

The Arduous March Famine and the Grassroots Revolution

To many in the West, North Korea has long been regarded as a “Hermit Kingdom”—a state that deliberately isolates itself from the outside world, except for its communist allies. Adhering to its distinctive ideology of *Juche*, which emphasizes self-reliance, the state strictly restricted foreign contact, and nearly every aspect of the nation was shrouded in secrecy.¹ In September 1995, however, the North Korean government publicly appealed to the international community for humanitarian aid, citing hardship caused by heavy summer floods and subsequent crop failure.² This rare move, which seemed at odds with North Korea’s long-standing isolationist stance, underscored the gravity of the food crisis. Unfortunately, the devastation persisted into the late 1990s despite international assistance. Although estimated death tolls vary wildly depending on the source, ranging from 200,000 to over three million, hundreds of thousands of people died of starvation and malnutrition during North Korea’s famine years in the mid to late 1990s.³ Yet, this catastrophe did not begin with the 1995 floods. Its onset occurred much earlier, rooted in structural economic fragility and systemic policy failures.

Around 1991, the “Let’s Eat Two Meals a Day!” slogan surfaced in *Rodong Sinmun*, the official media outlet of the North Korean Communist Party.⁴ This campaign to urge people to reduce their daily food intake reflected North Korea’s worsening food insecurity, even though the regime refrained from openly admitting the problem. In fact, the North Korean Government’s Public Distribution System (PDS), which about three-quarters of the population relied on for food, had kept reducing its rations since around 1987. According to the World Food Program’s (WFP) estimate, most North Koreans at the time received only 10 – 30% of their grain as rice,

with the remainder consisting predominantly of corn.⁵ Based on this, the WFP diagnosed “famine in slow motion” in North Korea.⁶

The diagnosis of a “famine in slow motion” in the early 1990s did not signal a sudden divergence from North Korea’s agricultural history; rather, it represented the ultimate failure of a system that had been periodically afflicted by food shortages since its inception. The first food shortage occurred between 1945 and 1946, shortly after the end of World War II. The Korean peninsula’s arable land was concentrated in the south, and as Korea was divided into zones of occupation by the United States and the Soviet Union following the surrender of Japan, southern food supplies were suddenly cut off.⁷ The newly established communist North Korea implemented land reform, redistributing confiscated land from Korean landlords and Japanese colonists and seizing grains to address urban food shortages. However, this abrupt measure significantly reduced agricultural output amid confusion.⁸ Then, between 1954 and 1955, it experienced another severe food shortage as a result of the aftermath of the Korean War (1950 – 1953). Despite postwar efforts to overhaul agriculture and build a self-sufficient economy through collectivization and centrally planned initiatives, food shortages persisted. Notably, crop failures between 1970 and 1973 precipitated another period of food crisis in North Korea.⁹ With unfavorable climate conditions and only around 15 – 20 % of arable land available, stable agricultural production was inherently challenging in North Korea.¹⁰

However, the recurrent food shortages were not merely the result of geographical constraints, but also the result of more complex policy failures. For instance, the government’s push for Soviet-style, heavy industry-centered economic development policy since the 1950s led to a decline in the share of agricultural labor and resources. North Korea’s state-led, collectivized farming system, introduced in the 1950s, stifled individual initiative and discouraged creative

efforts to improve agricultural productivity. In the 1960s, the government implemented the Rural Technical Revolution to boost agricultural productivity through “mechanization, electrification, irrigation, and chemicalization.”¹¹ While the crop yields initially surged, lending temporary justification for the regime’s claims of socialist modernization, this trajectory was fundamentally unsustainable. The revolution left North Korean agriculture dangerously dependent on a high-input industrial model that relied on subsidized fuel and chemical fertilizers. The government continued to promote the overuse of chemical fertilizers and pesticides in the 1980s to increase harvests, but this overapplication degraded the long-term fertility of the soil.¹² The measure to increase productivity created only an absolute dependency on the very Soviet-subsidized inputs that would vanish overnight in the early 1990s. The food crisis of the late 20th century was a culmination of the country’s accumulated agricultural policy failures.

If chronic policy failures set the stage for food insecurity, external shocks in the early 1990s precipitated a systemic collapse. North Korea had historically relied heavily on its communist allies, China and the Soviet Union, for food aid and agricultural inputs. However, both countries underwent significant internal transformations beginning in the 1980s, changes which had adverse consequences for North Korea’s food supplies and production. The Soviet Union terminated its aid to Korea in 1987, amid the wave of *perestroika* and *glasnost* in the 1980s that preceded its shift to a market economy.¹³ Instead, it began demanding that North Korea pay market prices for fuel, fertilizers, and food, which it had previously provided at concessional rates. North Korea could not afford the cost, and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 exacerbated the crisis. Imports from the Soviet Union plummeted from approximately \$175 million in 1990 to less than \$10 million in 1992. Meanwhile, China transitioned to a socialist market economy in the early 1990s and increasingly expanded trade with South Korea,

culminating in the establishment of formal diplomatic relations in 1992. As the Sino–North Korean alliance weakened, China adopted similar market-based trade policies toward North Korea. Facing its own agricultural shortfalls, China cut its maize exports to North Korea by 80% between 1993 and 1994.¹⁴ Shortage in imports and aid from its allies further deteriorated North Korea’s domestic food production and supply. At the end of 1993, the North Korean regime was forced, unprecedentedly, to acknowledge that the national economy had entered a “grave situation” due to the “collapse of socialist markets of the world.”¹⁵ The “Let’s Eat Two Meals a Day” campaign continued through radio broadcasts in 1994.¹⁶ With limited food supplies, PDS rations continued to shrink. As the state-run “Let’s Eat Two Meals a Day” campaign took hold, PDS rations for urban dwellers—which once provided 600 – 700 grams of grain daily—collapsed to just 150 grams per day. While official data remain scarce, accounts from famine refugees indicate that regular food distribution largely ceased around 1994.¹⁷ When PDS could no longer operate, people with no alternative source of grain faced chronic hunger and starvation. As severe food shortages spread across the country, food-related deaths began to occur.

However, the hardships of the early 1990s were only a prelude to the worst famine the country had ever witnessed, known as the “Arduous March.” From late July to mid-August 1995, while the food crisis was already ravaging the country, North Korea experienced heavy rainfall that culminated in massive floods. Infrastructure was devastated, and 85% of the country’s hydroelectric capacity was destroyed, resulting in widespread power outages.¹⁸ According to an official announcement, the heavy floods also displaced 5.4 million people and destroyed 30,000 hectares of agricultural land.¹⁹ Most critically, the flood irrevocably destroyed the vast majority of the nation’s rice crop, causing already meager harvests to plummet. 1.9 million tons of grain were lost.²⁰ As if the conditions could not deteriorate any further, another heavy flood inundated

urban and rural centers in 1996.²¹ With food supplies exhausted, nationwide starvation was unstoppable. In 1997, North Korea entered its deadliest phase, marked by a drought that lasted more than 60 days amid extreme heat. That summer's drought, which followed the disastrous floods of the previous two years, exacerbated North Korea's starvation.²² The North Korean government's secrecy makes the precise death toll uncertain, but it is estimated that between 600,000 and 1 million people, or roughly 3 – 5% of the total population, perished from malnutrition and starvation between 1995 and 1999.²³

The lives of those who survived were also shattered, and society was devastated. Out of desperation, thousands of people fled the country and became refugees commonly known as “defectors,” risking harsh punishment—or even their lives—if captured by border guards. Opening schools became meaningless, as students and teachers left school to find food or were too weak to attend classes due to malnutrition.²⁴ Severely deprived of food, citizens abandoned their workplaces to forage for anything remotely edible in the wild; in those times of severe desperation, people's source of survival was whatever looked edible.²⁵ Many families survived on “green porridge,” a mixture of ground-up leaves, vegetable matter, and a small amount of grain.²⁶ When even green porridge was unavailable, people barely sustained themselves through “alternative food” found in the wild, such as twigs, tree bark, leaves, and grass, which were mixed with anything else remotely edible.²⁷ These coarse “foods” frequently led to diarrhea, dysentery, and internal bleeding.²⁸ Andrew Natsios, who visited North Korea in 1997 as an NGO worker, noted that he observed hundreds of people scouring the countryside for wild vegetation.²⁹ He was shocked by a resident who said that all the weeds would be eaten unless they were known to be poisonous; the famine refugees he met later in China confirmed the same

reality.³⁰ Desperation was so extreme that some people even consumed poisonous mushrooms, literally risking death for a single meal.³¹

During the horrific famine, children suffered even more. Malnutrition and illnesses from poor food prevented children from growing normally, making them far shorter and lighter than their South Korean counterparts, as later testified by visitors.³² Malnourished mothers struggled to breastfeed their infants, yet infant formula was unavailable. The escalating infant mortality rate was an inevitable consequence of these conditions. Furthermore, testimonies and accounts of North Korean defectors in interviews with South Korean or Western media often convey another dimension of the famine. A refugee doctor recalled seeing emaciated children being fed weeds and grasses, and adults giving their own meager portions to their children instead.³³ Children were also the most vulnerable to the collapse of the family structure. As the famine continued, numerous children were abandoned or orphaned: some because their parents left home to find food and never returned; others because families had reached the limits of survival. Forced to fend for themselves, these abandoned children began roaming the streets to beg or steal for their survival. These homeless children were dubbed *Kotchebi*, meaning “flower swallows,” analogous to these children’s constant movement in search of food and shelter. *Kotchebis* would often find temporary refuge, such as in abandoned factories or rail stations, but no place was safe for them.³⁴ They remained among the most at-risk victims of the crisis. It was even rumored that some of those homeless children became victims of cannibalism, and such horrific scenes would be told to the outside world through the eyewitness narratives of North Korean refugees.³⁵ Although such accounts cannot be independently confirmed, they reveal the extent to which the famine had eroded basic human compassion and social trust.

Where was the government when a large portion of its people were starving and pushed to the edge of humanity? In brief, the North Korean regime maintained a policy of official silence regarding its own culpability while systematically suppressing the voices of those who were suffering. The government must have viewed the worsening economic crisis as a burden. According to the North Korean Constitution, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) regarded the "steady improvement of the material and cultural standards of the people as the supreme principle of its activities," and "the State shall provide all the working people with every condition for obtaining food, clothing, and housing."³⁶ Many times, Kim Il-sung had promised to build a socialist utopia where everyone would eat "white rice and meat soup."³⁷ However, the famine completely contradicted what the socialist regime had promised its people, and if the state conceded that it could not even guarantee basic necessities to its people, the very premise of the state's "socialist utopia" worldview could be threatened. For this reason, the government's initial stance in dealing with the crisis was denial. Earlier, in 1993, the North Korean government had acknowledged North Korea's economic hardship, but the regime denied its involvement in contributing to the crisis, instead underscoring only external causes such as the collapse of global socialist markets. The "Let's Eat Two Meals a Day" campaign also suggests that the DPRK government addressed starvation as a matter of patriotic frugality rather than as a crisis requiring government intervention. Even during the famine's peak years, the regime did not properly acknowledge people's starvation. Moreover, the state prohibited citizens from using words such as "famine" or "hunger" in everyday conversation and suppressed any criticism regarding the economy's deterioration. To the regime, the famine should have remained an inevitable outcome of natural disasters.

If such a prolonged famine had occurred elsewhere, such as in South Korea, civilians might have demanded accountability from the government, organized mass protests, or even impeached their leaders. However, there was no sign of any recognizable protest in North Korea, and Kim Jong-il, who succeeded his father Kim Il-sung as after his death in 1994, remained the DPRK's supreme leader. What shaped this bizarre tolerance was the *Juche* ideology, deeply ingrained in every aspect of North Koreans' lives. As North Korea's guiding philosophy, *Juche* emphasized economic, political, and military self-reliance led by the absolute leadership of the supreme leader, as stated by the Preamble of the DPRK's constitution:

Having put forward *Juche*-oriented revolutionary lines, Comrade Kim Il Sung wisely led various stages of social revolution and construction work, thus strengthening and developing the Democratic People's Republic of Korea into a socialist country centered on the masses, into a socialist State which is independent, self-sufficient and self-reliant in defense.³⁸

This adaptation of traditional communist ideology into a uniquely nationalist and totalitarian form elevated the supreme leader to an untouchable, infallible figure. His exceptional leadership was believed, through indoctrination, to transform North Korea into a paradise on earth without reliance on foreign powers. Any voices criticizing the supreme leader or the Workers' Party of Korea, North Korea's sole ruling political party, were brutally suppressed. Any hint of political dissent was viewed as a crime against the government, and the consequences of opposing the regime were severe.³⁹ Those who voiced dissatisfaction with the government were often sentenced to hard labor, with many subjected to torture and even execution.⁴⁰ One survivor recalled that even mentioning "hunger" was technically banned:

If someone had died of hunger you couldn't say that they were so hungry they died. When you were working you would always feel hungry, to work without having eaten, argh!! There was no way you could say "I am so hungry, I can't do it." "I'm in pain," you could say.⁴¹

Speaking of hunger was practically considered a political sin, as it directly challenged the state's ideology of self-reliance. Those who broke the country's silence around the famine faced severe consequences.⁴²

Instead, the North Korean government normalized the term "Arduous March" after the supreme leader Kim Jong-il introduced it in his 1996 New Year's joint editorial:

All Party members, People's Army soldiers, and people must live and fight with the spirit of the Arduous March created in the Baekdu jungle.⁴³

The Arduous March was political rhetoric aimed at reminding North Koreans of a legendary narrative in which Kim Il-sung allegedly led strenuous guerrilla battles against Japanese soldiers between 1938 and 1939 and achieved victories despite extreme hardship. For decades, the mythic anti-Japanese struggle undertaken by the nation's founder had been central to Kim Il-sung's deified persona: the narrative about his struggle toward liberation was the glorious history of a national hero. By evoking the Arduous March, the extreme economic hardship that permeated the country was now painted as part of a collective march toward victory, imbued with the same patriotic spirit that had empowered Kim's band of guerrilla fighters. In short, the "Arduous March" rhetoric served as a political weapon to encourage citizens to endure their struggles, framing people's suffering as a journey toward the eventual completion of the revolutionary mission. The term, in reality, was nothing more than a euphemism that masked systemic devastation.

However, no matter how effective such propaganda was, willpower encouraged by "the spirit of the Arduous March" or patriotic enthusiasm alone could not alleviate mass starvation. The regime desperately needed external assistance, but doing so risked undermining the principle of self-reliance articulated in the *Juche* ideology and its legitimacy. This was the government's core dilemma. Ironically, a series of natural disasters between 1995 and 1997, despite greatly

worsening the famine, somewhat eased the government's burden. In 1995, the government started appealing for unprecedented international food aid, referring to the crisis that had resulted from floods in July and August.⁴⁴ Since then, North Korea has primarily described the mass starvation of the mid-1990s as a natural disaster-induced difficulty and secondarily as a consequence of a decline in trade. Blaming the famine on uncontrollable factors, such as severe weather, was an effective way to solicit humanitarian support without compromising the regime's legitimacy. As discussed earlier, food shortages had already reached a critical level *before* the 1995 summer floods. The damage from adverse weather could have been lessened without the aggressive exploitation of farmland and other agricultural policy failures. Nevertheless, the narrative of natural disasters successfully concealed the man-made nature of the famine, shifting the government's responsibility.

Nonetheless, the impact of this broader appeal was both delayed and limited. Recognizable famine-related mortality remained high until 1998—the year remembered as the deadliest period of the Arduous March famine—although the situation seemed to begin to improve later. In other words, even such a sizable food aid from the international community was neither immediate nor sufficient to resolve the ongoing famine.⁴⁵ This discrepancy is connected to the North Korean government's mismanagement at various levels. For instance, Pyongyang imposed severe restrictions on relief workers sent by the World Food Program (WFP), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the UN, UNICEF, and the World Health Organization (WHO), among other aid programs. The aid workers were forbidden from entering certain regions, including *Hamgyong Pukto*, which was ironically one of the most famine-ravaged cities in the country.⁴⁶ Donated food was often stored in Pyongyang's warehouses, rather than reaching the people who were most in need. Humanitarian aid workers'

direct interaction with North Korean people was also restricted. There was even a limit to the number of Korean speakers whom the relief programs could employ. Accordingly, aid workers' ability to gauge the situation and determine the best course of action to help North Koreans was severely constrained. Additionally, these aid workers were often not informed of where the food would end up, an aspect of humanitarian work that frustrated donor countries and relief programs. Many organizations halted or reduced their operations in North Korea and pulled out of the relief effort.⁴⁷

Aid workers had good reason to question why the regime was withholding information on where the aid was headed, for countries had dedicated considerable amounts of aid to mend North Korea's economy. In fact, North Korea received approximately \$2.3 billion in aid between 1995 and 2005.⁴⁸ The aid, however, was misused too often. To earn foreign exchange, the government resold the rice that Japan and South Korea had sent as humanitarian aid.⁴⁹ Furthermore, instead of distributing food aid among citizens who were literally relying on grass and tree bark to stay alive, the regime diverted a lot of the aid to the military, a group that was already receiving the most food rations because of North Korea's "military-first" *Songun* ideology.⁵⁰ This ideology was the same one that caused North Korea to spend a quarter of its GDP on the military in the early 1990s. Furthermore, the regime's limitations on how long aid workers could stay at children's centers may have affected the amount of food children—the group most vulnerable to the famine—actually received. Food intended for children was often stolen by North Korean workers who used it to feed their own families.⁵¹ In these ways, the government mismanaged its foreign aid, contributing further to the suffering of its own people.

Mismanagement of foreign aid during the famine period mirrored structural problems in North Korean society and politics. Instead of learning from policy failures that caused and

intensified the famine, North Korea strictly adhered to *Juche* ideology-embodied practices. The self-reliance doctrine of *Juche*, which made the government maintain isolation and secrecy, was an obstacle to the effective delivery of foreign assistance. Emphasis on military independence led to substantial amounts of foreign aid being diverted to strengthen the military rather than to save civilians' lives. As noted earlier, the *Juche* ideology also underscored political loyalty to the communist party. This emphasis had long justified the PDS's discriminatory distribution of food and resources through *Songbun*, the North Korean version of a social caste system. Even during the famine, the caste-based nature of the PDS remained intact: food aid was disproportionately assigned in favor of Pyongyang residents and core elites. Consequently, the *Juche* ideology contributed to perpetuating the starvation of the less favored classes, in spite of the influx of global assistance.

“We have nothing to envy in the world”—lyrics from a North Korean children's song which were well-known throughout the country—encapsulated the core of the *Juche* ideology.⁵² While it may sound unusual to outsiders, North Korean residents had been deeply indoctrinated by this type of state propaganda, which portrayed their country as a “heaven on earth” under the fatherly leadership of their supreme leaders, Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il. Although countless people anguished from starvation, the state did not respond to their suffering while expecting the same level of patriotism and obedience. Consequently, ordinary North Korean citizens were forced to fend for themselves, and their choices for survival sometimes silently undermined the very tenet of the “socialist paradise,” even though no visible mass protest broke out during the famine within the country.

One of the most desperate acts of survival was abandoning the “heaven on earth,” even at the risk of death. Prior to the Arduous March famine, escaping the country was extremely rare.

Between 1971 and 1993, only 147 North Koreans fled North Korea to settle in South Korea; official estimates suggest that the total number of refugees was no more than 1,000 across four decades, from the end of the Korean War to the early 1990s.⁵³ Given tight surveillance, crossing the border was not only illegal but also dangerous.⁵⁴ Despite this danger, the number of defections surged in 1994 as a result of the famine. Although exact figures are unavailable, except for those who arrived in South Korea, the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea (HRNK), a Washington D.C.-based NGO who investigates human rights-related issues in North Korea, estimates that approximately 200,000 to 300,000 North Koreans crossed the border and fled to China by the end of the 1990s.⁵⁵ The stark surge of illegal migration underscores how dire the famine had become: starvation pushed tens of thousands of ordinary North Koreans to risk their lives and seek survival beyond their country's borders.

China was the most common destination for defectors because the Sino-North Korean border was less tightly controlled than the North-South Korean border. That said, crossing the border itself still meant extreme danger from the outset. To reach China, defectors had to cross either the Yalu River or the Tumen River, the main boundaries between North Korea and China.⁵⁶ If caught by the North Korean border guards while attempting to cross, defectors would be immediately captured and severely punished. Thus, many people had to hide themselves around the riverbank and wait for a chance to move. Traversing the river was another huge obstacle: some defectors chose to travel on foot once the river froze, while others swam across the river during warmer seasons. Yet crossing the river in any way was a perilous undertaking. While walking on the frozen river, the ice could crack beneath people's feet, pulling them into the icy water.⁵⁷ Moreover, swimming against harsh currents could put people in danger of drowning. Malnourished for long periods of time, many defectors were too weak to withstand

such harsh conditions, so it was not uncommon to find dead bodies floating in the Yalu and Tumen Rivers during the famine years. It was a tragic sight that indicated the degree of desperation that pushed defectors to embrace those perils.

Even if defectors successfully reached the Chinese side, they were still tightly bound by chains of fear and another ordeal. Most defectors were women, and many female defectors were trafficked and sold into forced marriages or prostitution, which often led to physical and sexual violence and emotional manipulation.⁵⁸ Tragically, many women crossed the Sino-North Korean border with the expectation that they would be trafficked and married to Chinese men in search of wives.⁵⁹ China's one-child policy, combined with a widespread preference of sons, created a significant gender imbalance due to a large number of sex-selective abortions.⁶⁰ As a result, many Chinese men were unable to find spouses. Aware of this situation, some female North Korean defectors entered into trafficking arrangements "willingly," viewing marriage in China as a means to secure food, shelter, and some financial stability.⁶¹ Many of these women used brokerage networks called *seon* that connected North Korean women defectors with Chinese buyers. Testimonies from defectors vividly reveal the tragic nature of such networks. Kyung-suk, a woman who defected immediately after her father's death from starvation, said:

"Even though *seon* led me to marry my ex-husband who had tortured me for many years... it is not [the brokers'] fault. I do not think they really sold me, but introduced him to me. In my mind, they just wanted to help me, as it was better to marry a Chinese man due to my illegal status in China."⁶²

Their narratives even demonstrate that some women were given the choice of different Chinese grooms. Still, as Kyung-suk's account suggests, the physical, psychological, and sexual abuse that often ensued was no less disturbing than if a woman had involuntarily entered a marriage. Ms. Seok (who is anonymous to protect her identity), who had defected to China in 1999, offered another harrowing account:

My older sister's ethnic Korean husband introduced me to a Han Chinese man in Jilin Province to live with. Because I could not speak Chinese and I was too scared to do anything there, the Han Chinese man and his father used to yell at me and even beat me. Sometimes, they kicked me in my stomach so hard I could not breathe. They beat me so frequently that I thought I would die.⁶³

North Korean female defectors who were victims of such violence could not report it to the police, as the Chinese government considered North Koreans illegal economic migrants rather than refugees in need of protection, a perception that put these women in constant danger of repatriation.⁶⁴ A 1964 treaty between China and North Korea required both sides to return people deemed as “counterrevolutionaries... and basic criminals [who escape] across the border.” In 1986, another agreement mandated both countries to collaborate in preventing “illegal border crossings of residents.” Under these agreements, Chinese police helped North Korean authorities’ operations in China track defectors and repatriate them.⁶⁵

Forced repatriation often led to brutal punishment in North Korea. Returnees faced torture, imprisonment in political prison camps, and, in some cases, execution.⁶⁶ If a returnee was pregnant, she was subjected to forced abortion, often without anesthesia; if the pregnancy was too advanced, newborns were killed immediately after birth—sometimes suffocated with wet towels in front of their mothers.⁶⁷

If a woman were fortunate enough not to be trafficked, she most likely worked a menial job that paid very little. Many of these women sent the money they earned in China back to North Korea, where the rest of their family stayed. Other women brought their husbands and children to China, where none of them were guaranteed safety. Sometimes, defectors sold their own daughters, often thinking that their children would lead better lives that way. An interview with a refugee captures this point:

One day my mother told me, “No matter how hard we work, it’s difficult to make a living.” She sold me at 10,000 NK won (US\$50). How could you understand a

situation which drives a mother to sell her daughter to a foreign country? I understand her. She cried a lot after giving me away in marriage and wished my happiness, saying, “Don’t worry about us anymore and live a better life in China.”⁶⁸

Despite all the foreseeable dangers and hardships, numerous North Koreans fled, a fact which not only suggests the severity of the North Korea’s famine but also demonstrates the collapse of the state-constructed myth of a “socialist paradise.” Through their escape and lived testimonies, defectors exposed the very realities that the North Korean government sought to conceal. In some sense, the surge of defection represented people’s quiet resistance to the country.

Meanwhile, widespread desperation for food due to the virtual collapse of the PDS led to the development of *Jangmadang*, an informal marketplace within North Korea, which had before then primarily been dominated by a centralized planned economy. For decades before the Arduous March famine, the only legal market authorized by the state was the minor-scale farmers’ market held every ten days, where farmers could sell produce grown in their small kitchen gardens.⁶⁹ However, farmers’ markets that had existed since the 1950s were peripheral to the PDS, which rationed food, clothing, and daily necessities to the vast majority of North Korean citizens. In 1984, Kim Il-sung introduced the August 3rd People’s Consumer Goods Production Campaign and permitted factories to sell their goods at market prices. However, this policy was too restrictive to allow genuine market activity in the private sector.⁷⁰

The situation changed dramatically after food shortages intensified and the PDS collapsed. People who lost access to food foraged for whatever they could eat, but the amount of food always remained insufficient, and eating wild “foods” often posed fatal health risks. To secure a more reliable food supply, people increasingly resorted to illegal trade. Whether they intended it or not, such trade was an act of defiance against North Korea’s political system. “We

lost faith in the government,” recalled Geumju, a defector who experienced the Arduous March as a child.⁷¹ Subsequently, black markets emerged. Informal trade among ordinary North Korean people began as small, improvised exchanges. “If you had some rice, you’d make and sell rice cakes. If you had corn, you’d make and sell corn noodles,” remembered Joo Yang, a defector born in 1991.⁷² These informal exchanges soon grew into larger local markets and merchant centers, which came to be known collectively as *Jangmadang*. These markets soon expanded into widespread grassroots marketization in one of the most openly anti-market societies in the world. This quiet but transformative shift fundamentally reshaped everyday survival and weakened the state’s dominance over the economy.

As market activity expanded, the socialist state’s tight economic control began to disintegrate. Smuggling through cross-border trade networks, a result of marketization, became unstoppable. “In the winter, I’d put goods in a water bucket and take it to the river and slide it right across the ice. A Chinese trader would grab it and slide the money over to me,” recalled Danbi Kim, another defector who experienced the Arduous March.⁷³ Even state-owned trading companies, which imported resources only with strict government approval, covertly sold parts of their imports at markets. Since domestic production was scarce, these imported products were highly sought after, and trading enterprises thereby earned substantial profits.⁷⁴ People’s engagement in privatized transactions constituted a quiet form of disobedience, but it occurred too frequently for the state to contain.

Furthermore, most markets did not operate in secret despite being illegal. They functioned openly, often in full view of local authorities, suggesting that the government largely tolerated their existence at the time. “Since everyone was desperate and struggling day to day, it wasn’t just one or two people trading. There were a large number of people. The state used to

stop people from gathering in groups to trade; they would go around and confiscate everything. But when everyone started trading, the state was powerless to stop it,” said Yang. Market entrepreneurs also paid bribes to local officials to turn a blind eye to market operations. State officials, who received meager salaries from the government, were themselves desperate for survival. Ultimately, the state adapted to reality: in 2002, the regime implemented the July 1st Economic Management Reform Measure, which legalized market operations.

Marketization through *Jangmadang* fundamentally impacted the young generation’s view of their system. Young people born in the 1990s, often called the *Jangmadang* generation, internalized market logic and entrepreneurial vision early on. “I knew I had to do business and make money to survive in this society, so I started thinking about business from the age of fourteen,” remembered Yang. “There was a factory that processed soybeans. They would husk them and take the beans, but there would be some beans left at the bottom of the chaff. I gathered it up and used the wind to blow away the chaff, and I sold the beans and made some money.” The way of survival they learned through the market was through trade, not state provision. For this generation, which grew up observing lively, informal market activity rather than relying on state distributions, the country’s socialist ideals seemed pointless and disconnected from reality.

Furthermore, *Jangmadang* exposed this young generation to foreign culture through smuggled and illegally traded media sources. As cross-border trade with Chinese entrepreneurs grew, more and more foreign entertainment also began flowing into North Korea alongside other products. Although accessing foreign culture was a counterrevolutionary act in North Korea, distribution of foreign media content and the “CD-running” business and thrived throughout urban and rural areas alike. Moreover, the mid- to late-1990s were a period in which South Korean content began to gain widespread popularity across Asia, including China. This cultural

phenomenon, known as Hallyu, or the Korean Wave, contributed to the widespread circulation of South Korean movies, dramas, and music in North Korea, despite the absence of an official channel to mediate them.

North Korea was a closed country, in which the media had long been devoted exclusively to internal propaganda. Thus, this infiltration of outside information posed a direct threat to the strictly state-controlled nature of North Korean media. The North Korean government tightly controlled all education, news, and entertainment through the Propaganda and Agitation Department (PAD), whose sole purpose was to glorify the regime and preserve the *Juche* ideology. From a young age, citizens were taught to worship the Kim family and malign the United States and South Korea. State propaganda promoted absurd myths, such as glowing stars and twin rainbows appearing at Kim Jong Il's birth, or his allegedly scoring eleven holes-in-one the first time he played golf. Schools taught that South Korea was impoverished and chaotic. "What they taught us about South Korea was all crumbling houses and poor southerners rummaging through the trash," recalled Kim. However, the South Korea depicted in smuggled media was far wealthier, safer, and freer than what they had been conditioned to believe.

When you watch foreign media, you start to realize various things. At first, you see the cars, apartment buildings, and markets, and you think it must be a movie set. But the more you watch, there are so many streets with tall buildings and cars. There is no way it can be a movie set, so [you know] South Koreans must be very rich. If you watch one or two [pieces of content], it always raises these doubts, and if you keep watching, then you know for sure. You realize how well South Koreans and other foreigners live.⁷⁵

As Kim's narrative suggests, repeated exposure to foreign culture slowly but fundamentally altered the *Jangmadang* generation's perception of South Korea and the outside world. Another defector, who escaped North Korea in 2010, recalled, "[When I started watching South Korean movies and dramas], I noticed that... there were no themes that condemned North Korea."⁷⁶ This young generation recognized that the world portrayed in films and dramas reflected real life

elsewhere, as the media was not a tool for propaganda or ideological education. Intrusion of foreign culture was a quiet but powerful force. Despite the harsh consequences for consuming foreign content—if caught, people could even be executed—many watched the shows in secret. Surveys conducted with North Korean defectors reveal that approximately 85% of the population secretly consumed Western media and South Korean television programming.⁷⁷

It is noteworthy that the *Jangmadang* generation's disillusionment played a significant role in the ongoing defections. The famine situation became relieved after 1998, but the number of people fleeing the country kept growing until Kim Jong-un took control of North Korea after his father Kim Jong-il's death, remaining high until the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Even though media exposure was not the sole, direct cause of their decision to escape, almost every younger defector's testimony that they consumed K-dramas and K-pop regularly while in North Korea shows how they came to conceive of an alternative life elsewhere.

While people's views of the regime were being reshaped by the growing influence of foreign culture, another significant transformation was quietly underway within North Korean society. As *Jangmadang* became the primary means for families to earn money, women—who constituted the vast majority of market participants—began to emerge as the principal breadwinners. This shift illustrates a profound departure from long-standing gender norms in North Korea. For decades, North Korea's patriarchal structure had designated husbands as the primary income earners, with some sources noting that a husband's earnings had traditionally been higher than his wife's.

This is not to suggest that women were not expected to work. During the 1950s, the regime's Chollima Movement mobilized the entire labor force—including women—to rebuild the nation after the Korean War. By 1967, women made up nearly half of North Korea's

workforce. Yet, despite this high participation rate, female labor was systematically devalued. Women were concentrated in low-paying, light-industry jobs and in education: roughly 80% of elementary school teachers were women, earning eighty to one hundred twenty won each month, while college professors—overwhelmingly male—earned between one hundred and two hundred fifty won. Additionally, women accounted for only 15% of college faculty.⁷⁸ The state encouraged women to work, but more significant social expectations about women were child-rearing mothers instilling communist ideology in their children. The regime glorified figures like Kang Ban Seok, mother of Kim Il-Sung, and Kim Jong Suk, mother of Kim Jong-Il.⁷⁹ In state propaganda, these female figures had been portrayed as paragons of ideological purity and maternal devotion.⁸⁰ Articles, poems, and songs glorifying these women circulated nationwide, and their birthdays became state celebrations from the late 1960s onward. From the late 1980s onward, North Korea saw numerous women quit their jobs after marriage, and a 1990 study on North Korean women stated, “It is reported that a majority of married women do not work outside the home.”⁸¹ In fact, in the 1990s, enterprises often banned women from working for them, as women were heavily associated with housewives.⁸² In brief, revolutionary womanhood was still bound to North Korea’s deeply rooted patriarchal order.

But the Arduous March fundamentally disrupted this gender order. When famine struck in 1994, the state continued to require men to report to factories—even though wages had collapsed and food stamps were worthless in a collapsed distribution system. Men, once the economic foundation of the household, became unable to support their families. Consequently, while husbands remained trapped in failing workplaces, women entered illegal market trades to find food and additional income. As time passed, more women became traders out of necessity, and soon economic survival depended on their participation. One defector described her

psychological shift: “I was shy and embarrassed when I started to sell goods in the market... I thought peddling was shameful because I was educated that way. But as I tasted the power of money, I changed. I gathered anything that I could sell and went out to the market.”⁸³

As women’s earnings began to surpass their husbands’, the traditional family structure was quietly inverted. A common phrase emerged in the mid-1990s: “If a woman in a family moves and acts, then her family can survive; if she does not, her family will starve to death.”⁸⁴

Since women made up the majority of black market traders, they also became the central actors in cross-border commerce. In this way, the famine not only reshaped North Korea’s economy but also transformed gender roles, making women the drivers of both household survival and the broader, grassroots changes that challenged the foundations of the socialist state. Women’s central role in trading also shaped the gendered nature of cross-border commerce. Because men were expected to appear at state-assigned workplaces, they were more closely monitored and less free to travel. Women, by contrast, were perceived as having no official obligations and thus faced far less surveillance. This made illegal movement—to nearby towns, to markets, and eventually across national borders—considerably easier for women than for men. Many North Korean women crossed into China to barter for food and basic goods before secretly returning to support their starving families.⁸⁵ These journeys, however, were dangerous. If caught and searched by border guards on their way back, their earnings would be confiscated. As a result, women often wrapped their money in plastic and hid it inside their vaginal cavities to avoid detection—a desperate, painful measure that reveals the extreme precarity of survival in the 1990s famine.⁸⁶

Other women never returned home, choosing instead to remain in China to earn money for their families. They frequently took low-wage jobs as caretakers, cleaners, or farm laborers,

and many entered or were forced into sex work.⁸⁷ In reality, however, avoiding traffickers was rare; becoming a trafficking victim was the most common fate for women who crossed the border.⁸⁸ This gendered vulnerability reflects the broader reality that women not only became the drivers of marketization within North Korea, but also bore the heaviest risks associated with illegal mobility and survival.

As markets spread across the country, the government eventually had no choice but to tolerate them. The state simply could not suppress a system that millions of people now relied on to survive—especially when most traders were women who were already operating outside the formal, male-dominated workforce.⁸⁹ In 1998, the government quietly revised the Constitution to acknowledge the role of profit in the economy, and by 2002, it formally legalized markets through the July 1st Economic Management Reform Measure.⁹⁰

Of course, legalization did not mean acceptance. Alongside these reforms, the state raised official prices by enormous margins to weaken private traders and to reassert its authority. Many families lost their savings overnight, but women—who had grown experienced in market exchange—adapted quickly by using Chinese yuan or US dollars instead of the unstable North Korean won. Even as markets became unavoidable, the regime insisted that they were not capitalist but merely a form of “practical socialism,” promising to restore the Public Distribution System someday.⁹¹

Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the state’s apparatus of control, which expected silent obedience during such a dire period, was irrevocably compromised by a campaign of grassroots non-compliance. The women who had taken to the markets during the famine continued to run, sustain, and expand them. They were the ones who carried goods across rivers, bargained with Chinese traders, evaded inspectors, and kept their families alive. While the government struggled

to reclaim authority, women were quietly reshaping daily life from below as the hidden figures of North Korea's grassroots revolution.

The Arduous March fundamentally inverted North Korea's social order. Because of the famine, North Korean women emerged as the primary breadwinners of their families, effectively disrupting the nation's long-standing patriarchy. For the first time since the nation's founding, a significant portion of the populace engaged in an unprecedented era of passive resistance against the regime—by defecting in search of sustenance, they discarded their “socialist heaven”; by establishing illegal markets, they defied the regime's contempt for capitalism; and by secretly consuming foreign media, they dismantled the regime's ideological monopoly from within.

Thus, the famine years of the 1990s in North Korea served as a catalyst for an unlikely challenge from the bottom. Ironically, this disruption was a direct result of the regime's fierce protection of its system. Although a decade of famine resulted in a tragic human death toll, the regime refused to acknowledge its culpability or policy failure while demanding loyalty to the *Juche* ideology and prioritizing ideological purity over the economic welfare of the people.

To the government's dismay, this inadequate response shattered the illusion of a “nothing-to-envy” country and provided a desperate populace with a tangible reason to resist. The consequences of the Arduous March remain complex, characterized by tragic and hopeful implications. It remains the greatest paradox in North Korean history: while the famine brought unprecedented death and suffering, it simultaneously forced the people to undermine the regime from within. In that sense, famine years offered a glimpse of hope to posterity—proving that even in the world's most isolated nation, human determination and resilience could pave the way toward a freer future.

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