

Surviving the Hard Times: Adjustment Strategies of Industrial Workers in a Post-Crisis North Korean City*

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Abstract

The article deals with the everyday survival strategies employed by the workers of (largely non-functioning) state enterprises in post-socialist North Korea, and with the social changes this group has dealt with in the last two decades. It also compares these trends with the experiences of post-socialist Eastern Europe. In the 1990s the economic role of the North Korean state decreased dramatically. Official wages could no longer guarantee the physical survival of the populace, so workers from state industries engaged in a multitude of economic activities which were (and still are) largely related to the booming “second economy.” These activities include private farming, employment in semi-legal and illegal private workshops, trade and smuggling, as well as small-scale business activities. The choice of a particular activity depends on a number of factors, of which network capital is especially significant. Income is also augmented by the illegal use of state resources and widespread theft of material and spare parts from state-owned factories. As a result of these changes, the industrial working class of North Korea, once a remarkably homogenous group, has fragmented, and its members have embarked on vastly different social trajectories.

KEYWORDS: Post-socialism, post-communism, second economy, North Korea, Kim Jong Il, coping strategy, daily life

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The present article deals with the everyday survival strategies which are employed by the workers of (largely non-functioning) state enterprises in post-socialist North Korea, and looks at the impact these new social

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strategies had on this group. It also compares these changes with the better-known experiences of East European post-socialism.

This lets us position the North Korean experiences within a broader context of post-socialism. As will be shown below, North Korea demonstrates its own means of exit from Leninist state socialism. This exit has some peculiarities, but also exhibits many features which are similar with the experiences of post-socialist East Europe and China. At the same time, the peculiarities of North Korea cast some doubt on many assumptions which are common in post-socialist studies: for example, the oft-repeated claims that many of the observed (and rather unsavoury) features of post-socialist societies have been brought about by the neoliberal policies of the reformist governments.

The description of present-day North Korea as “post-socialist” might raise some eyebrows. After all, an oft-repeated cliché holds that North Korea is the “world’s last Stalinist country,”¹ a country where the old system, once built according to a 1950s Soviet blueprint, has supposedly remained unchanged.

However, this is a rather outdated picture. The North Korean authorities do their best to maintain the old facade, and generally succeed in this difficult undertaking—militant slogans and pompous military parades remain prominent features of Pyongyang life. But beyond this facade North Korean society has changed dramatically. Scholars of modern North Korea demonstrate remarkable unity when it comes to describing the essence of these changes. The social and economic changes in post-1990 Korea have been described as “spontaneous marketization” (Yi Yŏng-hun²), “grassroots capitalism” (Lankov and Kim Seok-hyang³), “reforms from below” (Noland and Haggard⁴), “the marketization of North Korean economy” (Yang Mun-su⁵) and “hybrid economy” (Rudiger Frank⁶). And as will be shown in the article, these descriptions are well founded.

In the early 1990s, the old state socialist economy of North Korea, being suddenly deprived of Soviet subsidies, shrank dramatically. Unlike East Europe, the post-socialist transition of North Korea remained (and still remains) incomplete and politically unrecognized (the government makes

¹ For recent reiteration of this cliché see, among many others: *South China Morning Post* [Hong Kong] 31 July 2011: 3; *Irish Times* [Dublin] 12 Jan 2011: 11; *The Times* [London (UK)] 29 Sep 2010: 30.

² Yi Yŏng Hun (Lee Young-hoon), “Pukhan ūi ‘Chasaengjŏk sijanghwa’ wa kyŏngjae kaehyŏk ūi chŏnggae” [The Spontaneous Marketization and Development of North Korean Economic Reform], *Tongil munje* 17, no. 2 (2005): 24-54.

³ Andrei Lankov and Kim Seok-hyang, “North Korean Market Vendors: The Rise of Grassroots Capitalists in a Post-Stalinist Society,” *Pacific Affairs* 81, no.1 (2008): 53-72.

⁴ Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland, “Reform from Below: Behavioral and Institutional Change in North Korea,” *Working Paper Series*, WP 09-8 (Washington, DC: Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2009).

⁵ This is, essentially, the title of Yang Mun-su’s most recent book. Yang Mun Su, *Pukhan kyŏngjae ūi sijanghwa* [The Marketisation of North Korean Economy] (Seoul: Hanul, 2010).

⁶ Rudiger Frank, “Economic Reforms in North Korea (1998-2004): Systematic Restrictions, Quantitative Analysis, Ideological Background,” *Journal of the Asia Pacific Economy* 10, no. 3 (2005): 283.

no secret of its wish to return to the Stalinist model). Nonetheless, the state sector has been marginalized, and now the average North Korean makes his or her living through a multitude of non-state-sanctioned economic activities, some of which are market-oriented in nature, others not.

North Korean post-socialism shows some remarkable similarities with (but also some differences from) the well-researched post-socialism of East Europe. In the present work we will dwell on the impact this economic transformation has had on the working class, the former employees of state-owned industrial enterprises, while also drawing comparisons with the relevant experiences of the post-socialist Eastern European.

Alison Stenning has underlined the following features of post-socialist working-class lives: “diversifying working practices (multiple jobs; informal work; reciprocal labour, etc.); negotiating change through social and kinship networks (access to work; consumption practices; financial stability); new spaces of labour activism, ... labour migration.”⁷ As will be demonstrated below, most of these trends can be observed in North Korea as well, with the notable exception of “labour activism,” which remains unthinkable.

In this article we will trace these trends, and will also discuss which factors influence an individual’s choice of coping strategy. A particularly important role is played by so-called “network capital,” to borrow the definition of Endre Sik: the network of connections with the people and organizations which creates the ability to acquire access to resources like capital, employment opportunities, business opportunities and other valuable information.⁸

The present article draws on in-depth interviews with 18 recently arrived refugees from North Korea, currently residing in the South. The interviews were conducted in 2011. To protect the refugees’ identity, we refer to them using only a number (some relevant information can be seen in table 1).

In order to create a more detailed picture, we concentrate on one particular locality, the city of Hoeryŏng. By North Korean standards this is a small- to middle-sized city (population some 70,000) located in the north-eastern part of the country, near the Chinese border. Such an approach allows us to obtain a more nuanced understanding of the socio-economic situation. The city of Hoeryŏng presents a rich research opportunity, since there are a large number of refugees from the area whose insights can provide us with an unusual wealth of information.

At the same time, our findings are not necessarily applicable to all of North Korea. The close connections between many Hoeryŏng families and their relatives in China have had a considerable impact on the city’s situation. Additionally, one has to keep in mind that, during the crisis of the 1990s, Hoeryŏng and other cities in the area were “triaged” by the government,

⁷ Alison Stenning, “Working Class Lives in Post-Socialist Europe,” paper presented to CEELBAS seminar, St Antony’s College, Oxford, 30 May 2008.

⁸ Endre Sik, *Network Capital In Capitalist, Communist, and Post-Communist Societies. Working Paper #212* (Notre Dame: The Helen Kellogg Institute for the International Studies, 1995).

which ceased to provide them with food from state reserves. Therefore, one might surmise that in Hoeryŏng and, more broadly speaking, in the borderland areas in general, market-oriented activity is more pronounced than in North Korea's interior, although the degree of this difference is difficult to ascertain at present (and, at any rate, this is not a topic of the present article).

There are reasons to hypothesize that the changes in Hoeryŏng might be indicative of North Korea's future. Similar trends—the slow waning of government control and a growing level of exposure to the outside world—can be observed throughout the whole of North Korea, but in Hoeryŏng and other borderland areas these trends seem to be more pronounced.

Table 1
The list of the interviewees

	Gender/ Age	Place of residence	Occupation	Year of leaving NK
A-01	F, 34	Hoeryŏng	T'aesong factory, manager	2007
A-02	M, 51	Hoeryŏng	Kraft paper factory, manager	2008
A-03	F, 29	Hoeryŏng	Trader	2008
A-04	F, 31	Hoeryŏng	Kindergarten teacher	2007
A-05	M, 46	Hoeryŏng	Mining factory, supply manager	2009
A-06	F, 43	Hoeryŏng	Yusŏn mine, miner	2008
A-07	F, 69	Hoeryŏng	T'aesong factory, worker	2007
A-08	F, 43	Hoeryŏng	Foreign trade company, accountant	2003
A-09	F, 65	Musan	Medical doctor	1998
A-10	F, 68	Hoeryŏng	Farmer	2006
A-11	M, 40	Musan	Police official	2008
A-12	F, 30	Hoeryŏng	Paper factory, worker	2011
A-13	M, 37	Hoeryŏng	Brick factory, worker	2008
A-14	M, 47	Hoeryŏng	Yusŏn mine, miner	2007
A-15	M, 38	Hoeryŏng	Yusŏn mine, miner	2008
A-16	F, 52	Hoeryŏng	Foreign trade company, manager	2007
A-17	F, 41	Hoeryŏng	Kraft paper factory, manager	2008
A-18	F, 31	Hoeryŏng	Paper factory, worker	2009

Our work is based on interviews with refugees currently residing in South Korea. With a few exceptions, interviewees were workers and managers who were employed by one of the state-owned Hoeryŏng factories (usually, they eventually switched to work in the private economy).

Due to the absence of economic data, we will refrain from attempts to measure the precise extent of the spread of new economic practices. Such measurements are notoriously difficult, even in societies which are far more transparent than North Korea (as Schneider and Enste have stated).⁹

The De-Industrialization Decades

The city of Hoeryŏng is located in the north-eastern corner of North Korea, on the Tuman river which separates North Korea from China. In 1991, the county (*gun*) of Hoeryŏng was upgraded into Hoeryŏng city (*si*), but the new official definition is somewhat misleading: most of the Hoeryŏng “city” territory is a sparsely populated rural area. Only the former (pre-1991) township of Hoeryŏng is urban in a strict sense. When, in the present article, we talk about “Hoeryŏng city” we mean this core urban area whose population in 2008 was estimated to be 60-65,000.¹⁰

The city’s major industrial enterprise is the Taesŏng factory which, in the late 1990s, switched exclusively to producing cigarettes for the military (earlier, it also produced sweets). The second-largest factory is a mining equipment plant. Two other major factories utilize local timber for paper production: one specializes in manufacturing kraft paper, a coarse and durable paper used in industrial packaging, while another factory produces normal paper. There was also the Chindallae factory, which produced sewing machines (it was closed around 1999, the only major factory to be closed in Hoeryŏng during the period of economic crisis in North Korea). Apart from these five major enterprises, each of which, by the early 1990s, had above a thousand employees, pre-crisis Hoeryŏng also housed a number of smaller industries: a furniture factory, a brick factory, a glass bottle factory, a shoes factory and the like.

⁹ Friedrich Schneider and Dominik Enste, “Shadow Economies Around the World: Size, Causes and Consequences,” *CESifo Working Paper Series No. 196* (1999): 43-45, available at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=272624>.

¹⁰ The published material of the 2008 census can be found at: DPR Korea, *2008 Population Census National Report* (Pyongyang: Central Bureau of Statistics, 2009), 18. In order to augment the incomplete, available data, we have conducted interviews with a large number of Hoeryŏng residents, former low-level officials, asking them to estimate the number of people’s groups (inminban, the lowest-level surveillance-cum-administrative unit) in every ward (tong). The number of inminban is well known to every official, hence the figures are reliable. Fortunately, the 2009 reform postulated that on average the inminban is about 30 households, and this rule seems to be generally followed. Therefore assuming the average family size to be 4.0 persons, we can make a rough estimate of the size of the population. In cases where the 2008 census results are known, our estimates deviated within a 5 percent range, therefore the estimate of the Hoeryŏng core population at 60,000-65,000 seems to be quite reliable.

In the early 1990s the new post-communist government in Moscow discontinued Soviet aid, which for decades had kept the North Korean economy afloat, while China also switched to the use of hard currency and international prices in its economic exchanges with North Korea. This sent the North Korean economy into a downward spiral. The Bank of Korea, whose North Korean economy-related assessments are widely believed to be the most reliable, estimates that North Korea's GDP in 1991-1999 decreased by 37.6 percent.¹¹ By the early 2000s non-military industrial output was believed to be barely 50 percent of 1990 levels.¹²

In other words, in the 1990-2010 period, North Korea went through a chaotic de-industrialization on a scale which roughly equalled the simultaneous deindustrialization of Eastern Europe. The above-cited figures compare unfavourably with those of Russia, where the 1996 GDP was 55 percent of the 1988 level or, say, Bulgaria, where this ratio was 61 percent (Hungary and Romania fared better, with the 1996 to 1988 GDP ratio of 85 percent and 78 percent, respectively).¹³

Unlike the countries of Eastern Europe, North Korea's state enterprises did not fall victim to overseas competition, restructuring from above or neo-

Table 2
The impact of the crisis on the major factories of Hoeryŏng.

	Number of workers circa 1990	Number of workers circa 2010	The approximate operating rate (% of 1990 level)	Major produced items
Taesŏng tobacco factory	3,000	1,300	50%	Tobacco
Mining equipment factory	3,500	800	50%	Carts, conveyor belts, etc.
Kraft paper factory	2,200	150	5%	Kraft paper
Paper factory	1,000	300	20%	Notebooks

Source: refugee interviews

¹¹ Bank of Korea, *Pukhan chuyo kyŏngjae chipyo pigyo* [North Korea, a comparison of the main economic indicators], can be found at www.bok.or.kr.

¹² Im Kang-taek, *Pukhan kyŏngjae kaebal kyae-hwaek surip pangon yŏn'gu: Pael'unam saryae-rŭl chungsimuro* [Taking the example of Vietnam: Research on North Korea's economic development planning] (Seoul: T'ongil yŏn'guwŏn, 2010), 164.

¹³ For a summary of the World Bank statistics on the issue, see Mick Dunford and Adrian Smith, "Catching Up or Falling Behind? Economic Performance and Regional Trajectories in the 'New Europe,'" *Economic Geography* 76, no. 2 (2000):177.

liberal reforms, but collapsed once the state lost access to the outside assistance which kept the entire system viable. Nonetheless, the end result was remarkably similar to those observed in Eastern Europe.

Due to the unreliable supply of electricity and raw material, a majority of factories in the 1990s had to scale production down or stopped completely, while coal mines in the area were flooded. Only Taesŏng factory emerged relatively unscathed from the chaos of the 1990s, but non-military production had to be stopped there. Other factories fared worse (see table 2).

A1, a former employer at the Taesŏng factory, the largest factory in Hoeryŏng, described the post-crisis developments at her factory:

Until 1992, [the production level] was 6,000 ton of cigarettes. The entire factory worked three shifts, 24 hours. But since the end of rations, since around 1998 or 1999, electricity has been switched off frequently. Kim Il Sung once came to Hoeryŏng and said ‘Supply the Taesŏng factory with electricity first, make sure they have everything they need.’ This is why we used to meet plan quotas. But after the crisis began and around 1998 production had collapsed to half of what it used to be ... In our department in 1992, there were some 400-450 workers. By 2005, only some 150 people were left, and things have not changed since then.

A14 describes a more dramatic situation at a coal mine near Hoeryŏng city:

Our mine stopped operations before 2000. From 1997, the era of no distribution began, and since then real production became impossible. A person must eat to work. Only if one eats, there is strength, and without food rations nobody could work.

The End of Homogeneity

The impact of the industrial collapse was aggravated by the peculiarities of North Korean society, where many features of state socialism were taken to an extreme. Historically, the North Korean state took an unusually hard stance on private economic activities. All major industries were nationalized in 1946 and in the late 1950s small-scale private production was banned as well. Agriculture was collectivized and private kitchen gardens, so important in the agriculture of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, were severely restricted, with their maximum size being limited to a paltry 20-50 pyŏng (70-170 square metres).¹⁴

¹⁴ According to a 1998 law, the maximum size of the kitchen gardens is limited to 30 pyŏng for farmers and 10 pyŏng for industrial workers. See the law cited in Pak Il-su, *Konan-ŭi haeggun ihu kaein soyugwŏn pyŏnhwa-e kwanhan yŏn'gu* [A study of relational changes in individual ownership system after the “arduous march”] (Seoul: Kyŏngnam taehakkyo Pukhan taehagwŏn, 2006), 57. Some published sources, however, insist that the size of private plots can reach 50 pyŏng. See Im Su-ho, *Kyehwaek kwa sijang ŭi kongjon: Pukhan ŭi kyŏngjae kaehyŏk kwa ch'aejae pyŏnhwa chŏnmang* [Coexistence of panning and market: prospects for economic reform and system change in North Korea] (Seoul: Samsung Economic Research Institute, 2008), 105.

Since the 1950s virtually every able-bodied male has been expected to be employed by a state-run enterprise. Unless an adult male produces a medical certificate which confirms his inability to work, it is illegal for him not to have a job, and this rule was enforced efficiently and universally [A1, A5, A11, A18]. Women, however, can become full-time housewives after marriage if they choose to do so.

From the late 1950s to the late 1980s, workers got food almost exclusively through the rationing system, which in North Korea was unusually comprehensive. From 1957, the private sale of grain was banned, and the ban was efficiently enforced until the late 1980s, hence the Public Distribution System (PDS) remained by far the most important source of cereals (and, therefore, calories) in the diet of urban North Koreans. The majority of those employed were eligible for a daily ration of 700 grams of grain (the grain ration came as a mix of rice, corn and flour), while miners and other workers who engaged in heavy labour were issued daily rations of 900 grams, students received 500 grams and so on—there was a detailed hierarchy of rations.¹⁵ Cooking oil, soy sauce, cabbage as well as cloth and footwear were rationed as well.¹⁶ PDS rations were very cheap. Prior to the 2002 price/wage reform, the price of rice was fixed at 0.08 won, with other cereals being even cheaper, thus the average worker would spend less than 1.60 won a month on his/her major dietary needs. The average monthly wage in the late 1980s was 70 to 100 won, so the rations' price was, essentially, tokenistic.¹⁷

The comprehensive and, largely, egalitarian nature of the North Korean rationing system created a society of remarkable material equality: officials and some other privileged groups received special additional rations and had access to special resorts and health-care facilities as well as quality housing, but among workers from the same town, the differences in actual living standards were negligible. “In Kim Il Sung days, for a common person there were few ways to earn extra money, and money would not buy much anyway” [A11].

Unlike the communist regimes of Eastern Europe, the North Korean government did not encourage the upward social mobility of workers. North Koreans are assigned official jobs immediately after graduation from high school (nearly all males first spend 7 to 10 years in the military). As a rule, only people with politically unproblematic family backgrounds are eligible for college studies or promotion. The family background (*sŏngbun*) is

¹⁵ Actual rations were below these declared levels. In 1972-73 the rations were cut, and a person theoretically eligible for a standard 700 gram ration was actually given 540 grams. Proportionate cuts were made with all other rations. See Sŏ Dong-ik, *Inmin ūi sanŭn mosŭp* [How do the people live] (Sŏul: Charyŏwon, 1995), vol.1, 213-214.

¹⁶ For a comprehensive overview of the PDS since its inception and until its collapse in the 1990s, see No Yong Hwan and Yŏn Ha Ch'ŏng, *Pukhan ūi chumin saenghwal pojang chŏngchaek p'yŏngka* [Changes in North Korea's welfare system] (Seoul: Han'guk pogon sahwae yŏn'guwŏn, 1997), 47-62.

¹⁷ No Yong-hwan and Yŏn Ha-chong, *Pukhan ūi chumin saenghwal*, 141.

determined by the actions of direct male ancestors in the 1930s and 1940s and is normally inherited from one's father. Significant numbers of manual workers come from families which have been subjected to the hereditary discrimination (descendants of clerks in the colonial administration, religious activists, refugees to the South during the Korean War and the like).¹⁸ In the city of Hoeryŏng the percentage of such people was larger than in other areas, since many families with bad *sŏngbun* were relocated there in the 1960s and 1970s while people with good *sŏngbun* were often sent to more prestigious cities [A5, A11].

There was little spatial mobility as well. Job change was possible only with prior sanction from the authorities. Relocating to another part of the country on one's own initiative was impossible and even overnight trips outside one's own county/city required prior police permission.

All these factors transformed North Korean workers into a remarkably homogenous group whose members were locked into a small geographic area and usually spent their entire working lives at the same factory with few chances of social mobility, but also with iron-clad, if modest, social guarantees. This situation is somewhat similar to that of other communist countries; as David Kideckel noted, under state socialism, the "familistic state was both controlling and nurturing,"¹⁹ but these controlling/nurturing tendencies seem to be even more pronounced in the peculiar case of North Korea's "national Stalinism."

People came to assume that the state would always provide them with regular subsidized rations. A5 says: "Until the early 1990s, many people relied solely on the state. People like me, those who did not care much about the state [and earned income outside the state economy] constituted five, maybe, ten percent at most, while everyone else depended on it."

The industrial collapse of the early 1990s changed the situation. From 1992-93, in the Hoeryŏng city area, rations were delayed and/or delivered only partially, and by 1995-96 the regular delivery of rations had all but stopped. Nationwide, the collapse of the PDS triggered a major famine, which left some 500,000 to 900,000 dead.²⁰

There were two factors which had a great impact on the fate of Hoeryŏng during the "Arduous March" (this is how the famine of the 1990s is known in official parlance). First, like the other provinces of the North East, the area was triaged during the famine, so the government did not supply the area

¹⁸ The best description of the *sŏngbun* system in English can be found in Helen-Louise Hunter, *Kim Il-song's North Korea* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1999), 31-35.

¹⁹ David Kideckel, *Getting by in Post-socialist Romania* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 17.

²⁰ For the most recent review/revision of the initial results, see Thomas Spoorenberg and Daniel Schwekendiek, "Demographic Changes in North Korea: 1993-2008," *Population and Development Review* 38, no. 1 (2012): 133-158.

with the food it had, leaving it to its own devices.²¹ At the same time, the crisis was ameliorated by the city's location on the border and the established cross-border connections, as many residents had relatives in China.

It seems that in the case of Hoeryŏng the negative impact of triage was cancelled out by the positive impact of cross-border contacts. Most of our informants agree that the city of Hoeryŏng fared relatively well during the famine. A5's job in the 1990s involved much travel across the country, and he described the Hoeryŏng situation as inferior to Pyongyang and some other major cities, but still well above the national average. Adjacent areas, conversely, suffered greatly. A6 describes the situation in a Yusŏng mining village, located some 10 kilometres away from downtown Hoeryŏng: "Rations stopped being delivered completely by around 1995. In 1996-98, many people starved to death, really a lot. ... They had to make coffins for so many that there were problems getting the wood needed for coffins. It was like that since 1995 or 1996, and until 1998."

From around 2001-2002 the PDS delivery in the area was partially resumed, but never returned to the pre-crisis level. The available data does not allow for precise estimates, but it seems that in the years 2008-2010, merely 15 to 20 percent of the total population of Hoeryŏng received full regular rations, the rest were given either partial rations or no rations at all. Since the mid-1990s, distribution is managed directly by state enterprises, not by state-run distribution centres [A1, A4, A5, A19], thus the size of rations varies greatly, depending on the place of employment. For example, in 2008 to 2010 the workers at the mining equipment plant received 50 percent of regular rations (some 250 grams of grain per day) [A19] while the privileged Taesŏng factory could provide its employees with near full rations [A1].

Since the mid-1990s, for a majority of North Koreans the only way to meet basic food requirements was to purchase food at private markets where grain as well as other foodstuff became readily available. However, official wages would not be of much help. In 2007 to 2009, a worker's monthly wages at Hoeryŏng's factories fluctuated between 2,000 and 7,000 won (with 3,000 seeming to be the average) while the price of rice approximated 1,500 won per kilo [A1, A2, A4, A17, A18]. In other words, the official monthly salary would buy between one and four kilos of rice—a fraction of what would be necessary to meet basic nutritional needs.

Facing such a challenge, the employees of Hoeryŏng's factories began to look for ways to earn an extra income outside the state economy. Kim Byung-Yeon and Song Dongho recently estimated that in 1998-2008 the share of income from informal economic activities reached 78 percent of the total income of North Korean households (due to the nature of the sources, these

²¹ On the triage policies during the North Korean famine, and on the decision not to supply the northeastern provinces, see Andrew Natsios, *The Great North Korean famine* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2001), 105-109; Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland, *Famine in North Korea: Markets, Aid, and Reform* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 65-70.

findings seem to apply, above all, to the borderland areas, similar to Hoeryŏng).²² In this regard, North Korea (at least, borderland areas) appears to be remarkably different from the post-Soviet countries where, as Simon Clarke observed, “despite the catastrophic fall in wages and employment, income from primary employment is still the most important source of household money income.”²³

Coping with the Crisis: Escape from the Workplace

The first challenge for every North Korean who aspires to make a living outside the official economy is to find the time and, therefore, liberate themselves from the time-consuming duty to attend the official workplace. This problem seems to be unique to North Korean post-socialism, and is unknown in the countries of post-socialist Eastern Europe. Even though production declined significantly, the authorities still insist that workers should be present at their official workplaces. Seemingly the emphasis on the worker’s physical presence is related to the peculiarities of the surveillance and indoctrination system which is centred on the workplace. Officially, however, North Koreans are told by internal propaganda that they should be present at the workplace to be ready for the resumption of the normal work routine, which will happen “soon,” and also in order to “protect” industrial equipment [A2, A4, A12]. Since little or no productive activity takes place, workers remain idle or take care of the remaining equipment, or are sent to do unpaid corvée labour: harvesting, rice planting, unskilled work at construction, etc.

Frequent unauthorized absence from work can lead to incarceration in a *tallyondae* (literally, “re-training detachment”), a prison-like facility for forced labour (unlike regular prison, terms are short, usually a few months) [A3, A5, A12].

In this new situation, women find themselves in a more advantageous position. A married woman can officially stay at home and engage in private economic activities with relative impunity. This difference in legal treatment has resulted in female domination over many parts of the “second economy”—at least, at its lowest level where survival, not enrichment, is the primary goal. In Hoeryŏng, some 75 percent of all market vendors are female [A1, A2, A4, A7, A14]. A closer look, admittedly, reveals a more complicated picture: the larger and more profitable enterprises tend to be run by males, often by those with connections to the authorities. But it must be said that owners of such larger private enterprises constitute a numerically small group. In the average Hoeryŏng household, it is the woman (technically a housewife)

²² Kim Byung-Yeon and Song, Dongho, “The Participation of North Korean Households in the Informal Economy: Size, Determinants, and Effect,” *Seoul Journal of Economics* 21, no. 2 (2008): 373.

²³ Simon Clarke, *Making Ends Meet in Contemporary Russia: Secondary Employment, Subsidiary Secondary Employment, Subsidiary Agriculture and Social Networks* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2002), 270.

who generates most of the family income while the man spends much time at his (usually non-functioning) factory and helps his wife only when possible.²⁴ A17 describes this situation: “Women did not go to a workplace, instead they engaged in private business, but their husbands still went to work. They even joke that the men are as good nowadays as a lamp during the day.” (The latter joke has been repeated very frequently by our informants and seems to be universally known.)

The economic prominence of women in North Korean post-socialism, noticed by many scholars, constitutes a remarkable difference from the situation in East European post-socialist countries, where the transformation generally led to a decline (relative if not absolute) in women’s position and income. As Stenning and others noted: “A common feature of post-socialist labour markets has been that women tended to be made redundant more often and more quickly, that they struggled harder to find new work and that they are likely to be employed, when they did find work, at a lower wage on average.”²⁵

Women might use ways which are not gender-specific to be lawfully absent from the workplace. However, a majority of women rely on the easiest way to evade unpaid work (or rather presence) at a state enterprise: they do so by becoming a housewife through marriage. Fake marriages are not unknown: North Korean women sometimes cohabit with regularly visiting Chinese merchants and act as their agents, or bribe unmarried military personnel into registering a fake marriage which gives them freedom from obligatory work attendance [A11].

For males, there are two major avenues which are used to escape the demand for daily workplace attendance. First, a worker might acquire a health certificate which confirms that his poor health makes him incapable of work. A18 describes the situation: “If you are of working age, in order not to work one might go to a hospital, [to obtain] a medical certificate which says that you have hepatitis, or some other serious disease ... You must go to hospital and give the doctor some money, or some food instead – tobacco or food.” The bribe, however, tends to be prohibitively large for the common worker [A12, A13].

A more common method of officially skipping work is to negotiate a so-

²⁴ The changes in the position of women in post-crisis North Korea have attracted much scholarly attention recently. See, for example, Pae Yŏng-ae, “1990 nyŏndae Pukhan ūi kyŏngjaenan ihu yŏsŏng-ŭi yŏkhal kwa ūshik pyŏnhwa” [Changes in female roles and consciousness after North Korea’s economic crisis] *T’ongil chŏllyak* 10, no. 2 (2010): 93-127;

Kim Sŏk-hyang (Seok-Hyang Kim), Kwon Hye-jin (Hye-Jin Kwon), “Konan-ŭi haenggun’gi ihu Pukhan tangguk ūi yŏsŏng tamnon punsŏk [Analysis of the North Korean authorities’ discourse on females after the ‘arduous march’], *T’ongil chŏngch’ae’k yŏn’gu* 18, no. 2 (2009): 153-185.

²⁵ Alison Stenning, Adrian Smith, Alena Rochovská and Dariusz Swiatek, *Domesticating neo-liberalism: spaces of economic practice and social reproduction in post-socialist cities* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 185-186.

called “8.3 [August 3] contribution.” The term originates from the so-called “August 3 (hence 8.3) decision” which was passed in 1984 to encourage household production. It was initially seen as a way to make use of housewives’ time as well as to utilize industrial by-products.

When the situation deteriorated in the early 1990s, workers began to apply for permission to work at home, ostensibly as a part of the “August 3” scheme, but really in order to participate in the emerging unofficial economy. Instead of presenting the factory with home-made products, they switched to giving money to their supervisors. By the late 1990s, the “8.3 contribution” had lost all its earlier connection with house-based production and became a common euphemism which describes regular payments made by employees to their factory management in order to secure the right to be absent from work (and also, significantly, from assorted political functions and indoctrination sessions). A13, a worker from Hoeryŏng brick factory, described the situation: “The [managers] tell us: ‘Write down your name and do not come to work. Instead, give money to the enterprise. Do what you want, do not come, just donate money.’”

The amount of the “8.3 contribution” is negotiated individually, in accordance with a number of factors, above all the income a particular worker is likely to earn if allowed to engage in the unofficial economy full-time. The range of the “8.3 contribution” is extensive. It might be as low as 1,000 won a month (about \$0.40, about a third of the average monthly salary) if one is a humble miner in a remote village where almost no work in the second economy is available. It might be as high as 25,000 won a month (\$10, about eight times the average salary) if the person is known to run a profitable small business [A1, A4, A11, A15, A16]. In special cases, the “8.3 contribution” can be very high: for example, people engaged in gathering wild pine mushrooms for resale to China (a highly profitable activity) are expected to pay 50-100,000 won during the mushroom harvesting season as their “8.3 contribution” [A15]. By North Korean standards, this is an exorbitant sum, but “since mushrooms are so expensive, this [amount] is nothing for a successful mushroom picker” [A15]. However, on balance the rate of the “8.3 contribution” seems to be prohibitively high for a majority of workers. Factories in areas with a more profitable second economy usually can and do demand more from their staff.

Most workers cannot afford to pay regular “8.3 contribution,” but still have to skip the time-consuming workplace activities from time to time. Such people either make irregular payments to their supervisors or do not show up at work occasionally; as long as their non-attendance is not too frequent, their absenteeism is tacitly tolerated [A5, A8, A11, A14].

The picture which emerges from interviews is remarkably consistent, as presented in table 3.

Table 3
The work attendance rates in selected factories of the Hoeryŏng area,
circa 2007-2008

Interviewee's place of employment	Number of workers in the work team	Number of workers present on the average day	Number of workers who pay the "8.3 contribution"
A2 (Mining equipment plant)	~15	~7-8	2
A17 (Kraft paper factory)	~10-15	~5-7	1-2
A12 (Paper factory)	20	~2-3	4
A14 (Yusŏn mine)	~12-15	~5-7	2

Source: refugees' interviews (name of the refugee mentioned above).

A marked exception is A1, who was employed at the privileged Taesŏng tobacco factory and said that in her work team of some 40 people, only a few were absent on the average work day. She explained the reasons for the unusually low level of absenteeism: "they paid wages and gave full rations so most people went to work."

Appropriating State Resources for the Individual's Survival

However, not all workers escaped their economically meaningless jobs; some of them had to rely on survival strategies which involved illegally appropriating government resources, such as stealing from state factories, use of state equipment for private activities, etc. In the 1980s, when much research was done on the "second economy" in state socialist systems, many scholars noticed the nature of connections between the official ("first") economy and un-official ("second") economy. The "second" economy does not exist in isolation. It appears that in the case of Hoeryŏng in the 1990s and 2000s, most of the connections are of the type which F.J.M. Feldbrugge, a scholar of the Soviet "second economy" in the 1980s, described as "parasitic symbiosis." By this he meant the type of "second economy activities which are completely embedded in the first economy and sap its resources."²⁶

²⁶ F.J.M. Feldbrugge, "Government and Shadow Economy in the Soviet Union," *Soviet Studies*, (October, 1984): 529.

The easiest—but by no means the only—way to sap resources is to steal raw materials, finished products, equipment and spare parts, and, indeed, interviewees agree that such theft is very common in Hoeryōng. As one would expect, it is done largely by factory managers, but common workers also find ways to put government property to use for their own survival and/or money-making purposes.

Opportunities for the unlawful appropriation of state property might even be an important incentive for people to look for a particular job. People prefer to work at factories where, first, it is easier to steal and, second, where whatever can be stolen is also easy to sell. As we will see below, in this regard the Taesōng tobacco factory is by far the most popular choice, but workers manage to make use of a job even at a seemingly unpromising place such as the mining equipment factory: “Workers are always looking for something that can be taken from the factory and then sold. For example, people haul away sheet iron, and then sell it on the market” [A19]. At the kraft paper factory around 2006-07, some 10 percent of the paper produced was stolen and then sold at market, where this coarse paper could be used as a substitute for wallpaper or floor paper (traditionally, floors of Korean houses are covered with coarse oil paper, now often replaced by linoleum) [A17].

Instances of such activity are rather higher at the Taesōng tobacco factory, understandable since tobacco is in high demand in a country where nearly all men smoke. Our informants agree that its desirability to a very large extent is driven by the manifold opportunities for theft of both finished cigarettes and raw material (of course, it also matters that the Taesōng factory delivers full grain rations to its employees). A7 was unequivocal in her description of the situation: “In [Taesōng] factory, workers make a living by stealing stuff.” A1 described a sophisticated system which has developed to channel cigarettes from the Taesōng factory to private tobacco wholesalers and then to markets across the country. Some workers at the factory have become intermediaries who specialize in moving large packs of cigarettes outside the factory premises (A1 was one of these intermediaries). To ensure the security of their operations, these intermediaries regularly bribe guards and management. They do not necessarily have access to the cigarettes themselves, so in many cases other workers steal cigarettes first and then sell the packs to these intermediaries at a discount. Intermediaries move the packs to the city and sell the stolen cigarettes to wholesalers, who usually come from other parts of the country. A1 put it this way: “It is widely known who is involved with this type of trade at the Taesōng factory, they know who moves tobacco outside. These people are specialized; there are around ten people like this at the factory.”

In many cases household manufacturing needs materials and components which cannot be produced at home, and hence are either imported from China or taken from state factories. The home production of tobacco products, a booming industry in Hoeryōng, is a good example. While low-

quality tobacco leaves can be purchased from farmers who grow tobacco privately, there is no way to manufacture cigarette paper at home. Therefore, private small-scale producers have to use cigarette paper which is stolen from the state or imported from China.

State resources might be appropriated by workers in a more sophisticated and less direct way. Many workers use factory equipment to produce items for private sale. For example, at the mining equipment factory, currently almost always idle, many workers make iron utensils for private sale. In other shops at the same factory, workers use sheet iron to cut crude nails. According to A19, such nails, even though inferior in quality to standard machine-produced nails, still sell well. A particular subtype of such activities is the private production of coal which occurs at the closed mines which are so common in the Hoeryŏng area. A2 explains: “The coal mine in Yūsŏn is not used any more. But some locals go there to mine individually. ... They are like artisans, they go down there, and mine a bit of coal and then sell it.” In many cases private workshops are operated by the people who have acquired the necessary skills while working in the official state economy.

Again, a representative case is to be found in the private production of tobacco products, of which in the last decade Hoeryŏng has become a major centre. The boom in private workshops has been made possible by the existence of the Taesŏng factory, which is the source of expertise and some materials. Most of the workshops are located in the Saemaül ward, in the vicinity of the Taesŏng tobacco factory, and are operated by its former or current employees.

When asked about the approximate amount of the tobacco leaves and cigarette paper which end up stolen from the factory, A1, the low-level manager, estimated that some “20% of paper and 20-30% of leaves disappear from the factory.”

A4 ran such a tobacco workshop for a few years. As soon as she married, she quit her badly paid official work and began to use her house as a workshop. Tobacco was bought from local farmers who grew it at their semi-legal plots, but A4 also bought tobacco which was stolen from the Taesŏng factory. Then she prepared the tobacco mix. For cigarettes, A4 used both locally produced cigarette paper (stolen from the Taesŏng factory) and cigarette paper from China—the latter being of better quality.

The cigarettes were rolled by hand—necessary equipment is made by local handicraftsmen and can be easily purchased at the Hoeryŏng market. The cigarettes were rolled and then packaged by teenage girls; A4 had four or five girls under her employ. Usually these girls earned some 400-600 NK won a day (about \$ 0.2 at the then market exchange rate). A4, somewhat apologetically, explained: “It sounds like a low wage here, in South Korea, but some of the girls were earning almost as much as their parents. They were girls from poor families, their parents did not trade because they had no money, or because they were in poor health, or because they were lazy.”

Packaging materials came from China and imitated the packaging of Chinese brands, but A4 says that virtually nobody was fooled by this: “They knew that they were not buying the real thing. But I think my tobacco was OK, I was looking for good leaves and made quality mixes.”

A4, in spite of her young age (late twenties) was a successful businessperson, with a monthly income of some 1.5 million NK won or so (about \$600-700). This made her very affluent by the standards of Hoeryŏng, where the average family’s income in 2008-2010 was said to be 80-100 thousand NK won (some \$25-\$35 at the then exchange rate) [A6, A7, A10].

The Multi-Faceted “Second Economy”

All available coping strategies have one important characteristic in common: they imply a partial or complete escape to the “second economy.” Informants are unanimous: the collapse of the state-run economy led to a dramatic revival of private economic activities, hitherto marginal and disapproved of by most.²⁷ To quote A2, “Before the ‘arduous march’ we thought differently. [The people] really believed that one should be loyal to the Party and Leader. But, in spite of such education, everything changed within a few years. Now people work for themselves, they manufacture things themselves.”

There is a great temptation to claim that the rebirth of the North Korean market economy has created an even playing field, where success is determined by industriousness, skill and, of course, a bit of luck. Unfortunately, the data from interviews does not confirm such libertarian hopes: in the fragmented world of North Korea’s post-socialist working class, one’s path is determined by many factors, some of which are completely beyond the individual’s control.

Location matters: people in remote mining communities, so abundant in the area surrounding Hoeryŏng’s city centre, cannot actively engage in market activities, as a trip to the nearest marketplace is prohibitively time-consuming [A2, A6, A14]. But it seems that the access to assorted networks (what Endre Sik described as “network capital”)²⁸ is of special importance. Sometimes, network capital can be transformed into a start-up investment: in Hoeryŏng, initial investment is often provided by relatives in China who can also help with useful business connections [A8, A9, A10].

In his study of social networks in Eastern Europe, Endre Sik suggested that “network capital,” while important everywhere, tends to play a greater role in the state socialist and, especially, post-socialist societies.²⁹ The North

²⁷ There is a large and growing literature which deals with the North Korean “second economy.” For the most comprehensive recent summary, see (among many others), Yang Mun-su, *Pukhan kyŏngjae-ŭi sijanghwa* (Seoul: Hanul Academy, 2010).

²⁸ Endre Sik, *Network Capital In Capitalist, Communist, and Post-Communist Societies. Working Paper #212* (Notre Dame: The Helen Kellogg Institute for International Studies, 1995).

²⁹ Endre Sik, *Network Capital In Capitalist, Communist, and Post-Communist Societies*, 4-5.

Korean experience seems to confirm his observation. More profitable activities usually require connections with officials or, better still, with relatives in China—and these connections also tend to serve as the major source of start-up capital. This does not necessarily mean that average workers do not have any chance of upward social mobility; in the Hoeryŏng area, many workers might have a successful and generous relative in China. Nonetheless, a worker's chances for material success tend to be limited if compared to those of more privileged social groups whose "network capital" is larger (for example, industrial managers and officials).

According to our informants, the unofficial economic activities include (in order of perceived profitability and difficulty of entry, starting from the least profitable occupation):

- employment in the private economy as a hired worker;
- semi-legal farming;
- labour migration to China;
- household workshop production (as an employer/owner or independent artisan); and
- trade and other business activities.

One of the most common activities is private farming, which has increased greatly in the area over the last 15 years. Private farmers are, essentially, squatters who start their fields on the slopes of nearby mountains and other difficult to cultivate areas. Connections with the local forestry office can be helpful, hence "network capital" matters in this case as well, but on the whole, private farming is a type of non-official economic activity where the entry barrier is one of the lowest.³⁰

Scholars of European post-socialism have already noted that "subsistence food production is not an activity undertaken by the very poor."³¹ This conclusion is applicable to Hoeryŏng too. The very poor tend to work for hire, because they have neither start-up capital nor access to the private plots (usually because, to use Sik's concept, they lack "network capital"). The very poor are employed as unskilled labourers (porters or agricultural workers, for example). AI, a rather successful businesswoman herself, puts it bluntly: "People, who really do not have money, they make a living by moving pushcarts. People like me, people who trade, always have money" [A1].

Last but not least, moving to China in search of work should be counted among the coping strategies of North Koreans in the area. No exact statistics are available, but it seems that Hoeryŏng has an unusually high ratio of people who left the country during the famine and in subsequent years.

³⁰ For research into private farming in North Korea, see Andrei Lankov, Seok Hyang Kim, Inok Kwak, "Relying on One's Strength: The Growth of Private Agriculture in Borderland Areas of North Korea," *Comparative Korean Studies* 19, no. 2 (2011): 325-357.

³¹ Alison Stenning and Adrian Smith, "Beyond household economies: articulations and spaces of economic practice in post-socialism," *Progress in Human Geography* 30, no. 2 (2006): 196.

Hoeryŏng's location on the border with China makes cross-border trips easy. The border river is shallow and narrow, and freezes in winter. Until 2005-06 North Korean border guards were not all that numerous, and the Chinese side remained essentially unprotected, therefore it seems that the governments of both China and North Korea tolerated a measure of unauthorized cross-border migration. Up until the late 1940s, the Hoeryŏng area served as a major source of outbound migration to China, thus many locals have relatives in China on whose help they can and have relied.

A mass movement across the border began in the mid-1990s, and the number of refugees peaked around the year 2000 and then decreased considerably. Nowadays, some twenty to thirty thousand refugees are believed to be in China.³² At first, escapees merely wanted to find some food, but the cross-border movement has changed over the time, and now it is, to an extent, a labour migration, with North Koreans looking for jobs in China (another significant part of the outward flow are North Korean women who move to China to enter into pre-arranged marriages).

In most cases, refugees are employed in poorly paid, unskilled work or cohabit with Chinese nationals (the majority of the refugees are female).³³ Since such jobs in China pay from 300 to 700 yuan (\$50-110), plus free accommodation and meals, they are lucrative compared to most jobs in Hoeryŏng where such money could be normally earned only by a reasonably successful businessperson. In many cases, labour migrants to China stay in touch with the families back home and send them money frequently. Money remittances are an important feature of the local economy, and the unusually high proportion of escapees—which implies a large volume of money remittances—is sometimes mentioned among the reasons of Hoeryŏng's relative prosperity (A1, A5).

A5 described the emerging income/status pyramid in the following way: "In Hoeryŏng, officials constitute some 5-7% of the population, and they tend to be very affluent. Another 20-30% trade at markets. Another 10% are engaged in household production and the rest, some 30 or 40%, survive through farming private plots." While all these figures should be taken with a grain of salt, the general trends are clear.

Conclusion

The post-1994 North Korea presents students of post-socialist transformation with an interesting and unique case. Unlike the countries of Eastern Europe

³² There is a large and growing literature on the refugees in China, both in English and Korea. See, for example, Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland, *Witness to Transformation: Refugee Insights Into North Korea* (Washington, DC: Peterson Institute For International Economics, 2011), 2; Daniel Schwekendiek, "A Meta-Analysis of North Koreans Migrating to China and South Korea," *Korea 2010: Politics, Economy and Society*, vol. 4, 247-270.

³³ For a general review of the lives of North Korean refugees in China, see Yi Suk-cha, "Hanguk

or, for that matter, China, the switch to a market economy was not forced on the country from above, by a reform-minded government. Instead, it happened from below, often against the wishes of the government, which sometimes unleashed campaigns aimed at curbing and/or reversing the spontaneous marketization, to use Yi Yǒng-hun's expression. Nonetheless, in the absence of neo-liberal policies, the partial collapse of the state socialist sector still happened, and its impact on the lives of the former industrial employees was dramatic and, generally speaking, remarkably similar to what has been observed in the post-socialist Eastern Europe.

Alison Stenning describes the post-socialist transformation as a move “from a *relatively* stable and singular labour market, to a post-socialist labour market [which] is fragmented, diversified and dynamic.”³⁴ This description of the post-socialist workers in Eastern Europe is also partially applicable to the experiences of workers in North Korea after 1994.

There are differences, of course. The new North Korean labour market can hardly be described as “dynamic,” even though it is, arguably, more dynamic than it has been for decades. North Koreans are quite eager to switch from one income-generating activity to another, but many old official restrictions remain in place, and make, among other things, it difficult to change one's place of residence. Therefore, whatever coping strategy is chosen by an individual, a new type of economic activity usually has to take place within the same geographic area—and this greatly limits the range of choices available. Unlike in Eastern Europe, no significant internal migrant class has emerged. And, of course, one should remember that, unlike the workers of Eastern Europe, in the 1990s and early 2000s North Korean workers lived under the quite real threat of starvation, so they knew that not just their income, but their physical survival was threatened. This created a level of pressure which exceeded what was encountered in Eastern Europe.

Nonetheless, there are many commonalities, including, above all, fragmentation, which has been repeatedly described as an important feature of the post-socialist working class. In their study of the post-socialist working class in former Yugoslavia, Mladen Lazić and Slobodan Cvejić singled out working-class fragmentation as the most significant feature of the post-communist transformation.³⁵ Pak Young-ja, the author of pioneering studies of North Korean workers in the early 2000s, also mentioned fragmentation as one of the most distinguishing features of the recent transformation.³⁶

chōngpu chaejung t'alpukja chōngch" [The Policy of the Korean government toward the North Korean Refugees], *Kukje chōngch'i nonch'ong* 5, no. 12 (2011).

³⁴ Alison Stenning, “Working Class Lives in Post-Socialist Europe.”

³⁵ Mladen Lazić and Slobodan Cvejić, “Working class in post-socialist transformation: Serbia and Croatia compared,” *Corvinus Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 1 (2010): 1, 3-29.

³⁶ Pak Yǒng-ja (Young Ja Park), “2003 nyǒn ‘Chonghap Sijangjae’ ihu Pukhan ūi ‘chubyōn nodong’ kwa ‘nodong sijang’” [‘Marginal labour’ and ‘the labour market’ after the introduction of the ‘combined markets’ in 2003], *Han'guk chōngchi hakhwaebo* 43, no. 3 (2009): 165-166.

Indeed, after the crisis of the 1990s the North Korea working class, which had up until then been a remarkably homogenous social group, changed profoundly. According to individual circumstances, various members of this social group have chosen different coping strategies, which pushed them towards very diverse social trajectories.

Many workers had no choice but to flee collapsing state industries where they could not even earn survival income. Some former workers succeeded in business—usually small retail trade or smuggling, but sometimes household production as well. In some cases this gave them opportunities for upward social mobility which were denied to workers in the old system, where social mobility was heavily restricted.

However, these options are not open to everybody: in order to succeed in a second economy one needs money and/or “network capital,” to use Endre Sik’s expression. In this regard an industrial worker tends to be disadvantaged compared with other urban social groups. Hence, those with insufficient resources and network capital have to look for other alternatives. Some former workers chose to become, essentially, full- or part-time subsistence farmers who work on the small non-legal or semi-legal farming plots. Migration to China has become another option available to the workers of the borderland Hoeryŏng area (for females this option is easier to pursue).

Some coping strategies are actually rather reminiscent of the waning days of state socialism in the USSR and Eastern Europe. Workers who remain at their factories, whenever possible use the equipment and scavengable materials to privately produce items for sale, and also help themselves to government property which can be used in new, unofficial economic activities (essentially, a version of what was once described as a “parasitic symbiosis” of the official and unofficial economies in the USSR of the 1970s).

A peculiar feature of post-socialist North Korea is that the economic and social role of women has increased compared to the previous period. This is a paradoxical by-product of the male-centred structure of North Korean society under state socialism, where the actions of males were deemed far more important and hence more worthy of control and supervision. The biased attitude created a situation where females could be far more flexible and flout some regulations with relative impunity.

Some workers have had the chance to eventually enter the ranks of the new, emerging entrepreneurial class, North Korea’s new bourgeoisie, while others—clearly, a majority—literally struggle to survive. At any rate, though, the working class of the state socialist era is gone, as has the era itself. A new North Korea has emerged.

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