shop, period. Kim Il-sung had created about as anticonsumerist a culture as could exist in the twentieth century. Elsewhere in Asia, markets

teeming with humanity and merchandise abounded. Not in North Korea. The most famous stores in the country were Pyongyang's two department stores – Department Store No. 1 and Department Store No. 2, they were called – and their merchandise was about as exciting as their names. When I saw the stores on a visit to Pyongyang in 2005, I could see Chinese-made bicycles on the first floor, but it was unclear whether the merchandise was really for sale or just on display to impress foreigners....North Koreans were not supposed to shop because in theory everything they needed was supplied by the government in the name of Kim Il-sung's benevolence. They were supposed to get two sets of clothing each year – one for summer and one for winter. New clothes were dispensed by your work unit or school, often on Kim Il-sung's birthday, reinforcing his image as the source of all good things. Everything was pretty much standard issue. Only vinyl or canvas shoes were provided, as leather ones were a tremendous luxury and only people with some outside source of income could afford them. (Demick 61-62)

### **On South Korea**

Description of Suwon, a city twenty miles south of Seoul:

Suwon is home to Samsung Electronics and a cluster of manufacturing complexes producing objects most North Koreans would be stumped to identify – computer monitors, CD-ROMs, digital televisions, flash-memory sticks. The place is loud and cluttered, a cacophony of mismatched colors and sounds. As in most South Korean cities, the architecture is an amalgam of ugly concrete boxes topped with garish signage. High-rise apartments radiate for miles away from a congested downtown lined with Dunkin' Donuts and Pizza Huts and a host of Korean knock-offs. The backstreets are filled with love hotels with names like Eros Motel and Love-Inn Park that advertise rooms by the hour. The customary state of traffic is gridlock as thousands of Hyundais – more fruit of the economic miracle – try to plow their way between home and the malls. (Demick 8)

The 2002 World Cup was being co-hosted by South Korea and Japan. Not since 1988, when South Korea hosted the Olympics, was there so much footage from Seoul. Mrs. Song wasn't that interested in soccer, but she was intrigued by the glimpses of South Korea she saw in the background. She couldn't help but notice the cars, the high-rises, the shops. During the commercial breaks, there were advertisements for mobile telephones and other things that Mrs. Song had never heard of. When the South Korean team beat Poland, tied the United States, and beat Portugal, Italy, and Spain to reach the semifinals – the first Asian team to do so – millions poured out into the streets to celebrate. They wore red T-shirts and horns with little red lights for the team's fan club, the Red Devils. There they were, Koreans just like her, speaking the same language, but looking so beautiful, so happy, and so free. (Demick 241)

## **Comparing North Korea and South Korea**

Both North and South Koreans are steeped in Confucian traditions in which boys carry on the family line and care for elderly parents. (Demick 13)

Kim Jong-il realized that the Cold War was over, but he didn't seem to grasp that his old Communist patrons were more interested in making money than bankrolling an anachronistic dictatorship with nuclear ambitions. The economy of his archrival, South Korea, had edged ahead in the mid-1970s; by the next decade, North Korea had been left in the dust. Never mind Communist solidarity, China and the Soviet Union wanted to do business with the likes of Hyundai and Samsung, not with state-owned enterprises in the North that didn't pay their bills on time. In 1990, the year before it collapsed, the Soviet Union established diplomatic relations with South Korea in a devastating blow to North Korea's world standing. China followed suit two years later. (Demick 66-67)

Certainly, North Korea doesn't have the love hotels of South Korea or Japan. You can't check into a regular hotel without a travel permit, and no hotel would ever admit an unmarried couple in any case. (Demick 81)

The prudishness is part of traditional Korean culture. It is easy to forget when you're in Seoul and see schoolgirls wearing thigh-high tartan skirts that just a century ago respectable Korean women wore full-body coverings that would rival anything required by the Taliban. (Demick 81)

Listening to South Korean television was like looking in the mirror for the first time in your life and realizing you were unattractive. North Koreans were always told theirs was the proudest country in the world, but the rest of the world considered it a pathetic, bankrupt regime. (Demick 194)

## **On North Korean refugees**

In the nearly half a century that elapsed between the end of the Korean War and Mi-ran's defection in October 1998, only 923 North Koreans had fled to South Korea. It was a miniscule number if you consider that while the Berlin Wall stood an average of 21,000 East Germans fled west every year....The North Korean regime took extraordinary measures to keep its population locked up. Fences were erected along the beaches in Chongjin and other coastal cities in the early 1990s to prevent people from sailing off to Japan...That changed in the late 1990s. The famine and the economic changes in China gave North Koreans new motivation to escape. From the border, they could see shiny new cars scooting along the wharf by the Tumen River. They could see with their own eyes that life in China looked good....The numbers of defectors grew



exponentially. By 2001, it was estimated that 100,000 North Koreans had sneaked into China, a small percentage of whom eventually defected to South Korea. (Demick 213)

The qualities most prized in South Korea – height, fair skin, affluence, prestigious degrees, designer clothes, English-language fluency – are precisely those that the newly arrived defector lacks, which accounts for the low self-esteem typically found among North Koreans in the South, such as Oak-hee. South Koreans weren't much better off fifty years ago, but North Koreans remind them of a past they would rather forget. The defectors also augur a frightening future, with good reason – South Koreans fear that the collapse of Kim Jong-il's regime will see their country overrun by 23 million people in need of food and shelter. Although political correctness dictates that all Koreans yearn for their missing king ("reunification is our desire, even in our dreams," South Korean schoolchildren dutifully sing), some view the prospect with dread. Think tanks in Seoul regularly churn out reports estimating how much it would cost to reunify, with figures ranging from \$300 billion to \$1.8 trillion. Young people, born long after the end of the Korean War, have less sentimentality about the missing other half of Korea. They would rather ignore the impoverished, nuclear-armed dictatorship looming above them. In the blur of their busy lives, working the longest hours of any developed nation, playing hard, driving their Hyundais fast, and listening to their iPods loud, it is easy to forget. (Demick 256-257)

North Korean defectors often find it hard to settle down. It is not easy for somebody who's escaped a totalitarian country to live in the free world. Defectors have to rediscover who they are in a world that offers endless possibilities. Choosing where to live, what to do, even which clothes to put on in the morning is tough enough for those of us accustomed to making choices; it can be utterly paralyzing for people who've had decisions made for them by the state their entire lives. (Demick 283-284)

## HANDOUT 2: PHOTO ANALYSIS GUIDELINES

### Observation

Look at the photos of North Korea and South Korea (see Handout 6). Form an overall impression of each photograph before you begin to examine individual items. Next, look at each quadrant of the photo to see what new details become apparent.

Describe what you see. Are there people, objects, or activities shown in the photograph? What does the setting look like?

Photos of North Korea	Photos of South Korea

### Inference

Based on your above observations, list what you might infer from the photographs. What can you learn from the images about life in North Korea or in South Korea? How do the photos of North Korea compare with the photos of South Korea? What is shown? What is missing? What might this say about life in North Korea or South Korea?

Write notes here and include your hypotheses in your SPICER chart to build an idea of the similarities and differences between North and South Korea.

### Questions

What questions do these photographs raise in your mind? What information would you like to learn to corroborate your hypotheses? Where could you look for that information?

### **HANDOUT 3: USING *SPICER* TO UNDERSTAND THE COMPLEXITIES OF NORTH KOREAN REFUGEES' TRANSITION TO SOUTH KOREA**

**SPICER:** An acronym to help you organize your understanding of history. These multiple lenses of thinking about the world are helpful for brainstorming about the many elements of life.

**Social:** How people interact with other people in society. Includes where people live, work, and play, as well as the interactions individuals have with people throughout society and the norms on which society is based.

**Political:** How political power is gained and used to govern society.

**Intellectual:** How people think about the world and express their thoughts. How people are educated and who is educated is a reflection of a society's intellectual values.

**Cultural:** Includes what people eat, how they dress, how they speak and write, how they create art.

**Economic:** How people acquire and distribute money and how the broader system of earning and spending money functions.

**Religious:** How people think about God and organize (or do not organize) around God.

	Social	Political	Intellectual	Cultural	Economic	Religious
North Korea						
South Korea						

**HANDOUT 4: NYTIMES ARTICLE**  
**“YOUNG NORTH KOREAN DEFECTORS STRUGGLE IN THE SOUTH”**

*The New York Times*

July 12, 2012

Young North Korean Defectors Struggle in the South

By MARTIN FACKLER

SEOUL, South Korea — Kim Seong-cheol is a survivor. He left his home in North Korea at the age of 8 for a Dickensian existence, begging on the streets with a pack of boys when famine struck and his parents could not feed him. By his account, he endured several stays in brutal North Korean and Chinese prisons for attempting to cross the border into China.

But when he finally made it to South Korea, and freedom, Mr. Kim faced an obstacle that even his considerable street smarts could not help him overcome. He had placed into a university under a new affirmative action program, but was haunted by the deprivations of his past and quickly slipped behind South Korean classmates who had already made it through years of an extremely competitive education system.

“I just couldn’t shake the memory of hunger from my mind,” said Mr. Kim, 26, who dropped out after just one semester and fell into a deep, alcohol-fueled depression.

Mr. Kim is part of a growing number of defectors who are making their way south — the number has increased sevenfold to 23,000 in the last decade — and posing a growing challenge for South Korea. Attempts at integration, including government-run crash courses on life in the capitalist South, have had mixed results, leaving many North Koreans unable to adapt to South Korea’s high-pressure society or overcome their stereotype as backward country cousins.

The government had hoped that education might close the chasm, offering piecemeal steps over the last decade that evolved into a full-fledged affirmative action program, which gives young North Koreans the chance to bypass grueling entrance exams to enter top universities. Now, even that stopgap measure appears to be failing as large numbers of North Koreans are dropping out, creating new worries that they and other defectors could become part of a permanent underclass.

“These children are simply not equipped for South Korea’s fiercely competitive society,” said Shin Hyo-sook, a specialist in education at the North Korean Refugees Foundation, a newly created government research institute. “They suffer identity issues due to their extreme experiences.”

The difficulties have come despite the fact that the government and universities have tried to give them an additional leg up, offering the approximately 500 defectors enrolled in South Korean universities free tuition, government-paid housing and living stipends. And the problems are likely to get more pronounced as defectors increasingly include whole families and children who left without their parents.

Officials say the difficulties tend to appear at university because it is the first time that the defectors, who are sent to special remedial elementary and high schools after arriving, find themselves in the same classroom with South Korean students.

Many South Koreans had assumed that a shared language and culture would help defectors ease past the educational gaps, but the defectors say the extra help is not enough to catch up with South Korean classmates who spent the evenings and weekends of their childhood at cram schools preparing for entrance exams. Most of the North Koreans, often from that nation's lower social rungs, have at most a few years of elementary school education more focused on political indoctrination than reading and math, defectors say.

An even bigger challenge, educators say, are the defectors' emotional problems. While South Korean officials say they have not concluded whether these children suffer cognitive deficiencies from malnutrition, they say the North Koreans often suffer depression, anger and other symptoms of post-traumatic stress.

What is clear is the result: education experts say that at many universities, half or more of North Korean defectors are dropping out, though the problem is so new that complete statistics do not exist. (The dropout rate among South Koreans is just 4.5 percent.)

One North Korean who barely avoided that fate is Kim Kyeong-il, whose family reached the South in its second attempt to defect seven years ago. After the first attempt, when he was 9, he says, he was thrown into a North Korean prison where he barely survived the beatings and starvation that claimed the life of his father. After arriving in the South at 17 and going to a special remedial school, he got a chance to enter Korea University, one of the country's most prestigious schools. But he found himself way behind in English, which he was not taught in virulently anti-Western North Korea. He was even behind in Korean, having reached only the fourth grade in the North. In lectures, he did not understand the professors' jokes about South Korean pop culture, but laughed anyway to avoid sticking out.

"I felt like someone from the 1970s who was put on a time machine and dropped in the 21st century," said Mr. Kim, 24, a senior majoring in Chinese language. He said many of his classmates shun him for his northern accent, and for his small stature likely caused by inadequate nutrition.

He avoided dropping out by transferring to Seoul's Yonsei University, another high-level university but one that has been cited as a model for the support it offers defectors.

The university offers its approximately 50 North Korean students free tutoring and psychological counseling, according to Jeong Chong-hun, a professor who advises the North Koreans there. "They risked their lives to seek freedom here, so it's our obligation to help," he said.

Still, he said some students grow so isolated or bitter that they skip classes, and even there, a third of the defectors do not finish school. One North Korean student at Yonsei committed suicide.

Kim Seong-cheol, the former street beggar, said his own feelings of intense isolation contributed to his leaving school. His relatively coddled classmates, he said, could not possibly understand the traumas that he had suffered — the wrenching decision to leave his parents to survive or the pain of being shocked with electric prods in prison camps. And they were unburdened by the nightmares that jolted him awake at nights, leaving him too exhausted to study. In the worst dream, he relived the death of his best friend, over and over. The boy died in front of him, choking on a stolen ball of rice as an angry merchant kicked him.

But after a year of heavy drinking and never leaving his government-paid apartment during the day, Mr. Kim decided it was not in his nature to give up.

He enrolled at a new school, Konkuk University in Seoul, and changed his major from computer science to real estate, in part because it seemed easier.

"I must succeed this time," said Mr. Kim, now a junior. "But whatever I do here, I still always ask myself, 'What am I? Where do I belong?'"

**HANDOUT 5: CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR ARTICLE**  
**“INSIDE NORTH KOREA, MORE CELLPHONES AND TRAFFIC LIGHTS, BUT**  
**REAL CHANGE LAGS”**

*The Christian Science Monitor* – from CSMonitor.com

Inside North Korea, more cellphones and traffic lights, but real change lags

A visitor to North Korea finds more signs of modernization in Pyongyang as Kim Jong-un consolidates power. But it's hard to tell if reform is afoot in a country that remains deeply impoverished and isolated.

By Donald Kirk, Correspondent  
posted August 1, 2012 at 11:25 am EDT

Pyongyang, North Korea

A sense of incipient change is in the air here as North Korea's traditional rhetoric about nuclear war contrasts with signs of a desire to reform a society that remains dangerously impoverished, underfed, and undeveloped.

True, over the past few years, Pyongyang has shown signs of modernizing: Eight or nine glistening high-rise apartment buildings form a new skyline in the heart of the capital, and a concert hall opened last month featuring the Pyongyang Symphony Orchestra performing compositions in praise of new leader Kim Jong-un; his grandfather, Kim Il-sung; and his father, Kim Jong-il. Traffic lights are replacing the legendary traffic ladies at key intersections, and taxis with checker designs on the front doors line up outside hotels and restaurants.

Together with visits from high-profile foreigners, the impression is that of a gradual opening, at least for a sliver of the city's elite.

Such signs, however, belie a longstanding commitment to the policy of *juche*, meaning self-reliance, and, more important, *songun*, or "military first." The result has been the deification of the Kim dynasty in a system in which the military has held sway while the economy has plunged ever deeper into an abyss of widespread hunger, disease, and neglect.

"We have nuclear weapons," boasts a North Korean Army captain at Panmunjom, the site of the signing of the Korean War armistice in 1953 along the line between North and South Korea. "They guarantee that we will be safe from nations far away from Korea. We Ko-reans never invade anyone, but we have strong capabilities."

Now outsiders are scrutinizing Kim Jong-un for any glimmer that he may be opening the country. Yet the veneration of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il is so total that it's not clear if Kim Jong-un, believed to be still in his late 20s with no previous experience in governance, can or even wants to reverse the pattern his grandfather and father set before him.

#### A visit to the North

Life may be marginally more open here than a few years ago, but visitors aren't permitted to talk with ordinary people or walk into stores or markets to see if the shelves are as empty as they appear from quick looks through the windows.

New statues of Kim Il-sung, who ruled for nearly half a century until his death in 1994, and his son and heir, Kim Jong-il, who died last December, stand tall over Mansudae, a promontory with a sweeping view of much of the city. Korean and foreign visitors line up in front of them to pay respect; one or two bow and place flowers at the bronze feet.

In the end, a visit here turns into a game in which authorities keep watch over foreigners with the same consummate skill they show in controlling their own people.

At any of the two or three hotels where foreigners are consigned, they can eat, drink, and buy souvenirs when not gazing at monuments, traipsing through museums, and seeing such sights as the Pueblo, the US Navy spy ship captured off the east coast in 1968 and moored here on the Daedong River.

Foreigners don't, however, get to chat up anyone other than the few whom the government appointed guides – visitors call them "minders" – want them to see. And they aren't permitted to photograph anything deemed embarrassing by the mysterious figures who make the rules.

Stops at Kim Il-sung's birthplace and museums glorifying his life are mandatory. People are told not to fold or toss newspapers and magazines emblazoned with pictures of him, his son, or his grandson, who took over after his father's death. There are constant reminders of their "on-the-spot guidance" in everything from agriculture to home building to industry to defense against what's claimed as a constant threat of an attack.

#### North Korea: military first and self-reliance

Superficially, the North Korean media venerates Kim Jong-un in superlatives that place him on nearly the same level as his forebears, while he pays at least lip service to the policy of songun, often in fiery rhetorical blasts against South Korea.



"If the US side wants another war, they will have to sign a document of surrender, not an armistice," the captain at Panmunjom dutifully quotes Kim Jong-un, elevated to the rank of marshal this month, as saying when he paid a visit in March. "We should defeat them using the Korean style of repelling them."

At the base of a tower honoring *juche*, symbolized by a hammer, a sickle, and a writing brush, a woman explains its significance in terms of "threats" by the country's main enemies: the United States, South Korea, and Japan, which ruled the Korean Peninsula as a colony for 35 years before the Japanese surrendered in 1945.

"Our goal is to keep our sovereignty," she says. "By investing in the economy we could be better off, but to be independent is more important."

No one here would dare question that principle, but Kim Jong-un is believed to want to bring about change, at least in emphasis.

Signs of change?

The new leader is assumed to have been the one who convinced his father four years ago of the need for cellphones. Configured to make international calls impossible, they're widely seen here as a sign of the desire to modernize, though not break with the past.

More evidence of a buildup of Kim Jong-un was his appearance with a mystery woman later confirmed to be his wife, Ri Sol-ju, at a performance featuring Walt Disney characters.

North Korean state TV broadcast the show just as Kim Jong-un was about to face off against the top military chief – a hard-line general who owed his career to Kim Jong-il's military-first policy.

Reports have since emerged that conflicts over economic policy lay behind the decision to strip Gen. Ri Yong-ho of his posts while Kim Jong-un battles to remove the armed forces from control over the economy.

Kim Jong-un's ultimate goal would seem to be to put civilian experts in charge of an economy that was, as late as the 1960s, ahead of that of South Korea.

In fact, there was a time, during the period of Japanese rule over the Korean Peninsula that ended in 1945, that Korea's biggest industries were in the north. The old Japanese-made factories, later modernized with aid from the former Soviet Union, have largely fallen into disrepair – and disuse.

The question is whether Kim Jong-un can grasp the depth of the problem – and then institute changes that would enable the economy to begin to revive.

Visitors, however, get no notion of serious conflict. They can't go on the Internet or receive e-mail. They have to deposit their cellphones at the airport on arrival. They're blocked from making local phone calls to anyone but diplomats and representatives of international organizations. Outgoing calls all have to go from hotel call centers, are extremely expensive, and presumably are monitored. Itineraries have to be set far in advance.

The rules are just as tough on foreign embassies and companies as they are on short-term visitors. They're unable to call even their own local staff members, all of whom are paid directly by the government, not their ostensible employers.

Much of the country, moreover, is closed to foreign diplomats.

The European Union nations maintain embassies, but their ambassadors readily acknowledge that they face many of the same limitations as do short-term visitors.

Diplomats, when they do travel, come back wondering about another issue – the gulf between the 3 million people living in Pyongyang and the country's 21 million other citizens. How long, they ask privately, will people remain so supine, amenable to the will of the center, before they seriously complain?

Where are the protests?

For now, such complaints do not appear to pose a serious threat.

The contrast between life in the capital and elsewhere, though, is obvious. Cars are more common here than elsewhere, and most of the country's 1 million cellphone users live in the capital and a few other major centers.

For many, life in the best of times is harsh. Down the east coast, on the way to the Mt. Kumgang tourist complex just above the North-South Korea line, thousands of "volunteers" hunker over portions of a rusted single-track rail line, hammering at rocks for the rail bed. No modern equipment is in sight.

Inside the Kumgang resort, at the foot of stupendous granitic peaks, the scene is one of desolation.

Business shows no sign of recovering since South Korean President Lee Myung-bak four years ago banned tourists from entering from the South after a guard shot and killed a middle-aged woman who'd ventured from the tourist zone to gaze at the sunrise.

A minder, normally polite and cheerful, rationalizes the incident: The woman, he says, ignored shouts and a warning shot and was wandering toward "an Army base."

As for Mr. Lee, he says, echoing state media, "I would like to kill him, not by shooting him, but with my bare hands."

At the martyrs' cemetery honoring those who died fighting the Japanese, atop Pyongyang's highest hill overlooking Kumsusan, the spacious memorial hall for the bodies of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il, hundreds of soldiers file by.

They're about 18 or 19 years old, but look 12 or 13 – the result of a lack of food that has stunted the growth of much of the populace. Some grin at the foreign visitors. A few wave good-naturedly despite the presence of grizzled sergeants accompanying them.

An inscription on a memorial reads: "The noble revolutionary spirit will live forever in the hearts of the people."

Judging from the faces of these teenagers, however, it's hard to believe that North Korea's vaunted 1.2 million-man Army, many of whom actually live on farms or in factories, not in military outposts, are ready or eager to fight.

**HANDOUT 6: IMAGES OF NORTH KOREA AND SOUTH KOREA**



# Images of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea)

























# Images of the Republic of Korea (South Korea)

























## HANDOUT 7: ADDITIONAL RESOURCES INSIGHT INTO LIFE IN NORTH KOREA

Amnesty International's Annual Report 2012. North Korea.

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/region/north-korea/report-2012>

- This page provides information on life in North Korea and focuses on human rights violations. It is a reflection on 2011 that was published in 2012, so it is relatively recent.

“Inside North Korea, more cellphones and traffic lights, but real change lags.” *The Christian Science Monitor*. August 1, 2012.

<http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-Pacific/2012/0801/Inside-North-Korea-more-cellphones-and-traffic-lights-but-real-change-lags>

- A look at some of the ways North Korea has changed recently, while also acknowledging the many continued controls over North Koreans.

Inside North Korea. National Geographic. 2007.

<http://video.nationalgeographic.com/video/national-geographic-channel/full-episodes/explorer/ngc-inside-north-korea/>

- A 45-minute undercover video done on a doctor's trip to North Korea to help a group of people regain their eyesight. This is a useful way for students to gain a look at North Korea through film.

International Concern over divided peninsula. North Korea: in need of opening up the economy. Selig S. Harrison, *Le Monde diplomatique*, November 2003.

<http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/55a/155.html>

- Article addresses the food concerns in North Korea, the inaccessibility of Western media to most North Koreans, and criticizes simple comparisons of North and South Korea to East and West Germany.

## **HANDOUT 8: ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

### **STRUGGLES OF NORTH KOREANS IN SOUTH KOREA**

“North Korean refugees adapt to life, school, and prejudice in South Korea.” *The Christian Science Monitor*. August 5, 2010.

<http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-Pacific/2010/0805/North-Korean-refugees-adapt-to-life-school-and-prejudice-in-South-Korea>

- Provides examples of what some young refugees experience in South Korea, particularly the challenge of not seeing their families, left behind in North Korea, and the difficulty of finding employment.

“Young North Korean Defectors Struggle in the South.” *The New York Times*. July 13, 2012.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/13/world/asia/young-north-korean-defectors-struggle-in-the-south.html?pagewanted=all>

- Article gives some insight into refugees’ lives in North Korea as well as insight into the struggles in South Korea when the young refugees are enrolled in university.

“Strangers at Home: North Koreans in the South.” International Crisis Group. July 14, 2011.

<http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/asia/north-east-asia/north-korea/208-strangers-at-home-north-koreans-in-the-south.aspx>

- Looks at the ways that South Korea is not prepared to handle the issues North Korean refugees are facing, particularly considering South Korea’s already high suicide rate. This article suggests how different the two Koreas are today making for an even more difficult adjustment for North Koreans moving to South Korea.

Sources: North Korean Refugees Foundation. Peterson Institute for International Economics.

<http://www.piie.com/blogs/nk/?p=6894>

- Great chart to show the numbers of refugees living in South Korea to give an idea of how many people’s lives are affected.