They Think They're Normal

Enduring Questions and New Research on North Korea—A Review Essay

David C. Kang

Patrick McEachern, *Inside the Red Box: North Korea's Post-Totalitarian Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010)

Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland, *Famine in North Korea: Markets, Aid, and Reform* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007)

Suk-Young Kim, *Illusive Utopia: Theater, Film, and Everyday Performance in North Korea* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010)

North Korea's sinking of the South Korean naval vessel *Cheonan* in March 2010 has been described as South Korea's 9-11 moment. Eight months after the sinking, North Korean artillery fire killed two South Korean marines and two civilians and wounded eighteen others. That event was characterized as "the most serious incident since the Korean War."[1] Both incidents followed a November 2009 skirmish in which South Korean naval vessels opened fire on a North Korean patrol ship that had crossed the disputed Northern Limit Line, "damaging it badly," with suspected heavy casualties on the North Korean side.[2] Combined with revelations in November 2010 of a North Korean uranium nuclear program, nuclear tests of a plutonium-based weapon in 2006 and 2009, and continuing fears of missile and nuclear proliferation, the peninsula has entered a new Cold War.[3]

David C. Kang is Professor of International Relations and Business at the University of Southern California, Los Angeles.

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1. Donald Kirk, "Holed *Cheonan* Stern Ups the Ante," *Asia Times,* April 17, 2010, http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Korea/LD17Dg01.html; and Tom A. Peter, "North and South Korea Clash across Tense Border," *Christian Science Monitor,* November 23, 2010, http://www.csmonitor.com/World/terrorism-security/2010/1123/North-and-South-Korea-clash-across-tense-border.
2. Choe Sang-hun, "North Korea Warns South after Naval Clash," *New York Times*, November 11, 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/12/world/asia/12korea.html.
3. This uranium facility opens up the possibility of a second pathway to nuclear weapons development, a revelation that in and of itself is not immediately indicative of a weapons program. Many observers in the United States and South Korea believe, however, that this facility raises the probability of many hidden uranium facilities.

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Deterrence, isolation, and symbolic shows of force and determination are the current strategies for dealing with Pyongyang, but the "North Korea problem" remains as intractable as ever.

The scholarly literature about North Korea tends to cohere around three enduring and interrelated questions. First, to what extent is North Korea's foreign and domestic policy motivated primarily by internal versus external factors?[4] That is, what motivates the behavior of its leaders and people? Is it domestic factors such as the country's economic situation or ideology? Or could it be situational and external pressures such as North Korea's geographic or strategic position relative to those of other countries? Second, is North Korea strong or weak? Put differently, does the regime pursue militant and destabilizing foreign policies and repression at home because of fear, aggression, or greed?[5] Third, to what extent is North Korea's behavior predictable or unpredictable?[6] On the one hand, North Korea continues to defy outsiders' expectations about its survivability and to pursue seemingly random belligerent foreign policies. On the other hand, some observers argue that its behavior follows a particular pattern or cycle. In short, the regime has survived long beyond most expectations, despite obvious internal weaknesses and external pressure, and it continues to pursue policies that often appear puzzling or at least contradictory to the outside world.[7]

Depending on how one answers the questions above, the policy implications that follow are fairly straightforward. For policymakers, the question has always been whether to engage and interact with North Korea, or whether to contain it and attempt to isolate the people and the leadership. If one sees North Korea as fundamentally insecure, predictable, and concerned about its external relations, then engagement and carrots are the best way to lure the

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4. Victor D. Cha, "Korea's Place in the Axis," *Foreign Affairs,* Vol. 81, No. 3 (May/June 2002), pp. 79–92; and David C. Kang, "International Relations Theory and the Second Korean War," *International Studies Quarterly,* Vol. 47, No. 3 (September 2003), pp. 301–324.
5. Michael O'Hanlon, "Stopping a North Korean Invasion: Why Defending South Korea Is Easier than the Pentagon Thinks," *International Security,* Vol. 22, No. 4 (Spring 1998), pp. 135–170; David C. Kang, "Preventive War and North Korea," *Security Studies,* Vol. 4, No. 2 (Winter 1995), pp. 330–363; and Stuart Masaki, "The Korean Question: Assessing the Military Balance," *Security Studies,* Vol. 4, No. 2 (Winter 1995), pp. 365–425.
6. Denny Roy, "North Korea as an Alienated State," *Survival,* Vol. 38, No. 4 (Winter 1996), pp. 22–36; Hazel Smith, "Bad, Mad, Sad, or Rational Actor? Why the Securitization Paradigm Makes for Poor Policy Analysis of North Korea," *International Affairs,* Vol. 76, No. 3 (July 2000), pp. 593–617; and David C. Kang, "Rethinking North Korea," *Asian Survey,* Vol. 35, No. 3 (March 1995), pp. 253–267.
7. David C. Kang, "Rolling with the Punches: North Korea and Cuba during the 1980s," *Journal of East Asian Affairs,* Vol. 8, No. 1 (Winter 1994), pp. 1–28; Marcus Noland, "Why North Korea Will Muddle Through," *Foreign Affairs,* Vol. 76, No. 4 (July/August 1997), pp. 105–118; and Andrei Lankov, "Staying Alive: Why North Korea Will Not Change," *Foreign Affairs,* Vol. 87, No. 2 (March/April 2008), pp. 9–16.

leadership into accommodating outside powers. If, however, one sees the regime as fundamentally aggressive, unpredictable, and motivated by internal factors, then pursuing deterrence and isolation is the most effective way to deal with it.[8]

North Korea is both an intellectual puzzle and a practical problem beyond the issues of nuclear proliferation and international security. Another set of questions motivates debate about its economy and deplorable record of human rights abuses. How can North Korea survive with an economy that is so poor, so backward, and so isolated compared with those of its rapidly developing neighbors? Why has it not pursued economic reforms and opening? Should foreign countries promote marketization, economic reforms, and capitalism in North Korea, or should they limit or prohibit foreign economic interactions altogether? Regarding human rights, profound ethical questions face both scholars and practitioners of international relations: How can we improve human rights in North Korea and the lives of its people? Should external actors—governments, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and other groups—work with a regime that is so repugnant if it helps to improve the lives of innocent citizens? Or do we isolate the regime and subject it to external pressure and embarrassment over its human rights record until it decides to change?

A wave of scholarship on North Korea, built on rich empirical research, provides new perspectives on these questions. Three books are particularly noteworthy for their careful analysis and attention to detail. When read together, they present a comprehensive and panoramic vision of North Korea today. Patrick McEachern's *Inside the Red Box: North Korea's Post-Totalitarian Politics* examines the country's government and institutions, arguing that institutional politics are both evident and influential on North Korean policy. Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland's *Famine in North Korea: Markets, Aid, and Reform* explores North Korea's economy, explaining the structural causes of the "great famine" of the mid-1990s and the limits of partial economic reforms. Finally, relying on interviews with North Korean refugees and an extensive use of primary documents, Suk-Young Kim's *Illusive Utopia: Theater, Film, and Everyday Performance in North Korea* is one of the first books to offer an in-depth explora-

8. Victor D. Cha and David C. Kang, *Nuclear North Korea: A Debate on Engagement Strategies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003); Michael O'Hanlon and Mike Mochizuki, *Crisis on the Korean Peninsula: How to Deal with a Nuclear North Korea* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2003); John Delury and Chung-in Moon, "Analytic Failure and the North Korean Quagmire," *38 North,* April 7, 2011, http://38north.org/2011/04/quagmire/; and B.B. Bell, "What Must Be Done about North Korea" (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, December 14, 2010), http://csis.org/publication/what-must-be-done-about-north-korea.

tion of the lives of "ordinary" North Koreans; to ask why the regime invests so much time and effort in film, mass games, and other ritualized performances; and to consider the effects of such activities on the daily lives of the country's citizens.[9] According to the conventional wisdom, information about North Korea is strictly limited. In the past decade, however, access to, and knowledge about, North Korea and its citizens have been greater than ever before, as both continue to expand. As Kim notes, "The real challenge in researching North Korea emerges not from the dearth of available materials, but from the overabundance of primary sources begging for researchers' attention" (p. 319).

This essay reviews these three books against the backdrop of the questions raised above and makes two overarching arguments. First, North Korea is more "normal" than often thought, and its domestic politics, economy, and society function in ways familiar to other countries. When viewed from the inside out, North Korea's institutions, economic life, and people act in ways similar to those of others around the world. What is "normal" is by no means an absolute concept, and no matter how bizarre outside observers consider North Korea, its people think of themselves as normal and take the circumstances of their lives for granted.

The second overarching argument is that North Korea's continuing nuclear and military challenge is only one aspect of its overall relations with the rest of the world, and policies designed to minimize its threatening military behavior may work at cross-purposes with policies designed to improve its economy and the lives of its people. That is, North Korea is both strong and weak, and it reacts to both external and internal pressures. Outside governments, NGOs, activists, and policymakers face difficult trade-offs in crafting policies toward both the North Korean regime and its people. The complexities that arise in dealing with North Korea create a number of contradictory policy choices, and making progress on one issue has often meant overlooking other problems or even allowing them to fester.

The remainder of this essay is organized into four sections. The first section examines North Korea's domestic political institutions with a focus on McEachern's *Inside the Red Box.* By disaggregating the main political institutions in North Korea, it is possible to discern the play of bureaucratic and domestic politics that influences North Korea's foreign policy behavior. The second section examines the North Korean economy. Marshaling evidence from Haggard and Noland's *Famine in North Korea*, it argues that North

9. Two other books based on defector interviews are Andrei Lankov, *North of the DMZ: Essays on Daily Life in North Korea* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2007); and Barbara Demick, *Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives of North Koreans* (New York: Random House, 2010).

Korea's economy, though far from following a path to capitalist reform, is much more open and penetrated than it was a decade ago. The third section uses Kim's *Illusive Utopia* to examine the lives of the North Korean people. A wealth of evidence suggests that, far from being brainwashed robots, North Koreans consider themselves normal. The final section examines both scholarly and policy implications emerging from this new research on North Korea.

Competing Political Institutions in North Korea

There are two prevailing views of North Korean domestic politics: either they embody the whims and needs of the Kim dynasty, which has ruled the country since its inception in 1945, or they reflect the desires of a relatively unchanging—or even unchangeable—totalitarian monolith.[10] Given the importance of the Kim clan, its origins in the communist bloc, and the self-imposed isolation of the country, these two perspectives are unsurprising. Yet even totalitarian leaders rule through institutions and bureaucracies. According to principal-agent theory, influence and pressure travel up as well as down the institutional ladder. Thus, even though Kim Jong-il may set the overall tone and direction for North Korea's foreign and domestic policy, he must work through various agents and their institutions, which can delay, modify, or even resist his orders.[11] These institutions and their leaders may make suggestions, offer policy options, and lobby Kim himself. Principals may have the ability to impose steep costs on agents who circumvent their directions, but even penalties do not change the fundamental fact that agents must still interpret and implement orders from above, and these orders may be clear only in the most specific or detailed of commands.

These observations raise two questions. First, what details can we learn about the inner workings of the North Korean government and its institutions? Second, does this knowledge provide insight into North Korea's foreign policy behavior? Patrick McEachern's *Inside the Red Box: North Korea's Post-Totalitarian Politics* uses modern social science methods and careful empirical research to attempt to answer these questions. McEachern's is one of the few works that takes the North Korean regime and its institutions not as a sui generis and unknowable "other," but rather as a set of institutions, leaders, and stakeholders open to systematic scholarly inquiry like any other government or institution.

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10. On the Kim family, see Bradley Martin, *Under the Loving Care of the Fatherly Leader* (New York: St. Martin's, 2004); and Bertil Lintner, *Great Leader, Dear Leader: Demystifying North Korea under the Kim Clan* (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm, 2005).
11. Gary J. Miller, "The Political Evolution of Principal-Agent Models," *Annual Review of Political Science,* Vol. 8 (June 2005), pp. 203–225.

McEachern's basic thesis is particularly blunt: "Kim cannot rule by fiat; individuals and institutions below him matter. At the very least, they inform and execute strategic-level decisions and make operational decisions based on their understanding of Kim's wishes" (p. 2). The bureaucracy is routinized and stable, and attempting to discern the institutional context of specific policy actions is critical. McEachern identifies three key institutions with enduring preferences that are stable beyond the goals of individual leaders: the Korean People's Army (KPA), the Korean Workers' Party (KWP), and the cabinet. Having explored the period 1994–2009 by reading more than 4,400 speeches, editorials, and other articles published in North Korean media by the forty-eight most senior members of these three major institutions, McEachern identifies stable policy preferences across these institutions that exist independent of their leaders.

The founding leader of North Korea, Kim Il-sung, ruled from 1945 until his death in 1994 and oversaw a state that more closely approximated the totalitarian model. Kim Il-sung was a charismatic revolutionary with a powerful personal story and the vision and experience to control the country. These characteristics enabled him to produce an all-encompassing ideology in which the KWP not only controlled the military and the bureaucracies but oversaw a centrally planned economy. By most accounts, Kim Il-sung was essentially a totalitarian dictator, and all of North Korea's institutions reflected his general preferences and desires. A number of external shocks, however—including the collapse of the Soviet Union and China's rapid rapprochement with South Korea; the great famine of the mid-1990s, which severely weakened the regime's hold over the population; and the less charismatic personality of his son Kim Jong-il—combined in the 1990s to force the North Korean state to move toward less centralized control. What is especially clear is that the death of the country's founder and national hero led to an era of major transition.

Upon taking power in 1994, Kim Jong-il responded to these external and domestic shocks by starting to modify North Korea's state institutions. According to McEachern, Kim Jong-il "was a detail-oriented micromanager who could more effectively divide and conquer the state rather than dominate a unified system as his father had. . . . The cabinet, military, and party emerged as peer organizations that provided a certain type of internal governmental checks and balances" (p. 34). In 1998, Kim Jong-il elevated the cabinet to equal status with the KWP and the KPA. As McEachern writes, "Party ideologues continued to provide some input, but they lack the skills to make technical or expert statements. . . . The military could continue to argue that more defense spending buys more security, although competing interests as they grew more powerful could argue that effective diplomacy and economic contacts offered another route to national security" (p. 35).

North Korea's three main institutions, however, have stable preferences and often compete for their particular visions. In brief, the KWP remains the most ideological and views itself as the defender of the revolutionary way by emphasizing sovereignty and nationalism, as well as its commitment to a socialist ideology. The KPA, tasked with national defense, maintains a pragmatic outlook, but is highly skeptical of accommodation with the external world. The cabinet is the most professionalized of the three institutions; it oversees a bureaucracy staffed increasingly with experts attempting to craft solutions to real problems. All three compete over bureaucratic power, budgets, and prestige, as well as over substantive policy.

These institutions also vie for influence over the main issues confronting the regime: policy toward the United States, inter-Korean policy, and the North Korean economy. The cabinet is the most supportive of dialogue and trade. It is a proponent of economic reform as a means of strengthening the nation and is willing to negotiate with the United States. In contrast, the KWP favors confrontation with the "imperialists" (i.e., Americans, South Koreans, Japanese, and anyone else it does not like) and opposes accommodation with the United States and, on principle, economic reform of any type. The military sees negotiation with the United States as weakening North Korea's security; it wants larger defense budgets for pragmatic reasons; and it opposes diversion of budgetary resources to economic reforms on the grounds that it will weaken the military's ability to prepare for a possible invasion.

McEachern details how different policy preferences held sway at different times and how Kim Jong-il has dealt with competing demands. Sometimes he has stepped in and set a direction. At other times, external events have pushed policy in a particular direction. Still, Kim is clearly the most powerful figure in North Korea, and he retains the ability to set the regime's overall direction and make fundamental decisions at critical times. As McEachern describes it, "North Korea's institutions define the range of policy alternatives. Kim . . . selects from these presented options" (p. 38). Policy innovation percolates from below, and competing institutions seek to influence the framework within which they operate.

Two recent examples reveal the different preferences of North Korea's three main institutions and their policy implications. In 2001, Kim Jong-il traveled to Shanghai and other parts of southern China, bringing with him a large retinue of party, military, and cabinet members. The North Korean leader was reportedly shocked at how much more advanced Shanghai was compared with Pyongyang. He criticized Party Secretary Kim Yong-sun in front of leaders of the other two institutions. Publicly, he remarked that Shanghai "carried the sublime ideal . . . demonstrating pride on the land of China," and lauded

China's "cataclysmic change" and the development of special economic zones (p. 144). The KWP resisted this interpretation, arguing in an editorial following the visit that "our people regard living and carrying out the revolution under a superior socialist system by upholding the great leader and under the party's strong leadership as the utmost dignity and pride. They are also overflowing with the firm determination to advance toward the independent road, the socialist road, which they selected to the end" (p. 145). Shortly thereafter, the cabinet's economic journal, *Kyongje Yongu,* published a rebuttal arguing that "[reform] is not merely intended to overcome impending economic difficulties but to turn our nation into a paradise of people where people would enjoy a better wealthy life. For us to resolve problems including the food problem and to make a breakthrough in building an economic power . . . it is particularly important to ensure actual profits."[12] The KWP in turn responded in March 2001 that the cabinet should follow "the party's policy-level guidance in this year's socialist economic construction."[13] The debate continued throughout 2001, with the leadership ultimately deciding to introduce a range of market mechanisms into the economy, which were implemented on July 1, 2002.

The second example involves the second nuclear crisis of 2002–03. When the George W. Bush administration exhibited initial skepticism toward North Korea, and then in October 2002 accused it of violating the Agreed Framework by conducting a secret second nuclear program, the three main institutions reacted according to their institutional preferences. The Foreign Ministry released a statement on October 25 that highlighted the North's recently implemented economic reforms and asserted that "we are ready to seek a negotiated settlement of this [the nuclear] issue." The statement concluded that "there may be negotiations or the use of deterrent force to be consistent with this basis, but we want the former, as far as possible."[14]

In contrast, the KWP "railed against international aid, markets, and international accommodation."[15] Meanwhile, the KPA claimed that the U.S. accusation that North Korea had violated the Agreed Framework was a "direct challenge to the great military-first politics, which is our life and dignity. . . . In the name of the entire nation, they must strike a decisive blow on the United

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12. Nam-son Yi, "Choosing the Leading Sectors of Agriculture in Keeping with the Important Way of Resolving the Issue of the People's Livelihood," *Kyongje Yongu,* February 10, 2001, quoted in McEachern, *Inside the Red Box,* p. 145.
13. "DPRK Daily on Major Economic Sectors to Be Developed in 2001," *Minju Choson,* March 13, 2001, quoted in McEachern, *Inside the Red Box,* p. 147.
14. "DPRK FM Spokesman Issues Press Statement on Nuclear Issue 25 Oct," Korea Central Broadcast System, October 25, 2002, quoted in McEachern, *Inside the Red Box,* pp. 165–166.
15. McEachern, *Inside the Red Box,* p. 166. The article in question is Yi Hak-nam, "The Predatory Nature of the Imperialists' 'Aid,'" *Nodong Sinmun,* October 26, 2002.

States' arrogant and rude maneuvers, which gravely threaten our nation's sovereignty."[16] Over the next four years, the cabinet lost the policy battle, in large measure because of U.S. actions and the cabinet's lack of progress in promoting negotiation and accommodation. The resulting nuclear and missile tests merely reinforced the steps the KPA had been advocating.

McEachern notes that in late 2008 and 2009, "North Korea's three institutions started to speak with unprecedented unison on all strategic issue areas," and significantly, "the cabinet started to strongly endorse the policies it had previously rejected for years" (p. 242). McEachern attributes the unanimity of belligerent stances toward the United States, South Korea, and domestic economic reform as Kim Jong-il's attempt to unite all three institutions in paving the way toward a smooth leadership transition for his third son, Kim Jong-un.

Some analysts see the KWP and its ideology as continuing to dominate North Korean domestic politics; others see the *songun* policy (the "military first" policy that puts national security and the military above other institutions) as having elevated the KPA over the party and the cabinet.[17] McEachern's analysis of policy debates in North Korea reveals that neither of these perspectives is entirely accurate. Rather, since the elevation of the cabinet to equal status in 1998, all three institutions have competed for influence—sometimes winning, sometimes losing. Furthermore, the KPA is not necessarily opposed to economic reform, if it can be convinced that in the long run this will facilitate expansion of its budget and improve its ability to protect the country. McEachern concludes that "no single institution could claim victory on all three issue areas at once, nor did any institution sustain its victories indefinitely" (p. 219). Further, he notes that many of the obvious actions Kim undertook to reward the KWP were superficial (e.g., giving gifts and prizes), and argues instead that "Kim's actions can be better understood . . . [as] a move that freed his hand in directing the state from many ideological constraints" (p. 146).

McEachern paints a picture of North Korean bureaucratic politics in which the various institutions contend for policy control and influence with Kim Jong-il and his inner circle, and the outcomes are not preordained. Competing institutions attempt to frame the agenda and define the range of relevant policy choices by emphasizing different historical, ideological, and pragmatic contexts. External events, the policies of foreign countries, and the changing internal situation, combined with Kim Jong-il's evolving domestic and foreign

16. "DPRK's CPRF Spokesman Urges Defense of 'Military-First Politics of Patriotism,'" Korea Central Broadcast System, October 28, 2002, quoted in McEachern, *Inside the Red Box*, p. 166.
17. Lankov, "Staying Alive"; and Haggard and Noland, *Famine in North Korea*.

policy goals, determine North Korean behavior. Ultimately, then, McEachern argues that "this is not to suggest the Kim family's rule is fragile. . . . North Korea no longer has a single, monolithic party. . . . Nor is the command economy or ideological correctness sacrosanct. . . . Markets have etched cracks in the command economy; and ideological arguments compete with rational ones in policy debates" (p. 217).

Three major conclusions emerge from McEachern's analysis of the institutional structure of North Korea's government. First, the decision to develop nuclear weapons was not preordained, and though events may have led the country down this path, at various points in the past seventeen years, both North Korea and outside powers could have made choices that might have resulted in a different situation today. Perhaps most daunting, the path toward nuclearization—given past policy choices—is probably less likely to lead the Kim Jong-il regime to make the grand decision to abandon nuclear weapons. Abandonment may have been possible a decade ago and perhaps even a few years ago. It appears increasingly unlikely, however, that in its current circumstances, North Korea would be willing to negotiate these weapons away any time soon. Second, the country, its institutions, and discrete policies have evolved over time. The North Korea of 2012 is not what it was in 2000, or under Kim Il-sung in the early 1990s. Third, outside pressure on the North Korean government to alter its behavior has been unsuccessful in the past and is unlikely to succeed in the future. McEachern notes,

> Coercion is often employed to avoid giving the impression to the North that it can act with impunity, socialize their actions, and satisfy domestic political demands. However, these actions usually empower military or party advocates to abandon the diplomatic track altogether . . . [and] the cabinet consistently goes silent; they do not argue that North Korea must reengage to get such pressure lifted. . . . Given the regime dynamics discussed in this book, it is hard to imagine a scenario under which an organized group of elites could change regime behavior in a way conducive to U.S. or other outside interests, [simply] because their access to certain luxuries was temporarily suspended or even outright eliminated (pp. 231–232).

McEachern's book is based on a reading of media sources from North Korea and suffers from a number of methodological problems. The link between what competing policymakers write for public consumption and their own preferences is not necessarily direct, nor is it clear how well publicly expressed opinions represent the internal debates occurring within and among the KPA, the KWP, and the cabinet. Given the challenges in conducting research on domestic North Korean politics, however, McEachern's research design is both innovative and careful, and it provides a testable means by which to explore

institutional competition in North Korea. Although North Korean institutional policies display more subtlety and nuance than McEachern is able to discern, he has succeeded in making a defensible and testable argument about bureaucratic politics in North Korea.

Unplanned Marketization of the Economy

Is North Korea's economy strong or weak? The country has survived well beyond the predictions of many external observers, and it has made sporadic and halting attempts at economic reform and marketization. There are two competing hypotheses about whether expanded economic relations will strengthen or weaken the North Korean state. On the one hand, some analysts argue that commercial engagement with North Korea would weaken the regime's control over its people, let in new ideas able to compete with official state ideology and propaganda, and provide North Korean citizens an alternative source of money, and hence power.[18] Along these lines, some believe that Kim Jong-il and the leadership will never engage in serious economic reform because doing so could endanger the regime. On the other hand, there are those who argue that commercial engagement and economic reform would strengthen the regime and allow it to survive longer. This perspective views isolation as the only viable option for bringing about regime collapse.[19]

The most rigorous and comprehensive work on North Korea's economy is Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland's *Famine in North Korea: Markets, Aid, and Reform*.[20] In explaining the great famine of the mid-1990s, Haggard and Noland examine three central issues: the absence of economic reform before the famine, the involvement of external parties in providing humanitarian as-

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18. Andrei Lankov argued in 2008 that "[North Korean leaders] sustain the legitimacy of these claims with a self-imposed information blockade apparently unparalleled anywhere in the communist world. . . . Market reforms and increased foreign investment would unavoidably undermine this isolation. . . . The population would come to seriously question the North Korean regime's legitimacy." Lankov, "Staying Alive," p. 12.
19. Former U.S. Cmdr. Forces Korea B. Bell states, "First, announce that as long as Kim Jung Il remains in power in the North, all efforts towards engagement, negotiations, and reconciliation are suspended. . . . [T]he United States should follow] a policy of containment and economic embargo," including increased propaganda about "the reality in North Korea," an embargo of the six-party talks, and leadership change in North Korea. Bell, "What Must Be Done about North Korea," p. 3.
20. For other excellent work on North Korea's economy, see Ruediger Frank, "Economic Reforms in North Korea (1998–2004)," *Journal of Asia Pacific Economy*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (August 2005), pp. 278–311; and Bradley O. Babson, "Visualizing a North Korean 'Bold Switchover': International Financial Institutions and Economic Development in the DPRK," *Asia Policy,* Vol. 2 (July 2006), pp. 11–24.

sistance to the North Korean people, and the effects of economic reforms since the famine.[21]

The great famine, known in North Korea by the officially mandated code words *konan ui haeggun* [The March of Suffering], was a central event in the country's history, forcing the regime and its people to change in fundamental and unanticipated ways. Perhaps more important than the death of Kim Il-sung or the nuclear crisis, the famine altered the way in which North Koreans view themselves, their government, and their position in the world. The famine also forced the government to adjust its policies, institutions, and rhetoric, and it influenced North Korea's foreign and domestic policies and strategies in ways that the regime would never have chosen. As one element of the shocks of the mid-1990s, the famine played an indirect role in spurring the North Korean regime and its institutions to evolve in a more "pluralistic" direction. At the same time, the famine has had a direct and enduring impact on the way North Koreans feed themselves, do their jobs, and interact with the government.

The famine was not the result of a few years of bad weather and harvests. Rather, it was the culmination of a long series of poor government decisions that accrued slowly over decades. Indeed, most North Koreans had experienced nutritional deprivation long before the mid-1990s. Haggard and Noland situate the famine and its effects within this larger structural story, which begins with a centrally planned economic system that overproduced food, had long ago reached the limits of its productive capacity, and could not respond effectively to exogenous shocks. Following the work of Amartya Sen, Haggard and Noland view famines not simply as the result of poor harvests, but rather as distributional and political tragedies given that modern countries have a range of ways to produce, import, and procure food.[22] The problem was not only a lack of food, but also discrimination against certain regions, which received smaller proportional shares of the available food. Combined with a loss of financial and economic support from China and the Soviet Union, the food situation was fragile even before the bad weather of the 1990s. Yet Haggard and Noland emphasize human agency and avoidable mistakes. They write, "North Korea did experience severe floods in 1995 and a succession of natural disasters thereafter as well. But the country's vulnerability to those

21. For an excellent study by a former U.S. Agency for International Development official deeply involved in North Korean famine relief, see Andrew S. Natsios, *The Great North Korean Famine* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2001).
22. Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlements and Deprivation* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982).

conditions was exacerbated at every point by decisions the government made that compounded risk" (p. 24).

A key set of avoidable mistakes was the government's unwillingness to engage in economic or policy behavior that could have alleviated some of the difficulty. Most significant was the regime's refusal to pursue policies that would have allowed food imports and distribution without discrimination to all regions of the country. The famine thus came about gradually over the years. By attempting to follow a closed-economy model, the regime abandoned the possibility of engaging in international markets and importing food, choosing instead to restrict demand (e.g., the "Let's eat two meals a day" campaign of 1991). Exceedingly cautious attempts to increase exports and earn foreign exchange in the 1990s were unsuccessful—the Najin Sonbong free trade zone, created in 1991, was located in the most isolated part of North Korea and lacked a clear legal foundation for international business. Borrowing from abroad to finance food imports was another short-term option, but as Haggard and Noland write, "North Korea had thoroughly burned its bridges in this regard," having defaulted on foreign loans in the 1970s (p. 29). Furthermore, the government resisted asking for foreign aid for as long as possible, succumbing only when the situation had become so dire that there was virtually no alternative. Even today, North Korea and foreign aid donors engage in a bargaining game, where the government tries to control and divert as much aid as possible for its own ends, and the donors attempt to help the most needy North Korean citizens and reduce or avoid governmental intrusion.

In a detailed discussion, Haggard and Noland review all estimates of the "excess" deaths caused by the famine. Estimates range as high as 4,000,000 to a low of 220,000 between 1995 and 1998, as claimed by the North Korean government.[23] The famine and its effects were not uniform: the poorest provinces and the weakest and most politically vulnerable populations were hurt the hardest. In attempting to calculate the suffering, Haggard and Noland build on demographic work by Courtland Robinson and others that looked at

23. Andrew S. Natsios states, "From 1994 to 1998, 2–3 million people died of starvation and hunger-related illnesses, and the famine has generated a range of social and political effects." Natsios, "The Politics of Famine in North Korea" (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, August 2, 1999), http://www.usip.org/files/resources/sr990802.pdf. Jasper Becker writes that 3 million North Koreans perished in the famine. Becker, *Rogue Regime: Kim Jong Il and the Looming Threat of North Korea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 211; and Philip Gourevitch writes that "Kim Jong Il murdered two to three million of his people by starving them to death and has never in any way indicated that that bothered him." Gourevitch, "Letter from Korea: Alone in the Dark," *New Yorker,* September 8, 2003, http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2003/09/08/030908on_onlineonly02.

North Hamgyong Province, one of the most directly affected by the famine.[24] Robinson's team found 245,000 "excess" deaths (an elevated mortality rate as a result of premature death), or 12 percent of the population in that one affected region. Taking those results as the upper limit for such deaths and extrapolating across the entire North Korean population and across all of the country's provinces produces an upper limit of 2 million total famine-related deaths. When these figures are adjusted for the protected 4 million elites and the population of Pyongyang, and accounting for different provincial effects, Haggard and Noland conclude that "the most sophisticated attempts to measure excess deaths put them in a range of roughly 600,000 to 1 million, or approximately 3 to 5 percent of the pre-crisis population" (pp. 72–76). The consequences of the famine are still playing out—most notably, in the breakdown of the Public Distribution System (PDS or government food-rationing system) and other economic institutions, as well as in the increasing search by North Koreans to provide for themselves and their families.

Next, Haggard and Noland examine the bottom-up coping process by North Korean households that laid the "seeds of an increasing marketization of the North Korean economy" (p. 165). Simply put, the centrally planned economy—in particular, the PDS—failed the North Korean people during the famine. Families had to rely increasingly on their wits and engage in behavior the government was unable to stop, including migration, foraging, bartering, selling assets, and buying goods on the black market. In 1998, the South Korean Ministry of Unification stated that between 300 and 350 officially sanctioned farmer's markets were operating throughout the country (p. 173).

Yet in the fifteen years since the height of the famine, the North Korean government's response to marketization has been tentative and half-hearted. A series of measures in the late 1990s appeared to signal a commitment to "Chinese-style reforms" that would comprise economic opening but retain centralized political control, as the Chinese had a generation earlier. In 2002, the government made its boldest set of changes, most notably, allowing supply and demand to determine prices, even though wages remained fixed by fiat. Because the true price of goods was unknown before the reforms, inflation on the order of 1,000 percent followed: for example, the price of 1 kilogram of rice jumped from 0.08 won to 44 won, an increase of 54,900 percent. As Haggard and Noland observe, "To some extent this change in official prices was simply

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24. Courtland Robinson, Myung Ken Lee, Kenneth Hill, and Gilbert Burnham, "Mortality in North Korean Migrant Households: A Retrospective Study," *Lancet,* Vol. 354 (July–December 1999), pp. 291–295.

a recognition of the fact that the PDS had effectively ceased to function." Still, many urban households continued to rely on the PDS for a portion of their food (p. 182). In 2005, the government attempted to reintroduce some aspects of the ration system, mostly in basic foodstuffs, although much of the economy remained underregulated. Analysts debate whether the reforms were intended to fundamentally change the entire economy along market-oriented lines or whether they were aimed at making minimal adjustments to ensure the survival of the socialist and centrally planned system.[25] Perhaps more important than the intentions of the government, however, were the consequences of its actions and the pressures that led to those actions.

Most significant among these consequences has been a notable weakening of political and economic control by the central authorities in Pyongyang, and the regime's concomitant attempts to benefit from, and control, this weakening as much as possible. John Park's research on North Korea's state trading companies provides a window on the workings of both the North Korean government and economy.[26] In the early 1990s, as the economy deteriorated and support from the Soviet Union and China evaporated, North Korea's state trading companies emerged as an alternative means of conducting foreign economic relations. Over the past two decades, these state trading companies have become important conduits of funding for the regime, with a percentage of all revenues going "directly into Kim Jong-il's personal accounts . . . [which have been] used to secure and maintain the loyalty of the senior leadership."[27] These revenues also enhance bureaucratic budgets, and thus traders and local officials have increasingly become enmeshed in wide webs of informal market activity inside North Korea and between North Korea and other countries, mainly China. Park concludes that "ranging from top-down to bottom-up activities," these trading companies "comprise an important coping mechanism for Pyongyang. While they are not sufficient to effect system-wide economic reform in North Korea, they offer a functional and flexible means for engaging in the closest form of 'normal' commerce that North Korea has with another country."[28]

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25. Frank, "Economic Reforms in North Korea (1998–2004)"; and William Newcomb, "Reflections on North Korea's Economic Reform," and Seung-yul Oh, "Changes in the North Korean Economy: New Policies and Limitations," both in Korea Economic Institute, ed., *Korea's Economy 2003,* Vol. 19 (Washington, D.C.: Korea Economic Institute of America, 2003), pp. 57–60 and 74–76, respectively.
26. John Park, "North Korea, Inc.: Gaining Insights into North Korean Regime Stability from Recent Commercial Activities," Working Paper (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, April 22, 2009).
27. Ibid., p. 10.
28. Ibid., p. 12.

Almost inevitably, with the rise of market activities and expansion of state trading companies, as well as growing illegal cross-border trade with China, corruption has become endemic. Park argues that this trade and the corruption it fosters are hastening the weakening of central political control. Numerous reports suggest that in the late 1990s, border guards and local provincial officials faithfully carried out the central government's orders to confiscate all illegal commercial goods and enforce harsh punishments—sometimes including executions—of those caught smuggling goods across the China–North Korea border.

By the late 2000s, however, local officials and border guards had realized that by extracting a percentage of the value of the goods through extortion or bribery, they could enhance their families' economic situation. As a result, commercial activity has increased, and with it, the number of individuals who benefit directly or indirectly from the smuggling and corruption it entails. According to Park, this hybrid system of formal and informal marketization "is facilitating the expansion of commercial activity in the country. While corruption is widespread in North Korea, the regime at present appears to be drawing some benefits from the broader positive impact resulting from corruption. . . . [Informal marketization] provides more North Koreans with access to small ad hoc markets sprouting up along the routes and areas where [corruption] is common."[29] Indeed, Haggard and Noland's research on refugees reveals that "creeping marktization" has occurred as much outside state institutions as from formal modification of those institutions themselves. They write, "Managers, entrepreneurs, and workers [have] drifted into market activities well beyond what was permitted, either with the acquiescence of authorities, in the context of bribe payments, or through evasion."[30] Perhaps most emblematic of the changes in the North Korean economy is the revelation from Haggard and Noland's survey of 1,600 refugees that 95 percent of nonfarm residents now obtain their food primarily from the market.[31]

Yet at the same time, the government has attempted over the years to rein in this creeping marketization through a series of countermeasures. The most vivid of these came in November 2009, when the North Korean government (literally) overnight performed a redenomination of the North Korean currency, replacing the old notes with new notes 100 times more valuable, and al-

29. Ibid., p. 15.
30. Marcus Noland and Stephan Haggard, *Witness to Transformation: Refugee Insights into North Korea* (Washington, D.C.: Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2011), p. 46.
31. Ibid., p. 51.

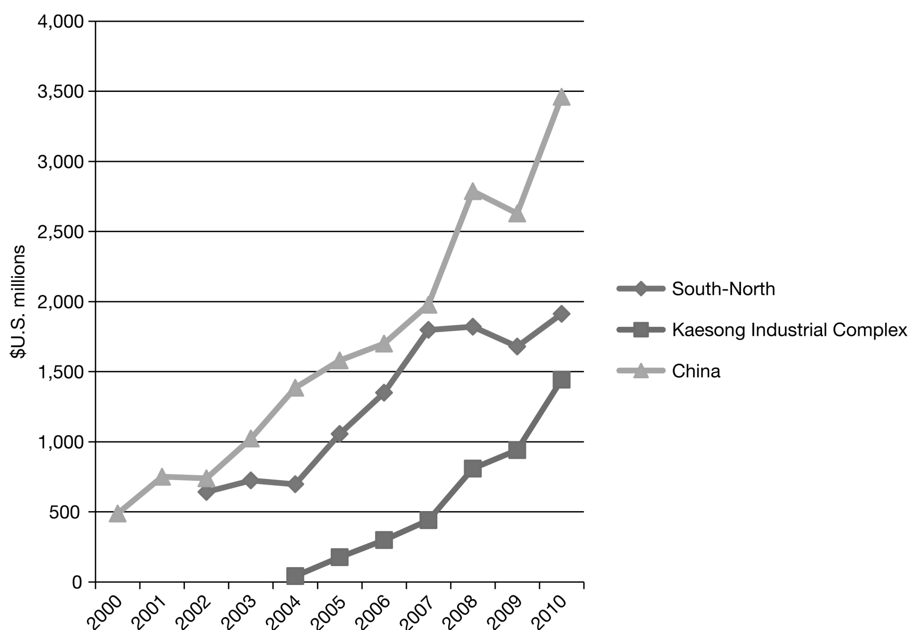
lowing only a small portion of the old money to be exchange for new notes (old 10,000 won notes were to be converted into 100 won notes).[32] Some observers argue that the effort was a miserable failure, and reports circulated that the official in charge of the currency revaluation was punished or perhaps even executed.[33] It appears, however, that the government was less concerned with the economic success or failure of the program than with a desire to roll back gains made by middle-class entrepreneurs who had begun to emerge over the past decade. By devaluing the currency, and thus wiping out much of the savings of North Korean individuals, the regime was directly harming those who had benefited most from the country's increasing commercial activity.

Despite the leadership's attempts to control and limit marketization in North Korea, commercialization continues apace. Haggard and Noland report from their survey of refugees that during the reform era (2002–05), 39.8 percent of respondents engaged in some form of private trading, and during the retrenchment era (2006–present), 42.4 percent reported doing so (p. 67). Even on a broader institutional level, limited reform continues. The Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC)—a joint project just north of the demilitarized zone (DMZ) that marries North Korean workers with South Korean capital—has remained largely separate from other political issues that divide the two sides. Opened in 2004, by October 2010, the complex counted more than 45,300 North Koreans employed in more than 110 factories and working alongside 800 South Koreans.[34] The total value of goods produced in 2010 was $323 million, an increase of 25 percent from 2009.[35] Even the conservative Lee Myung-bak administration, which took power in South Korea in 2008, has been unwilling to close the KIC. In fact, economic relations between the two sides have continued to increase, albeit at a generally slower pace than under previous South Korean governments (see figure 1).

More consequential for the North Korean economy than North-South trade may be the impact of Chinese business and the overall China–North Korea

32. "North Korea's Currency 'Revaluation,'" *Economist,* post, December 2, 2009, http://www.economist.com/blogs/banyan/2009/12/north_koreas_currency_revaluat.
33. Richard Lloyd Parry, "North Korea Executes Top Official Pak Nam Gi Who Oversaw Currency Revaluation," *Times,* March 19, 2010, http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/asia/article7066576.ece.
34. "Output for Kaesong Industrial Complex Increases 10 Pct in October," *Yonhap,* December 19, 2010, http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/northkorea/2010/12/19/69/0401000000AEN20101219001300315F.HTM.
35. Dick Nanto and Mark Manyin, "The Kaesong North-South Industrial Complex" (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, March 17, 2011), p. 8.

Figure 1. North Korean Trade with China and South Korea, 2000–10



SOURCES: Dick Nanto and Mark Manyin, "China–North Korea Relations" (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, December 28, 2010); ROK Ministry of Unification, "Statistics on Inter-Korean Trade from January to November This Year," December 2010; and Korea International Trade Association statistics, 2010.

relationship.[36] Drew Thompson's research reveals that between 2003 and 2009, Chinese companies invested $98 million in North Korea, concentrated mostly in extractive industries such as mining or in basic manufacturing.[37] As Thompson notes, "These investors have rights that both the Chinese and North Korean governments are obligated to recognize. The Chinese government has reasonable expectations that the North Korean government will respect and protect these tangible Chinese interests, raising the possibility that predatory corruption in North Korea can become an issue in the bilateral relationship."[38] Thompson further notes, "The existence of Chinese investments

36. The best comprehensive study of China's relations with the two Koreas is Scott Snyder, *China's Rise and the Two Koreas: Politics, Economics, Security* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 2009).
37. Drew Thompson, "Chinese Joint Ventures in North Korea" (Washington, D.C.: U.S.-Korea Institute, School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University, February 2011), p. 4.
38. Ibid.

affects Beijing's ability to endorse sanctions, which would harm Chinese companies, undermine whatever trust exists between Beijing and Pyongyang, and contradict China's argument that reform and opening is necessary."[39] In fact, China's economic relations with North Korea have increased steadily over the past decade, with China now accounting for the majority of North Korea's total trade (see figure 1).

Despite withering criticism in recent years for not pressuring North Korea more openly, China appears to be expanding its economic relations with the North Koreans and taking a long-run approach.[40] As Greg Moore states, "Chinese policy is *both* to bring North Korea to heel and to prop up North Korea's struggling economy, and this behavior . . . [i]s based on a careful calculation of China's national interests."[41] If China decides that a nuclear-armed North Korea and criticism from Seoul, Washington, and Tokyo are more detrimental to its position than a North Korean collapse, it could begin to shift policy and put more pressure on the regime. Alternatively, if China continues to see instability arising more directly from a weakened North Korea, its policies—rhetoric aside—will remain roughly the same as they have over the past decade.

As with the political system, then, the economic system in North Korea has changed significantly in the past decade. Whether North Korea is weaker or stronger today than it was a decade ago is the wrong question. It is both: North Korea is more open, more penetrated, and more marketized today than at any time since the Korean War. Furthermore, North Korea's dependence on foreign aid, NGOs, and other foreign assistance has produced an economy—indeed, a country—that is far more thoroughly penetrated by foreign influences than it was before the famine. Some foreign NGOs and companies now have almost two decades of experience dealing with North Korea, and various international organizations have had observers in every province in the country. The arrival of foreigners and creeping marketization has had an effect on the people and their relationship to the government. Yet at the same time, the government has managed to survive, and it continues to benefit through corruption and the marginal increase in human security it provides to the people. The re-

39. Ibid., p. 6.
40. Scott A. Snyder, "China's Litmus Test: Stability or Status Quo on the Korean Peninsula?" *East Asia Forum*, Council on Foreign Relations, post, May 28, 2010, http://blogs.cfr.org/asia/2010/05/28/china%E2%80%99s-litmus-test-stability-or-status-quo-on-the-korean-peninsula/; and Victor Cha, "China's Choice," *Chosun Ilbo*, May 25, 2010, http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2010/05/25/2010052501422.html.
41. Gregory J. Moore, "How North Korea Threatens China's Interests: Understanding Chinese Duplicity on the North Korean Nuclear Issue," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (January 2008), p. 2 (emphasis in original).

gime is also certainly on slightly stronger economic and political footing than it was in 1994, when the great famine was reaching its height, the country was reacting to an international crisis over its nuclear weapons programs, and its founding leader had just died.

Human Rights and Human Beings

The popular and policy media have perpetuated two contradictory images of the North Korean people. Both emphasize extremes: on the one hand, they are automatons, robot-like figures devoid of humanity and brainwashed into doing Kim Jong-il's bidding.[42] The popular press enjoys highlighting the peculiarities of North Korea, reporting tales of Kim's golf exploits or the ubiquitous presence of Kim Il-sung pins on the clothing of North Koreans.[43] On the other hand, the majority of personal stories feature horrific tales of North Koreans who have survived prison camps or made the dangerous choice to attempt to leave the country.[44] The U.S. State Department estimates that between 150,000 and 200,000 North Koreas are being held in prison camps and subjected to appalling conditions, torture, and often death.[45] The contradictions inherent in these images are obvious and enduring: the same people who are brainwashed and robotic are also seething with resentment and wake up every day yearning to breathe the sweet air of freedom and democracy. Despite their accuracy in capturing certain segments of the population, these images present a view of North Korea that neither sufficiently describes the majority of the population nor helps to explain why the regime and the people behave as they do.

The greatest challenge for outsiders, it appears, is to view North Korea's

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42. The photo essay by Tomas van Houtryve, in which one can see only dour faces, emphasizes the oppressive atmosphere in North Korea. Van Houtryve, "The Land of No Smiles," *Foreign Policy,* post, April 15, 2009, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/04/15/the_land_of_no_smiles. For an excellent contrast in selective imagery, see Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre's photo essay about urban decay in Detroit. Marchand and Meffre, "Detroit's Beautiful, Horrible Decline," *Time,* February 26, 2009, http://www.time.com/time/photogallery/0,29307,1882089,1850983,00.html.

43. "Move over Tiger: N. Korea's Kim Shot 38 Under Par His 1st Time Out," *World Tribune,* June 16, 2004.

44. Chol-hwan Kang and Pierre Rigoulot, *Aquariums of Pyongyang: Ten Years in the North Korean Gulag* (New York: Basic Books, 2005); and Kim Yong, *Long Road Home: Testimony of a North Korean Camp Survivor,* trans. Suk-Young Kim (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009). A notable exception is Kongdan Oh and Ralph Hassig, *The Hidden People of North Korea: Everyday Life in the Hermit Kingdom* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009).

45. Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, U.S. Department of State, "2009 Human Rights Report: Democratic People's Republic of Korea" (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of State, March 11, 2010), http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2009/eap/135995.htm, citing David Hawk, *The Hidden Gulag: Prisoner's Testimonies and Satellite Photographs* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, 2003).

22 million inhabitants as human beings who live their lives the best they can in circumstances they did not create. They did not ask to be born in North Korea, and the vast majority are like people in any other country: they live their lives, marry, worry about their children, go to their jobs, and try to get through the day as best they can. North Korea is their home: its inhabitants have families and friends and tend to be proud of their country. This is their reality, and although outsiders may find it strange, the North Korean people do not, on the whole, consider their situation abnormal. They take for granted the context in which they live, just as others do. They are the most direct victims of the regime's rule, yet the conventional wisdom is so politicized that merely pointing out the basic humanity of the North Korean people can often be misinterpreted as defending the regime.[46]

Viewed from the top down, propaganda attempts by the North Korean government to instill legitimacy and even shape the world of its citizens are all encompassing.[47] Suk-Young Kim's *Illusive Utopia: Theater, Film, and Everyday Performance in North Korea* is a fascinating study of "performance" in North Korea, and it is one of the first scholarly works not to simply take North Korea's bizarre mass games, rituals, and visual media at face value. Rather, Kim asks why the regime devotes so much effort to performance in both official and everyday life, from propaganda to the apparel of its citizens. She also examines how the people interpret and interact with the regime. Kim argues that "theater, film, and everyday performance [make up] an ideology-shaping matrix that not only entertains but also essentially organizes and mobilizes society. . . . The socialist culture of North Korea has had a tremendous influence on daily life" (p. 4).

Kim's description says much about the motivations of the regime and how it attempts to maintain control and shape the views of its citizens. From the perspective of the people, the question is not whether the government seeks to inculcate loyalty and obedience through various means, but rather the extent to which the people believe what they are being told. Indeed, propaganda is a "dialogic process between creator and receiver," and Kim moves far beyond simply asking what the North Korean state is trying to do. Instead she explores how the North Korean people understand and respond to its directives. Kim notes that "the actual operation of propaganda, even in a rigidly controlled society like North Korea, is much more discursive; it does not simply conform to the government's intentions" (p. 12).

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46. Katharine H.S. Moon, "Beyond Demonization: A New Strategy for Human Rights in North Korea," *Current History,* September 2008, pp. 263–268.
47. B.R. Myers, *The Cleanest Race: How North Koreans See Themselves and Why It Matters* (New York: Random House, 2010).

The issue, according to Kim, is not whether the North Korean leadership uses outrageous myths and exaggerations in its domestic propaganda to try to build its credibility—political elites everywhere use myth, political theater, and symbolism to establish legitimacy and provide a compelling narrative to their people. Rather, the real question is how extensively and deeply North Koreans believe the propaganda and myths. Although North Koreans cannot be polled, a true comparison would attempt to find out how many of them believe the stories and myths perpetrated by the regime and compare these findings to the beliefs of the populations of other countries.

Yet what does claiming that the North Korean people view their situation as normal tell us about North Korea the state? What is most obvious is that the static views of an unchanging Stalinist state are flawed. As noted earlier, identifiable changes have occurred within North Korea over the past two decades. The increasing number of refugees who have fled the country makes it possible to gain greater insights into the everyday lives of its citizens.

Kim frames her book around the well-known and often-mocked factoid about Kim Jong-il's interest—perhaps even obsession—with cinema. The North Korean leader reportedly has a huge library of Western and Asian movies. In the 1980s, he even ordered the kidnapping of two South Korean moviemakers and forced them to make films for the North Korean state. Rarely have scholars asked why Kim maintains this focus, preferring instead to chuckle at his bizarre behavior. Suk-Young Kim points out that "what is often overlooked in the world's fascination about Kim Jong-il's cinemania . . . is that the function of film as an essentially political tool was already established long before his coming to power, and it is precisely by means of mobilizing film's political potential that he ascended to become the successor to his father" (p. 22).

Kim Jong-il has used film, theater, and other media to cast his father as head of the Korean family in the Confucian tradition, and for years scholars have studied what has become known as the "cult of Kim Il-sung." In *Illusive Utopia*, Suk-Young Kim brings something new to the discussion by showing us not only how the regime's casting of Kim Il-sung as the nation's traditional patriarch affects the everyday lives of ordinary North Koreans, but also how the state machinery has utilized these memes and tropes to fulfill its objectives.

In this regard, the North Korean regime has consistently sought legitimacy by portraying itself as the defender of the Korean nation. In particular, it has emphasized nationalism in juxtaposition to Japanese and U.S. threats. And in recent years, it has increasingly sought to criticize South Korea for abandoning a truly "Korean" way of life. Yet more important has been the North Korean state's effectiveness at embedding its rule within Korean cultural and social foundations. This includes casting "long-standing Confucian family traditions . . . as the basis of a universal structure." This fusion of political control and

culture serves to legitimize and thoroughly organize and reorient North Korean cultural and social life in ways largely compatible with the regime's interests (p. 4). This "Korean-ness" of North Korea stresses nationalism, resentment against Japan for its colonization of Korea in the early twentieth century, and a strong family—even clannish—orientation.[48] Indeed, over the decades the state has moved far beyond simply addressing "political" concerns, attempting to influence the ways in which North Koreans eat, dress, and speak.

The most unusual and insightful aspect of *Illusive Utopia* is Suk-Young Kim's exploration of how the regime has constructed gender—in particular, ideas about femininity—in North Korea. Paintings, songs, movies, and mass games not only tell the story of Kim Il-sung as the father of the nation, but also provide guidance on how to behave as "model citizens." Women, Kim argues, "became not only the focal point within the traditional family structure but also the agents of ideological awakening for the newly founded socialist state" (p. 232). Yet defining a new role for women created a dilemma: the woman's traditional role in the family clashed with the idea of becoming a revolutionary. A variant of this contradiction is still evident today. In general, women in North Korea continue to wear either *joseonot* (modified traditional Korean clothing) or work uniforms. Thus, "[as] oxymoronic as it may sound, North Korea's brand of socialist modernity found its prerogative in traditional dress codes. . . . Tradition is not regarded as remnants of the feudal past, but a rich reservoir where nationalism could be reinstated" (p. 236). This grafting of nationalism, tradition, and contemporary political control has created a deep and powerful cultural meme in North Korea. Women, men, families, classes, and regions all have been given meaning and told how to perform in a way that links to an imagined "Korean" past. These "performances" also subtly and forcefully weave the people into a North Korean state that posits itself as protector and provider. Even when reality differs from rhetoric, the dissonance may not be strong enough to force a fundamental rethinking of the individual's place within the society and culture. Kim observes, "If women were to master military roles, they would have to abandon their familiar persona as domestic housewives and attempt to personify something they were not. No matter how intensively visual media created simulacra of female warriors, this impersonation would have presented a tough challenge for North Korean women, since the gap between them and the theatricalized characters was so wide. . . . For this reason, the North Korean state needed to create an intermediary procedure that would enable everyday women to identify with women on the stage" (p. 238).

48. For example, numerous South Korean conglomerates are also in the third generation of family leadership, with no transfer to professional management in sight.

In framing issues in terms of performance and symbolism, Kim includes activists and foreign actors as well as North Koreans. She notes that "at first glance, euphoric tourist sites and the brutal hunting of escapees may appear to be unrelated. But once the performance mechanism of producing what is visible and invisible becomes the focal point of analysis, tourism and human rights issues form a coherent dialogue about North Korean propaganda as a process of making a national performance. . . . North Korean escapees, foreign tourists, aid workers, and human rights activists all bring in competing ideas in an effort to create their version of the 'real' representation of North Korea" (p. 262). In each of these cases, the North Korean people are objects onto which competing meanings, images, and narratives are projected. Activists who send balloons with anti-North Korean pamphlets floating over the DMZ, refugees and aid workers who produce documentaries or books about their experiences, foreign governments, and of course the North Korean government itself—each is attempting to tell a narrative and to symbolically frame the North Korean people for their own purposes. Indeed, in *Illusive Utopia* Kim underscores the need to recognize and reframe the actions of external activists, governments, and other organizations as being as much about symbolic performance for foreign audiences as about exposing the "reality" within North Korea itself.

Kim provides as an example *Yoduk Story*, a musical written by North Korean defectors to dramatize the horrors committed by the regime. The musical, which has been performed in the United States and South Korea, ironically utilizes tropes and expressions that mimic North Korean propaganda films. In the films and in *Yoduk Story*, "[the heroines] transform themselves from victims to rebels when they stand up against their oppressors: the Japanese and the North Korean regime, respectively. . . . Both emerge from their silent and subdued gestures and become resolute fighters who stand up to their victimizers by performing the ferocious gesture of resistance . . . and the tragic iconography of a dispersed family [is] centered on the heartbreaking image of a mother suffering through the separation from her children" (p. 299).

Anthropologist Sandra Fahy's research complements Kim's work by also exploring the hidden voices of North Koreans. In multiple interviews that often lasted several hours, Fahy spoke in Korean with three dozen North Korean defectors in Seoul and Tokyo. Her goal was to learn about the defectors' experiences in their own voices.[49] The result is a deep and richly textured view of how North Koreans see themselves, their government, and the outside world.

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49. Sandra Fahy, "Listening to the Famine: Oral Accounts of Surviving North Korea's March of Suffering," book manuscript, Korean Studies Institute, University of Southern California, 2011.

Fahy's research reminds us that the North Korean people make their own decisions about their reality, which is often at odds with the official rhetoric of the North Korean regime.[50]

Fahy's research reveals the sophisticated and nuanced way in which North Korean citizens—from elites in the capital to the poorest farmers in the northern provinces—developed sly and often coded language to discuss topics that the government censored. Fahy notes that a "vibrant lexicon was in use by ordinary people and it was distinct in meaning from that used by the state. However, due to severe restrictions placed on accurate famine talk, coded communication had to be extremely subtle. Often the very terms provided by the government were used, but their meanings were remade."[51] To support this claim, she cites the example of citizens calling the local black markets *paekhwachom* (workers' department stores):

> Reference to the official shopping center was reformulated and given accuracy when its nominal reference was used to refer to the black market. . . . As such, state-sanctioned terms used in daily communication referred to things that were illegal without ambiguity on the official level. Mr. Yoon's account is also humorous because in Korean the word *paekhwachom* has a very affluent connotation. The reality of the black market contrasts sharply with the language used to refer to it [and] shows not only the dry and black humour of North Koreans, but also the readiness to use official discourse towards their own ends. This type of talk criticized the conditions of the country between interlocutors and indicates a lively awareness of the country's shortcomings.[52]

Much of this new wave of scholarship about North Korea relies on the work of refugees, and perhaps one of the most politically charged areas is the question of how many North Korean refugees are living in northeast China and how many are attempting to escape from North Korea. China, of course, resists attempts to conduct research along the border itself. Estimates range from a high of 300,000 North Korean refugees currently living in China to a low of between 5,000 and 15,000 in 2009.[53] Perhaps the most careful and rigorous

50. There is a glaring methodological problem in all research involving refugees. Refugees share one trait that makes them different from the larger population of North Koreans: they experienced something so horrible that they attempted the perilous journey to escape. Given that this research is essentially the only available perspective on life inside North Korea, we accept this methodological problem to deepen our understanding about life inside the country. We should remember, however, that this picture is inevitably skewed.
51. Sandra Fahy, "Speaking and Remembering: North Korean Famine Talk," *Food, Culture, and Society,* forthcoming, p. 8.
52. Ibid., pp. 18–20.
53. Both Robert Sutter and Samuel S. Kim state that 200,000–300,000 North Korea refugees were in China in 2003. Sutter, "China's 'Peaceful Rise': Implications for U.S. Interests in Korea," *International Journal of Korean Studies,* Vol. 8, No. 1 (Fall/Winter 2004), p. 123; and Kim, *International Journal of Korean Studies,* Vol. 7, No. 1 (Spring/Summer 2003), p. 45. The U.S. Senate passed a resolution

estimates come from demographer Courtland Robinson, who spent fifteen years measuring North Korean refugee flows in northeast China. Using embedded local observers in northeast China and statistical sampling techniques, Robinson found that in 1998 between 35,000 and 125,000 North Korean migrants were living in northeast China.[54] By 2009, however, the number had decreased to between 5,000 and 15,000. Robinson notes that "reasons for the declining population [in China] include tighter border security, increased migration to South Korea and other countries, and lower expectations of what is available in China."[55] The makeup of the migrant population has also changed over the years. For example, initially the majority of North Korean migrants were males ostensibly seeking work—during famines, males are usually the first to leave. By 2009, however, 70 percent were women. This change reveals that these women were "worth more" in economic terms in China. That is, women could find jobs more easily than men, either in conventional positions or through prostitution and even marriage with Chinese men. By 2007–09, between 5,200 and 15,800 children were born to North Korean women living in northeast China. In addition, women are reportedly more successful in reaching South Korea.

Furthermore, contrary to conventional expectations, North Korean refugees do not utterly reject their country. They continue to express pride in their homeland, as well as a desire to return if conditions improved. In going to South Korea or other countries, many North Koreans are forced to confront their essential foreignness, and their "North Korean-ness," like many people traveling abroad for the first time. Refugees also face discrimination from South Koreans, who tend to view the *talbukja* (escapees from the North) as uneducated bumpkins with strange accents.[56]

Even if these refugees do not encounter discrimination, their lives, experiences, memories, families, and friends inevitably trace back to North Korea,

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in 2002 that included the 300,000 estimate. S. Con. Res. 114 (May 20, 2002), "Senate Concurrent Resolution 114 Expressing the Sense of Congress Regarding North Korean Refugees Who Are Detained in China and Those Who Are Returned to North Korea Where They Face Torture, Imprisonment, and Execution." The U.S. State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration initially released an estimate of 75,000 and 125,000 in the year 2000, but then posited the number at 30,000 and 50,000 in 2005. See "The Status of North Korean Asylum Seekers and the U.S. Government Policy towards Them" (Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, March 11, 2005), http://www.state.gov/g/prm/rls/rpt/43275.htm.

54. Courtland Robinson, "North Korea: Migration Patterns and Prospects," paper prepared for "The Korea Project: Planning for the Long-Term" conference, cosponsored by the CSIS Korea Chair and the USC Korean Studies Institute, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, August 20–21, 2010.

55. Ibid., p. 9.

56. Choe Sang-hun, "Crossing the Divide: Teen Defectors from North Korea Face a Difficult Transition to Life in South Korea," *New York Times*, May 10, 2010.

and few people voluntarily leave what they know and the place where their families have lived for generations, if not longer. Perhaps one of the most intriguing findings from numerous studies is that most refugees did not want to leave their home country, and many would like to return if there were enough food. For example, all of Fahy's interviewees, ranging from elites in Pyongyang to farmers from remote Hamgyong Province, said that they would go home if they could. As one young woman told Fahy, "If there were enough to eat, and if there were no prosecution, I would go home again."[57] Two other North Korean defectors confided, "We didn't escape from North Korea because we hated it. That is the country in which we were born and raised. I have so many memories that upon reflection bring tears flowing from my eyes. If I had been able, I would have lived in North Korea. It is regretful, but right now North Korea has no means by which to give us life."[58] Suk-Young Kim quotes another defector: "I did not have any problem in North Korea. In fact, I lived a very comfortable life . . . but when our Dear General [Kim Il-sung] died in 1994, I lost all hope. I felt like there was no reason for me to remain in North Korea" (p. 131).[59]

To explain why the North Korean regime has endured, and to understand why incipient revolution in North Korea may not be as likely as some hope, it is important to take seriously this consistent finding that people do not easily leave their homes and their country. Indeed, refugees, political prisoners, and others on the margins of North Korean society are a small portion of the entire population. Although hundreds of thousands of North Koreans either have been persecuted by the regime or have chosen to flee, many millions more have remained. Understanding why they stay is as important as understanding why others leave. The standard explanation is that those who stay are either brainwashed or suffer severe repression. It is worth considering, however, that some may prefer to stay. Much of the evidence suggests that both pride and the comfort of home are stronger motivations than perhaps thought.[60]

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57. Fahy, "Speaking and Remembering," p. 23.
58. Sŏnhŭi Bak and Chunshik Bak, *Kulmchulim poda musŏun kŏsŭn hŭimangŭl ilhŏpŏlinŭn ilimnida* [Worse than hunger is the loss of hope] (Seoul: Shidae Chongshin, 2000), p. 141, quoted in ibid., p. 31.
59. For similar comments from refugees, see Bradley Martin, *Under the Loving Care of Our Father: North Korea and the Kim Dynasty* (New York: Thomas Dunne, 2004), p. 5.
60. Benjamin K. Sovacool, "North Korea and Illegal Narcotics: Smoke but No Fire?" *Asia Policy,* Vol. 7 (January 2009), pp. 89–111; David C. Kang, "Securitizing Transnational Organized Crimes and North Korea's NTS," in Kyung-ae Park, ed., *Non-traditional Security and North Korea* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, forthcoming); and Sheena Chestnut, "Illicit Activity and Proliferation: North Korean Smuggling Networks," *International Security,* Vol. 32, No. 1 (Summer 2007), pp. 80–111.

The point is not whether North Koreans are strange in the eyes of outsiders. Rather, there is a potential danger in evaluating North Korea based on outside standards. The North Korean system works for a reason; it is often dysfunctional, but still functional enough to sustain itself like many other nation-states around the world. There is an internal logic that combines Korean culture, state propaganda and repression, and the comfort people find in their homes and families. Such behavior is not categorically different from what occurs in every society in the modern world.

Conclusion

As Bruce Cumings once wrote about North Korea, "We look at it and see ourselves."[61] That is, outsiders project their fears and hopes onto North Korea rather than viewing the country on its own terms. North Korea offers no easy conclusions. Still, what can a careful exploration of the available research tell us? Most clearly, North Korea is about more than its nuclear and missile programs. Dealing with the country's economy, human rights, and humanitarian concerns is just as important.

North Korea in 2012 is not the North Korea of 2000: its political institutions, economy, and society have all experienced major and possibly enduring changes. North Korea exhibits a greater diversity of opinion and people than is commonly thought. Kim Jong-il is the leader of a totalitarian regime, but identifiable institutional differences, and undoubtedly personal differences, do exist. Largely as a result of weakened state control, the economy has experienced increases in commercialization and marketization in recent years. The economy is stronger than many outsiders believe: it has proven remarkably enduring and adaptable, and many people now operate in either the black market or private markets. At the same time, the regime is weaker than it was a decade ago: unplanned marketization has shriveled the central government's control over the periphery, despite episodes of retrenchment. The North Korean people are not brainwashed robots, nor are they all proto-democrats; they are real people with many different opinions. Informal and sporadic information from traders or family members in South Korea or in China continues to trickle into North Korea; the question is how this information will affect them and the choices they make.

None of the changes mentioned above necessarily means that North Korea is headed toward collapse or that its state institutions are nearing failure. Out-

61. Bruce Cumings, "We Look at It and See Ourselves," *London Review of Books*, December 15, 2005, p. 11.

siders have been predicting such a collapse for twenty years, if not longer.[62] Yet North Korea has managed to survive. State officials benefit from marketization because it provides a measure of human security that lessens domestic resistance even while weakening officials' control. Corrupt officials benefit personally from marketization even as it undermines their position. Civil society is almost entirely absent in North Korea, and despite occasional reports of spontaneous "rice riots," there is little evidence that the North Korean people could engage in a Libya-style uprising of any sort. The society is too divided; there are almost no bottom-up institutions around which political protests could cohere; and there are no social or civic leaders who could become political leaders in protests against the government.

It appears, then, that collapse of the North Korean regime would more likely occur from implosion at the top. Examining the stability of the North Korean regime thus requires a discussion of the third generation of the Kim dynasty.[63] Kim Jong-un is clearly the successor to his father. He is young (his exact age is unknown, but he is believed to be twenty-eight) and unproven as a leader. It is useful to remember, however, that the overwhelming consensus of outside observers in the early 1990s was that Kim Jong-il could not possibly survive as leader of North Korea. Thus, while we may think that Kim Jong-un cannot possibly survive once he takes power, we should be cautious in our predictions.[64]

What does the review of *Inside the Red Box*, *Famine in North Korea*, and *Illusive Utopia* tell us regarding the policies of countries concerned about North Korea? Is engagement or isolation more likely to produce change? As with its economic and social issues, North Korea's security situation today is not what it was ten years ago. A negotiated solution involving its nuclear and missile programs seems unlikely. The U.S., South Korean, and Japanese governments have chosen containment and isolation, pressuring the North Korean regime for concessions before they make any moves on their own. This policy has been fairly successful in the domestic politics of the United States, South Korea, and Japan, and there is little indication that these governments plan to change their strategies.

Yet the larger North Korean problem involves more than the security issue,

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62. Nicholas Eberstadt, "The Coming Collapse of North Korea," *Wall Street Journal*, June 26, 1990; and Fareed Zakaria, "When North Korea Falls," *Washington Post*, October 18, 2010. For a contrary view, see Daniel Byman and Jennifer Lind, "Pyongyang's Survival Strategy: Tools of Authoritarian Control in North Korea," *International Security*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (Summer 2010), pp. 44–74.
63. Scott Snyder, "Kim Jong-il's Successor Dilemmas," *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (January 2010), pp. 35–46.
64. Byung-joon Ahn, "The Man Who Would Be Kim," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 73, No. 6 (November–December 1994), pp. 94–108.

and a strategy of isolation and minimal interaction with North Korea means that the weakest and most vulnerable will continue to lead a hazardous existence, with near-famine conditions possible every year. The only way to solve the hunger issue is to bring North Korea into the world market and help it earn enough through foreign trade that it can import adequate quantities of food. The North Korean government also continues to engage in horrific and systematic human rights abuses; international isolation has done little to curb these abuses and may in fact encourage them. Thus, dealing with North Korea's immediate economic and social issues and interacting with its government and people may work at cross-purposes with policies designed to pressure the regime into making concessions on its nuclear and missile programs. Even sanctions that are targeted only at the North Korean elite appear to have little impact. The youngest and oldest, weakest and most vulnerable will be most directly affected by sanctions. As Haggard and Noland conclude, "A coordinated strategy of cutting North Korea off from international assistance would increase the probability of regime change. . . . [But] that rests on a highly dubious utilitarian logic: that it is morally acceptable to sacrifice the innocent today in the uncertain probability that lives will be saved or improved at some future point" (p. 230).

The changes taking place in North Korea will continue whether or not the international community engages it. The regime will most assuredly continue to look after its own survival first without consideration for the people. Thus, North Korea presents no easy solutions for policymakers in Seoul, Washington, and other capitals. Rather, it offers a series of difficult trade-offs: engagement of some type may have a positive impact on the current economic and humanitarian issues, but some observers fear that this will reward the regime for its international behavior. Containment is an obvious response to belligerent foreign policy behavior, but whether North Korea will bow to such pressure is unclear. Moreover, such actions would probably exacerbate the difficulties already confronting the North Korean people. Outside powers must therefore craft policies toward North Korea that recognize the country's inner workings while managing the trade-offs between engagement and pressure.