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Political, Social and Economic Inequality in North Korea

Zachary Patterson

Structured Abstract

Article Type: Research Paper

Purpose—This paper sets out to explore the ways in which North Korea has low efficacy in fulfilling its self-prescribed duties to ensure economic and social equality to the masses. Furthermore, this paper aims to expose these issues of inequality and other domestic problems in order to focus on topics which are often left at the way-side in a chiefly international relations based discourse about the state.

Design, Methodology, Approach—Many scholars would already critique communism of its inability to achieve equality, however, I suggest that the critique of a communist society's success in achieving equality should be directional. That is, does the communist state directionally achieve as much equality as it reasonably can, or is the state simply claiming to do this when the reality is much different? This framework is used to critique North Korea on equality.

Findings—By reviewing some domestic spheres of North Korean life—Songbun, the Jangmadang, Sexism, Healthcare and Pyongyangism—it can be determined that there is not only a level of inequality due to the inability of communism to comprehensively eliminate it, which is assumed, but also due to the systemic failure of the North Korean government and civil society to eliminate these inequalities.

Practical Implications—This article concludes that these dynamics of inequality might be useful for foreign actors while also demonstrating that these discussions are lacking from the general scholarship, which might concern those who aim to study the region.

Originality, Value—This paper synthesizes existing literature and research to

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reorganize the discussion away from traditional discussions on the North Korean state to orient ourselves toward a new area.

Keywords: directional equality, Jangmadang, Marxism, Songbun, utopianism

Introduction

Utopian egalitarianism is/was the cornerstone for communist movements. Certainly one logically holds suspect the goal of pure utopianism and the comprehensive elimination of social, economic, and political classes. The overly hopeful aims of these theories have become longstanding critiques of Marxism and related communist movements. Although rejecting the attainability of rigid egalitarianism is logical—egalitarian directionality, conversely, appears obtainable. Egalitarian directionality is a well-founded and clear attempt to be as equal as reasonably possible. North Korea consistently claims the success of its socialist revolution, and as of 1972, North Korea constitutionally declared the conclusion of their class struggle.¹ Rejecting claims of pure equity is facile. However, rejection of directional egalitarianism is less straightforward. For example, perhaps much of the inequality in North Korea is beyond the state's control and they have indeed done the reasonable maximum with their unique collection of resources and political situation to mitigate inequality. This paper aims to explore the reality of systemic inequality in North Korea, and how it manifests in terms of economic, social, and political norms in order to determine whether or not the state has done the best it can to mitigate inequality in the DPRK. This paper will furthermore address the ways in which such an analysis is important both theoretically for ideological paradigms and pragmatically for international actors.

Literature Review

Literature on North Korea is dominated by discussions of human rights, security, the regime, or social injustices. Discussions of equality or the success/failure of socialism are largely not a focus. In fact, it is commonly assumed by specialists and laypeople that North Korea is comprehensively impoverished and oppressed, which would make the question about equality void.

Literature on the emerging markets is perhaps the most direct at discussing inequality. However, commonly, discussions of markets focus on the phenomenon of the markets within the context of Marxism or the state's management of the markets. Inequality and disparity caused by the markets is usually noted in anecdotal examples, yet does not comprise a coherent focus. To be fair, a few authors have connected the market economy to economic disparity,² and others have connected it to sexism and unequal labor for women.³

The literature on healthcare focuses on the state's abysmal health standards

rather than equal access.⁴ Watts⁵ focuses on the disparities in health care access based on geographic location. Meanwhile, Amnesty International⁶ and Demick⁷ give accounts of the hospital system in North Korea to critique the low quality of care. Demick and Amnesty International furthermore provide accounts of private pay health transactions, alluding to the inequality created by them. However, much of the academic literature centers on the lack of standards, lack of resources, and government mismanagement of facilities while providing little contrast between or across different health facilities.

Socially, there is an ongoing debate over the role of Confucianism and the power of the Marxist state to repute Confucian tradition, especially in terms of patriarchy.⁸ Although origins of modern sexism in North Korea are disputed, discussion of the impact is rather cohesive. Most of the literature agrees that women are subjected to sexism, contrary to official state rhetoric. In many ways sexism is even institutionalized, especially in the labor force.⁹

Finally, research on Pyongyangism is the thinnest. Pyongyangism is the preference of the state to ensure the safety, well-being, and comfort of those residing in Pyongyang. Research has demonstrated that Pyongyang has always been a city of elites, however, an important tool for understanding the disparity between those in Pyongyang and the rest of North Korea has been made by a groundbreaking documentary independent of the academy.¹⁰

Generally, the literature is lacking a direct discussion about inequality, both social and economic. Inequality is prevalent within the existing literature on human rights, corruption, defection, etcetera, however, it has not yet amassed its own coherent academic body. Furthermore, the current literature, with the exception of journalistic books like Demick's, rarely focuses on the daily lives of North Koreans, rather, it centers the discussion around the state. That is why the following work is of importance. My work adds to the existing literature a review of inequality in North Korea, pulling pieces from the information that already exists and reassembling it to create a new perspective and new position within academic discourse. In doing so, this paper attempts to explain how this inequality is felt in people's daily lives rather than focusing on the state as the basic unit. Finally, this paper will offer conclusions which are pertinent to various international actors and the ways in which the following analysis of inequality is impactful.

Directional Equality in Early North Korea

In fairness, North Korea minimized economic gaps during its inception. In North Korea's early years, it was considered an "economic miracle."¹¹ In fact, then CIA analyst Helen-Louse Hunter admitted that she was impressed with North Korea's surprising economic success. Hunter was not alone—Tudor and Pearson¹² cite reports of Chinese living near the North Korean border who envied the North Korean standard of living. In fact, during its early era, North Korea was actually wealthier than its capitalist counterpart—South Korea.¹³ Ironically, during the 1960s

the tragic great famine which decimated North Korea in the 1990s would not have been fathomable.¹⁴ In fact, it would not be until the 1970s that cuts were felt in the PDS (Public Distribution System) for the first time, nor until the 1990s when the great famine came about that North Koreans really faced staggering abject poverty, lack of home-economic stability, or mass starvation.

In addition to economic superiority, North Korea received massive waves of immigration from ethnic Koreans in China and Japan who wanted a better life and consequently selected the North over the South for its economic prosperity.¹⁵

In terms of economic equality, under the leadership of Kim Il-Sung, the North Korean government expanded electrical grids to rural villages, remodeled homes to have tiled roofs, rebuilt decimated infrastructure, and was the first Asian country to basically eliminate illiteracy.¹⁶ Various North Korean constitutions included a breadth of rights such as work, education, and healthcare.¹⁷ In addition to constitutional declarations, other legislation ensured equal pay, eight-hour work days, paid vacations, maternity leave, no overnight work for nursing mothers, and other improved work conditions.¹⁸

The North Korean government almost immediately criminalized wife beating, child marriage, and arranged or coerced marriages—especially the use of a dowry.¹⁹ A two-year jail sentence was enacted for anyone forcing someone to even maintain an unsatisfactory marriage,²⁰ affirming the right of North Korean women to divorce. Harsher laws, such as forced labor, were passed for anyone marrying off a minor.²¹

Other major inequalities that were perpetuated under Japanese fascism were immediately dismantled. Colonial landlord exploitation, Japanese companies, and farm ownership were assaulted by the state, as they represented institutions of extreme oppression and inequality.²²

North Korea, furthermore, instituted its five-year plan in 1957, which aimed to further communize the means of production.²³ This move substantially equalized those who previously had little to no control over the means of production. This especially impacted women, who were given an equal distribution of means such as land.²⁴ During the state's seven-year plan, government expenditure on communal social goods such as housing, public facilities, and social services expanded.²⁵ These expansions coincided with efforts to rebuild the shattered infrastructure caused by the Korean War. Finally, the five and seven year plans and other government action during the foundation of North Korea sought to increase industrial and agricultural production,²⁶ which aimed to ensure increased material wealth for North Koreans—a stated goal of Kim Il-Sung.²⁷

Indeed, it is only fair to note these significant strides toward equality made by the state prior to our following discussion on institutionalized inequality in North Korea. Although these initiatives were made by the state matter, and surely equalized society in a major way, this progress must be contrasted against other social realities in North Korean society.

Songbun System

North Korean inequality is reliant on the Songbun system. Effectively, the Songbun system categorizes individuals on a spectrum of political trustworthiness.²⁸ Individuals were originally rated based on their kin's history of support for or against the state, mainly during the revolution.²⁹ The rating of the original individual is then passed down to their children. Since class and category are inherited, it is nearly impossible for one to distance themselves from their father's class.³⁰

The Songbun system maintains 51 categories with varying degrees of political trustworthiness. The 51 categories are subgroups of three classes known as the core, wavering, and hostile classes, hierarchically placed in that order.³¹ According to Collins in 1958 only 25 percent of North Koreans were in the core class, while 55 percent were wavering, and 20 percent were hostile; as of 2006 Song³² reports these numbers as 28 percent, 45 percent, and 27 percent, respectively.

There is convincing evidence that Songbun ratings influence one's standard of living. For example, the 1 percent, or roughly 200,000, North Koreans in the lowest category live in labor camps, while the remainder of the hostile class lives in sub-standard housing.³³ Both size and style of housing are awarded to families based on their Songbun and occupation. The North Korean government divides housing options into five levels, which correspond with differing Songbun ranges.³⁴ The first and lowest level is that of a simple room in which everyone sleeps on mats,³⁵ while level four housing permits people to live in larger high-rise apartments. Level five housing is rare, and reserved for top officials in the Korean Workers Party (KWP). Additionally, North Korea indeed endures homelessness, and especially did so during the great famine when people were traversing the country.³⁶ Demick argues that "for all of the supposed egalitarianism of North Korea, real estate is doled out according to the same hierarchical principles as the [Songbun]-background registers."

Furthermore, no one of a low ranking Songbun is permitted to reside in Pyongyang,³⁷ where there is a much better standard of living. Restrictions on who can enter Pyongyang are so stringent that someone entering the city without a proper travel permit could receive a range of punishments, even condemnation to a labor camp.³⁸ In addition to exclusion from the capital, most low-ranking North Koreans are not permitted to reside in the southern part of the country where most of the fertile land is located, and must reside in the harsh northern part of the peninsula.³⁹

These geographic separations guided by Songbun, then, impact the ways in which the government interacts with different regions. In fact, an inordinate proportion of defectors come from the North Hamgyong province, suggesting that northerners are "disenfranchised enough to leave their country,"⁴⁰ while southerners or those living in Pyongyang are not participating as widely in the exodus of defectors. Furthermore, statistical analysis has demonstrated that defectors in South Korea commonly experienced traumas in North Korea, such as, but not limited to, "being beaten, starved, punished for political misconduct, watched a family member or close neighbor dying of starvation without being able to help, and watched public executions."⁴¹ Regionally and contextually lived experiences call into question the

way in which we view North Korean defection. It may actually be the case that North Koreans are not generally prone to defect, and that there are indeed specifically marginalized geographic or social groups who defect.

According to Collins,⁴² a 1998 UN survey of childhood malnutrition during the great famine demonstrated “that 32 percent of the children showed no evidence of malnutrition, 62 percent suffered from moderate malnutrition, and 16 percent suffered from severe acute malnutrition.” Collins notes that these statistics align with the distribution of citizens in each class.

This indicates that during the great famine, the distribution of resources was unequal. The majority (78 percent) of North Korean children, at least in 1998, were either somewhat malnourished or severely malnourished, while the remaining 32 percent were not affected. This assertion is strengthened by a survey taken of food distribution by Lautze⁴³ during the great famine just a year prior to the UN report, which indicated that the northern region of North Korea had an unequal and skewed level of access to food.⁴⁴ Lautze⁴⁵ goes on to note that the government eventually stopped transporting food to “marginalized” areas in order to ensure that those in the army and Pyongyang were fed.

Another major way in which the Songbun system encourages institutionalized inequality is through exclusion from the Korean Workers’ Party (KWP). The KWP is the main political body at work, controlling all official political rhetoric. Since the government operates at the behest of the KWP, membership is highly desirable.⁴⁶ The hostile class is almost certainly banned from KWP membership, and thus banned from its social, economic, and political benefits. Collins⁴⁷ argues that the exclusion of the hostile class from the KWP is perhaps one of the worst forms of inequality in North Korea due to the immense social importance of membership.

Songbun additionally influences penal action in North Korea. According to the Criminal Procedures Act, the state is allowed to sentence individuals taking into account the distinction “between friend and foe.”⁴⁸ Thus, someone from the hostile class or wavering class may face a harsher punishment. In one study, almost 80 percent of defectors interviewed stated that people of a lower Songbun would be punished more severely.⁴⁹ Conversely, in Demick’s account of one defector’s story, it is alleged that the defector’s husband was not jailed or punished for making a negative remark against the regime due to his high class.

Additionally, average citizens of the wavering class or hostile class are tried in public, while those in the core class are often permitted to hold discrete trials out of the public eye.⁵⁰ The leniency in sentencing based on one’s Songbun class may be the difference between life and death.⁵¹ Song⁵² states that “rights are strictly contingent upon one’s class status in North Korea.”

The last major way in which Songbun impacts an individual’s life is prioritization. For example, during the great famine citizens received different levels of government assistance usually depending on their geographic location and occupation, which is correlated with their Songbun. A high-ranking family in Pyongyang could have endured the great famine with no actual loss of food, while others were foodless.⁵³ When the PDS eventually shut down or made cuts, these cuts were often

felt in “marginalized” areas first,⁵⁴ and at one point only 6 percent of North Koreans, mostly elites, had access to the once comprehensive PDS.⁵⁵ In fact, “ordinary” people were promptly fed rhetoric about “self-sufficiency,” while elites were still living off of state rations that were hidden from the average citizen who “had to fend for themselves.”⁵⁶

Finally, since there is little to no social mobility, and many privileges and opportunities are doled out based on one’s Songbun, those of the core class have the ability to accumulate wealth and own material property, especially those of high Songbun who live in urban areas.⁵⁷ The ability to accumulate wealth is key since wealth is how classism is maintained and how disparities are solidified. Furthermore, wealth was the means by which many North Koreans were able to endure the harsh economy of the 1990’s, and likely was a contributing factor to the difference between a malnourished and adequately-nourished child during this epoch.

The contrast between those of high Songbun and those of low Songbun is illustrated by Jin-Sung,⁵⁸ who was one of the “Admitted,” a high social status in North Korea. Jin-Sung visited his hometown and looked with disgust at the abhorrent conditions in which the poor people of the local market were living. The herd of impoverished people reeked, appeared dirty, and one old woman was even collecting cigarette butts to fill comforters to sell. Jin-Sung states, “as if anticipating my condescension, the old woman swore at me [and added] don’t you think of looking down on me”; a powerful statement from one of North Korea’s proletariat to the bourgeoisie—from a Marxist perspective.

As Collins⁵⁸ puts it, “this party-directed ‘caste system’ guarantees there is no level playing field in North Korea—politically, economically, or socially.” Song⁵⁹ argues that North Korea has completely eroded their Marxist principles and replaced them with classist categorizations. Finally, Hassig and Oh call the political classism a “caste system.” However, contrary to academic findings, the North Korean government insists that there is no distinction between the classes.⁶⁰

The Jangmadang Market Economy

A noteworthy institution that perpetuates inequality in North Korea is the emerging market economy, known as the jangmadang. After the fall of the USSR, many North Koreans lost their regular workloads and access to resources previously provided by the government, especially foodstuffs.⁶¹ Thus, although markets were essentially illegal in North Korea, new rules and laws were introduced and others ignored to permit small markets to emerge and compensate for absent income and resource distribution.⁶²

Exchanges in the markets are extremely advantageous for sellers and equally unfavorable for buyers. During the famine of the 1990s, and even today, during disruption in the PDS,⁶³ people paid outrageous prices for food at the markets. A kilo of rice in the 1990s at the jangmadang could cost 25 won, while state stores would sell that same quantity for about .10 won.⁶⁴ A decade and a half later, the differential

has worsened, with the average salary of a civil servant now being between 1,000–6,000 won per month, and the cost of a kilo of rice being 5,000 won.⁶⁵ Thus, the seller earns a substantial income compared to that of a state sanctioned laborer.

The markets, furthermore, create inequality between those with land and those without land. The state allows collective farmers to use their personal space to grow crops, which are sold in the *jangmadang*.⁶⁶ This highlights one exceptional case where people in urban high-rises are at an economic disadvantage. Since private growers are usually also state farmers, the state crops are often neglected, straining the PDS and causing further reliance on the private *jangmadang* goods.⁶⁷ Watts⁶⁸ states that the market economy perpetuates inequity between the “haves and have-nots,” and that farmers were major “winners” in the new markets. Chol-Hwan and Rigoulot also support the notion that access to food was much easier for peasants who partook in the land-grab.

Other resources besides land could determine success in the markets. Demick writes about a woman in the village of Kyongsong who had a freezer, which she used to make ice cream for sale.⁶⁹ These sales compensated somewhat for her husband’s dwindling paychecks, but would not have been possible without the apparatus that made the ice cream—the freezer. The absence of a medium to produce goods, like the freezer, led others without access to land to desperately sell their possessions for a one-time lump sum income.⁷⁰ Some people even sold tap-water and soap for people to wash their faces or presumably drink in areas where water was no longer easily accessible.⁷¹ Finally, those with absolutely no means to participate in the markets due to lack of land, lack of an apparatus to produce goods, lack of skills for a service, or lack of objects for one-time sale, may even illegally use resources from their government workplaces, such as scrap metal, for sale in the *jangmadang*.⁷² Effectively, getting ahead in the markets depends largely on material capital, similar to neoliberal economies in the West. Unfortunately, since people rely so much on the *jangmadang*, and the prices are inflated so far beyond government salaries, it is often very difficult to survive without working either in or with the *jangmadang*.

Even if one possesses the resources or skills needed for trade, similar to many capitalist systems, they may not have the initial capital required to start their private business. For example, someone with outside sources of money, such as North Koreans with defected family members in the South, can more easily access funds to start a private business.⁷³ While transferring funds between North and South Korea is officially illegal, money can usually be transferred via the *hwagyo*, ethnic Chinese citizens of North Korea, who have more freedom to traverse the border legally and transport funds.⁷⁴ Being *Hwagyo*, then, is powerful since money transfers include a commission, sometimes up to 30 percent.⁷⁵ In fact, research on the *Hwagyo* in North Korea is incredibly neglected, and is often focused solely on the *Hwagyo* of South Korea.

Lastly, there are the elite sellers. These elites use their position in government and other institutions to redirect funds or products into the *jangmadang* or even to international markets.⁷⁶ One estimate suggests that up to 20 percent of products sold privately are actually produced by the North Korean state.⁷⁷ In addition to pro-

viding North Korean goods in the markets, the elites may supply various products from China and South Korea that are usually hard to obtain from North Korean manufacturing, such as electronics, makeup, and pornography.⁷⁸

In fact, Jang Song Thaek—the uncle Kim Jung-Un famously had executed—had an estimated net worth of 80 million euros due to foreign investments and his involvement in trade on the Chinese border.⁷⁹ According to the state, Jang was executed for proposing increased economic reforms.⁸⁰ These massive operations resemble the economic power of large companies, and often require bribing in order to stay in business. Even in North Korea big business is outselling the mom and pop shops of the *jangmadang*.

Although the famine of the 1990s is over, the private markets remain. The government permits these markets to exist in a twilight zone. The government has passed significant decriminalization of these markets,⁸¹ and has a process for people to set up stalls and pay taxes for their economic activity. However, the state has also been cited tearing down market places and cracking down on unauthorized market activity.⁸² In fact, the government seems to have institutionalized the markets by cutting off rations for free items and raising workers' wages almost 10 fold so they can have more purchasing power.⁸³ If the government were indeed going to stop these markets, or even cared that the operators of these markets were pocketing profits, they would not have made such a move. One government document even states, "At present commercial transactions are rampant ... from now on nothing will be free of charge, and there will be no egalitarianism."⁸⁴

At any rate, the markets have become large enough to play a key role in inequality. Watts validates that the economic difference between those successful in the markets and those victimized by it are antitheses, and points out that this disparity has grown over his visits to North Korea, which is a view supported by various scholars.⁸⁵

On a meta-level, the economic outlook of North Korea is substandard. The North Korean gross national income is over thirty times smaller than that of South Korea's. Its official international trade network is small, and is dominated by a 90 percent trade dependency on China.⁸⁶ Such a small and highly concentrated network is risky, as it leaves North Koreans at the bidding of the Chinese, which has caused instability when economic reforms were held in China and trade became much more capitalistic. Percentage of growth fluctuates between -1 percent to +4 percent, which creates instability. Imports exceed exports, and its total trade value is only around 7 billion, whereas South Korea's is over a trillion.⁸⁷ Unfortunately for North Koreans, economic instability and lack of economic success on a national level promotes inequality and surely supports the existence of these economically classist private markets.

Healthcare

Universal healthcare is elemental to Marxist egalitarianism. The North Korean healthcare system, unsurprisingly, is purportedly universal.⁸⁸ Although the North

Korean health care system is not one to covet, it does provide free access. In fact, Demick suggests that the contemporary North Korean system is by and large superior to what was in place before.⁸⁹ Watts furthermore argues that “North Korea could credibly boast that it had one of the best health-care systems in the world” just decades ago. On a basic level, the health system seems pragmatic. However, in practice there are significant disparities. For example, in a joint study by the Eugene Bell Foundation and the North Korean Ministry of Health, one survey concluded that only 26 percent of elementary students in the Kangwon province had seen a dentist in the previous year,⁹⁰ suggesting that dental health was not only unequal, but reserved for the privileged few.

Amnesty International lists many of their chief concerns with the North Korean system as qualitative concerns, such as reusing needles, powerless hospitals, insufficient medical supplies, etcetera.⁹¹ However, once again, these are all indicators of a substandard system, not necessarily an unequal one. That does not make Amnesty International’s charges irrelevant to this discussion though, as many of their assertions can be indicators of inequality in access.

Amnesty International states that North Korea’s health expenditure is \$1 per person, the lowest per-capita health spending in the world. Comparatively, if we look at other states that spend very little on health per capita, we find major inequalities in their level of access. This may mean that people in rural or marginalized areas of North Korea cannot even access the substandard medical care that others receive.

Amnesty International also addresses the government’s inability to compensate their doctors, which has led to private practice impacting the poor disproportionately. This occurs because at times doctors are not paid, regardless of their work.⁹² When this happens, doctors may ask for money from patients that wish to receive care. This necessarily excludes poor North Koreans from medical care when doctors do not receive their government salaries.

The issues Amnesty International wants addressed in the North Korean health system are echoed by Grundy and Moodie⁹³ who reiterate issues with resources and personnel, such as a lack of electricity. The dire status of most medical facilities across the country indicates the likelihood that very little would be necessary to disrupt services in a facility. Without a reliable source of power, supplies, and dedicated doctors; facilities will be vulnerable to periods of suspended care or even long-term shut down, especially if the government budget reflects little will to improve those resources or replace them once they are gone. This necessarily promotes inequality, since those vulnerabilities will be felt differently by different socioeconomic backgrounds.

Geographically, care varies immensely. During a World Food Program visit to North Korea, Watts compares the dramatic difference between a maternity ward in Pyongyang and a hospital in Songrim, a city south of Pyongyang. Watts describes the ward in Pyongyang in impressive terms. He states that it was extremely clean and technologically advanced. For example, there were video monitors for fathers to video chat with new mothers in order to avoid infection after birth. However,

once the group was permitted to observe a maternity ward in Songrim, the scene was entirely different. The ward was run-down, cold, rusting, and dealing with incredible supply shortages, especially of antibiotics.⁹⁴ This stark contrast between the two maternity wards demonstrates a major disparity in quality of health care across space, even though access may indeed generally be equal.

Understandably, the great famine is responsible for the cataclysmic disruptions in the healthcare system⁹⁵—and as with any system, it can only operate to its physical capacities. Thus, in one light, it is unfair to criticize the inequalities of a strained health system that historically was geared to serve as a universal resource. It is strongly advisable to analyze these disparities within that framework. Yet there is evidence that suggests that the allotment of resources, more specifically quality resources, may be related to variables that are associated with Songbun or geographic location. If this is true—then strained support and low Songbun compound to impact rural, poor, and marginalized people in an important way.

North Korean Sexism

The Marxist interpretation of the liberation of women dictates that via the elimination of private property, women will achieve equality.⁹⁶ North Korea has closely followed, at least legislatively, Marxist interpretations of the liberation of women, and yet has failed abysmally at dismantling the Korean patriarchy. Even constitutional and other legislative declarations⁹⁷ have not swayed traditional notions of gender.⁹⁸ It is key to note that the equality of women in North Korea is not just a question of political equality, but social status as well.⁹⁹ The state has tried to legislate both areas, with some success. However, the overall disparities between men and women have not been minimized, and in some areas, have been exacerbated by the state.

The key legislation that purportedly ensures gender equality for women, in addition to universal rights granted in the constitution, is the Gender Equality Law of 1946. The law states that “women have equal rights with men economically, culturally, socially, and politically in all areas of life of the nation.” The law additionally ensures labor, pay, marriage, property, and political equality in further detail.¹⁰⁰ Thus, legally, sexism should be minimized. Despite this though, the social revolution of women is largely ineffectual.

The incredibly sexist pressure of the “communist mother” is perhaps the best example of social gender inequality idiosyncratic to North Korea. The communist mother is a social phenomenon unique to North Korean society, which equates the value of women to their abilities to execute well their domestic and workforce labor in a manner which furthers the communist agenda. The communist mother is the main means of indoctrinating children with communist rhetoric, while the father is largely left out of this responsibility.¹⁰¹ Therefore, women are judged on their domestic agency in communism differently than men. Song discusses Mun, a woman who publicly denounced a principal’s wife for electing to be a housewife instead of

choosing to work—labeling her a “human parasite.”¹⁰² Mun was subsequently awarded the title: “true communist mother” for publicly shaming another woman. Due to the fact that such an emphasis is placed on successful communist child rearing, and for the reason that this burden is uniquely placed on mothers and not fathers, women in North Korea do not have social status until they are mothers.¹⁰³

To be clear, the communist mother and her unequal division of labor at home is uniquely North Korean, as “no other socialist states particularly focused on the special roles of ‘communist mothers.’”¹⁰⁴ Ryang¹⁰⁵ argues that North Korean communist leaders were never subjected to Sovietization, which may cause these deeply different social views of women within a Marxist framework. This makes sense since the “communist mother” exacerbates labor inequality for women.

Mothers’ labor is channeled into the official economy, domestic chores, and the private markets in a much more significant way than the labor of men, who generally labor only in the official economy.¹⁰⁶ Although Kim Il-Sung indeed stated at a party congress that he aimed to reduce the “heavy” domestic workload for women, he did not actually mean that a reduction in domestic work for women should be achieved by a gender equal division of domestic labor. Rather, he meant that his technological goals, which included expanding access to household appliances, such as refrigerators, would make the extra obligatory domestic labor of women easier.¹⁰⁷ This is a major contrast to government rhetoric that North Korea is a “woman’s paradise”¹⁰⁸ and post-sexist.

Sexism is defined even further in child preferences, even though the communist system does not necessarily prefer boys to girls. Demick’s account of one defector exclaims that in her home the father and son were the only ones allowed to eat more expensive and nutritious rice, while the women and girls had to eat corn, including their elderly grandmother.¹⁰⁹ The boy was valued more than the girls to their parents, and consequently he was cared for in a prioritized manner. This anecdote has, in fact, been preliminarily verified by evidence that female infants and children had higher mortality rates than males during the great famine,¹¹⁰ perhaps due to unequal access to food.

Another woman, Mrs. Song, described her mother-in-law’s disgust when her second child was another girl. The mother-in-law threw provisions for a traditional soup at Mrs. Song once she was apprised of the sex of the child—an act of defiance and disapproval. After the third daughter was born, the mother-in-law exclaimed: “you’re doomed to have nothing but girls,”¹¹¹ clearly demonstrating that in North Korea, it indeed is doom to bear only female children. Only after the fourth child, a son, was born, was the mother-in-law satisfied, and prepared the soup for Mrs. Song. This sort of social oppression between women, especially between mother-in-laws and daughter-in-laws, is commonly reported by defectors.¹¹²

Goodkind argues that although there is a preference for sons, the preference may be weak. He demonstrates this point by providing a statistical analysis of demographic data on such things as childhood mortality and access to food. Worth noting, however, is that Goodkind does not include in his study any personal testimony from North Koreans, a fact which raises questions regarding the validity of his find-

ings. Nevertheless, it seems apparent that there at the very least exists anywhere from a moderate to strong preference toward sons, as this contention is supported by complementary evidence not included in Goodkind's work.

Custody is an additional institution of sexism in North Korea. To be fair, North Korean women may divorce their husbands or vice versa, even though some cases may include legal and financial obstacles.¹¹³ However, it is common for the father to receive custody of the children. Demick provides the example of Dr. Kim, as a female pediatrician, earned three times that of a regular laborer, yet lost her child to her less successful husband upon her decision to divorce.¹¹⁴ Her economic superiority was not considered when placing the children in a home. North Korea indeed has laws in place regulating custody, which are supposedly not extra-advantageous to men in any manner.¹¹⁵ Dr. Kim's experience with the courts certainly puts this theoretical basis into question.

In addition to these meta-level examples, the basic daily components of women's lives are impacted by sexism. Women are still paid less and are disproportionately left out of managerial positions at work, in spite of legislation combating this.¹¹⁶ Women eat either less or worse food, face spousal abuse, and even have their personal appearances regulated.¹¹⁷ Women's bodies and love-lives are regulated by government rhetoric, which influences how many children they bare and pushes marriage into their late twenties. In fact, one three-child recommendation may have even influenced the fertility rate to fall from 6.5 children per family to 2.5 children per family in a twenty-year period.¹¹⁸ This drop is substantial and not to be conflated with economic stress from the great famine, as it occurred prior to the great famine.

In addition to strict quantitative goals for marriage and childbearing, there are stringent qualitative ones as well. Many women stay married even if they have access to divorce, due to social stigmas about unmarried women, especially regarding ones with kids. Furthermore, if a woman is sexually active before or outside of her marriage and subsequently becomes pregnant, social pressures and stigmas against this often lead to abortions or the exploitation of the father for money.¹¹⁹ Women are also pressured to use sex as a form of bribery instead of cash.¹²⁰ This is especially troublesome since bribery is ubiquitous in North Korea.

In Demick's book *Mi-Ran* discussed the sexism of bike riding. Bike riding was both considered inappropriate for women and, at times, illegal for women. When *Mi-Ran* was a young girl, she would dare to ride her bike in defiance of gender norms. This norm may be caused by North Korean pop culture's view of women as fragile and tender.¹²¹ One day when she rode into the countryside, a group of young men rode up next to her and yelled: "you are going to tear your c***,"¹²² in an attempt to coerce her to desist riding her bike. These sorts of acts of gendered aggression suggest a deeper and more serious societal inequality between men and women, not simply a legal or political one.

There is, however, a silver lining for women—their participation in the aforementioned market economy. Women are purportedly the main agents in the markets, as they "run market stalls, sell food, engage in small-scale import-export, or rent out the family home to courting couples."¹²³ Their agency in the private markets

awards them more independence, perhaps even raising divorce rates.¹²⁴ North Korean women have even been cited as speaking in *banmal* toward men, a speech register traditionally used predominantly by men in North Korea signifying higher social standing, which Tudor and Pearson assert is correlated with these women's increased agency in the markets and the modernization of their economic roles as breadwinners.

Despite this economic advantage possessed by North Korean women, the aforementioned examples of sexism have a clear impact. According to the South Korean Ministry of Unification, three quarters of North Korean defectors who now reside in China are female, while almost 60 percent of North Korean defectors living in South Korea, at least between 2000 and 2004, were female.¹²⁵ The exodus of women from North Korea suggests that the reality of the sociopolitical equality of women in North Korea is bleak.

Finally, women face sexism even as escapees. Women can be the victims of trafficking while escaping to China.¹²⁶ Women are rated into one of three categories called "grade one," "grade two," and "grade three" "pigs." They may then be sold for up to 200,000 USD to disabled or undesirable Chinese men in the countryside who cannot find wives, and some are even restrained at night so they will not flee.¹²⁷ Similar to other migrant movements, such as the women who cross the U.S./Mexico border, it is indeed dangerous to be a female survivor of the exodus from North Korea.

North Korea's persistently and consistently sexist society is noteworthy, insofar that it is not communist. Although sexism pervades even in other formally egalitarian societies, the literature notes that the institutional sexism of North Korea is much worse than that of other communist powers, such as the USSR or Cuba.¹²⁸ Although many argue that the traditional Confucius patriarchy in North Korea is the cause of this sexism,¹²⁹ that conclusion is debatable. Kim and Park reject such an assumption, as the political revolution was aimed at the dismantling of many problematic facets of Confucius society. There is evidence that the state was more than capable of eradicating various deeply rooted Confucius practices such as the clan system for family grouping, artificially replacing it with a nuclear family.¹³⁰ Furthermore, other states, such as Cuba, had their own solidified patriarchies to dismantle, with much more success than North Korea.

In fairness, there are positive results from the legislative measures taken by the state. Women do indeed have equal access to education and hold advanced degrees, are afforded a range of legal rights regarding motherhood, and their overall social situation is incomparably better than it was under the Confucius society from which the state emerged. However, it is concurrently clear that major social and economic disparities permeate the ordinary lives of North Korean women, perpetuating a clearly non-egalitarian social environment for women that run contradictory to state rhetoric.

Pyongyangism

Perhaps the clearest example of inequality in North Korea is the gap between those living in Pyongyang and the rest of the country. Indeed, those living in Pyongyang have a lifestyle teetering on opulent, at least by North Korean standards. Even the North Korean government admits this disparity at some level. The North Korean constitution states that it aims to build “modern houses in the countryside”¹³¹ and that equal development and modernization will eliminate “class distinctions between the working class and the peasantry.”¹³² Although this is explicitly stated in the North Korean constitution, most houses in the countryside remain old with origins from the post-war reconstruction.¹³³

Many villages and towns outside of urban centers not only lack recreation but also lack the means to maintain recreation. For example, every village in North Korea has a cinema per government edict, though much of the time the cinemas do not work due to lack of electricity.¹³⁴ Thus, the only outlet for recreation for those outside of urban centers, chiefly Pyongyang, is a rundown cinema. Meanwhile, Pyongyang enjoys many recreational institutions, such as aquariums, theme parks, department stores, etcetera.¹³⁵ While the rest of the country scrapes by on the bare minimum, the people of Pyongyang can be seen eating pizza in Cafes with their iPads, which may be “a surprise to those who consider North Korea to be a universally impoverished, communist country.”¹³⁶

As mentioned above, the way in which hardship and famine impacted Pyongyang was extremely different than the rest of North Korea. When Jin-Sung visited the village of Sariwon, some 30 miles south of Pyongyang, he was surprised to learn that there was an entire government unit dedicated to collecting dead corpses of starvation victims around the village. Jin-Sung thought to himself, “such a thing could never exist in Pyongyang.” Jin-Sung described Sariwon as an unfamiliar and foreign place, unlike anything he had seen in Pyongyang. In fact, he described the collapse of the PDS as a “rumor” before seeing it for himself.¹³⁷

As stated above, we can confirm that there is a rather high standard of living in Pyongyang due to investigative footage. A problem arises when the North Korean government prohibits international journalists from filming outside of Pyongyang to capture differing lifestyles. We can, however, hold the official footage up against unofficial smuggled out footage, which highlights the stark contrast between life in Pyongyang and life in the rest of North Korea.

Frontline, a popular American documentary series, recently released in 2014 a documentary titled, “Secret State of North Korea.” This documentary is groundbreaking in content, as it is one of the most comprehensive and profound collections of first-hand smuggled out footage of life in North Korea. It is necessary to note that the footage from inside North Korea in the *Frontline* documentary is smuggled out by anti-North Korean activists, who have their own unique political agenda. Nevertheless, what they have filmed demonstrates a stark contrast between life in Pyongyang and life in the rest of North Korea.

In the smuggled footage of the country outside of Pyongyang, people are skinny

and dirty. Malnourished and sick people litter the streets of villages. Orphans gather in the markets and beg for money or food. One of the orphans depicted in the smuggled footage told a soldier that she was homeless simply because her mother said it was too hard to care for her.¹³⁸

Alternatively, in Pyongyang, the undercover footage reveals the opposite. One woman was filmed getting in an imported Mercedes with her husband on her wedding day.¹³⁹ In fact, many of the elite enjoy Mercedes, BMWs, and Lexuses.¹⁴⁰ There is footage of department stores and grocery stores stocked with items. The people in Pyongyang are well dressed, smiling, and seem to want for nothing, even when they do not know that they are being filmed.¹⁴¹

The cost of living is another measure that can be used to demonstrate the economic differences between the people of Pyongyang and everyone else. First, real estate is quite expensive in Pyongyang. As a matter of fact, in roughly the past decade, it may have risen ten-fold.¹⁴² A major driving force for this rise in the price of real estate is the illegal and legal trade of housing. Housing can legally be traded within the same district; however, this is often done with a cash fee involved and often across districts.¹⁴³ In truth, it has been cited that some apartment trades in the Mansudae district may cost around 100,000 USD,¹⁴⁴ meaning that in a country where most people live in abject poverty, urban apartments are selling for prices many Westerners could not afford. Tudor and Pearson add, that “for the millions of North Koreans who live in a hand-to-mouth existence, the idea of driving a BMW and living in a Mansudae apartment is beyond even imagination.”

Pyongyangism is indeed a prime example of how the state uses geographical restrictions to segregate the differing social groups by Songbun, among other things. In order to travel to or from luxurious Pyongyang among other areas of the country, individuals need travel passes. In fact, people will often illegally ride on top of trains in order to access restricted areas of the country, which is combatted by police brutality and the possibility of three months in a labor camp.¹⁴⁵

As we have seen throughout this paper, preference is clearly given to those residing in Pyongyang. Travel to the city is heavily restricted, political trustworthiness and high Songbun are certainly a requirement to live there, top colleges and job opportunities are located in the capital, and life is overall much more comfortable. From better maternity wards to lower chances of malnutrition, residents of Pyongyang always come out on top. Capitals are symbols of the state, and the North Korean state has created its showcase for the world to see. Unfortunately, this process has additionally created disparity and inequality.

Conclusion

This article underscores key elements of social, political, and economic inequality in North Korea, which manifest in five major areas: Songbun, healthcare, emerging markets, sexism, and Pyongyangism. These five areas are critical institutionalized driving forces of inequality. To address the central question posed, regarding whether

the state has done its best to mitigate inequality, the answer is a definitive no. This is particularly the case since the beginning of the great famine.

First, the socialist rhetoric of the state, which opposes the accumulation of wealth and profit, did nothing to mitigate the new form of currency in North Korea—social currency. Where monetary profit is lacking, social profit exists. Where money would buy one's success, "happiness," or opportunity in the West, social status buys it in North Korea. For example, those who may be denied university access in North Korea due to their social status are not very different from those denied university access in the West due to their economic limitations. Thus, the elimination of monetary profit and wealth accumulation simply led to underground and equally segregating social currency.

Second, the North Korean government has consistently and progressively lost its ability to combat monetary wealth accumulation, especially post-famine. Although the accumulation of this wealth is still a dangerous process, it is clear that all sorts of people from housewives to government officials have indeed begun to profit off of capitalist markets and even international trade. Furthermore, although the state has rebounded immensely from the 1990s famine, which devastated the PDS, at this point, the state seems to rely on the capitalist for-profit market activity to make up for where the state falls short. There is no indication, even from government rhetoric, that the state will return to an egalitarian distribution network and recriminalize for-profit economic activity.

These two forms of currency, monetary and social, are then further compounded when combined. In fact, Chol-Hwan¹⁴⁶ explains that his family was "[wealthy] due not only to my grandparents' social status but also the fact that they had once lived in Japan"—wealth determined by social status and monetary success. To be sure, inequality and classism are visible in even the most egalitarian Marxist societies, including Cuba and the USSR. However, the stark classism in North Korea is similar to that of the very European bourgeoisie Marx rallied against, while other communist states such as Cuba or the USSR did a much better job of mitigating inequality and the existence of social classes.

This is a necessary analysis, as it informs how we, the West, discuss North Korea. Academically, the literature needs to be diversified to not only include security, defection, and human rights abuses—but also a discussion of classism, inequality, and the applicability of the terms "socialism" or "communism." Pragmatically, other international actors need to consider the social realities of life in North Korea when dealing with topics such as security or human rights, etcetera. For instance, sanctions may not have any impact on a society which already endured deprivation and disparity amongst the social classes for over a decade and still supported the legitimacy of their government. Or perhaps ways in which the West can use the emerging markets to exert influence over everyday people, or even promote expansion of these with the North Korean state to weaken its totalitarian hold. Perhaps the Hwagyo, a group of people that are the topic of literally appallingly low levels of academic research, can be utilized by foreign governments for the transmission of information in addition to currency. There are many pragmatic questions with a real potential

impact that can be pursued when shifting our focus from the state to the people, especially those centering around inequality.

Finally, leftists and Marxists and similar paradigms should address how and why stark classism and social currency exist in “communist” or “socialist” states, and how these ideological movements would mitigate this. In fact, according to one survey of North Korean defectors, only 38 percent believed that creating a socialist system was a mistake; and of them, 60 percent believed that the mistake was made with the way in which it was implemented.¹⁴⁷ Thus, if the communist and socialist movements indeed claim legitimacy in North Korea, even amongst defectors, it would behoove those movements to address the issues raised here.

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