

# **THE TUMEN TRIANGLE DOCUMENTATION PROJECT**

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**SOURCING THE CHINESE-NORTH KOREAN BORDER**

Edited by  
CHRISTOPHER GREEN

Issue Two  
February 2014



## **ABOUT SINO-NK**

Founded in December 2011 by a group of young academics committed to the study of Northeast Asia, Sino-NK focuses on the borderland world that lies somewhere between Pyongyang and Beijing. Using multiple languages and an array of disciplinary methodologies, Sino-NK provides a steady stream of China-DPRK (Democratic People's Republic of Korea/North Korea) documentation and analysis covering the culture, history, economies and foreign relations of these complex states.

Work published on Sino-NK has been cited in such standard journalistic outlets as *The Economist*, *International Herald Tribune*, and *Wall Street Journal*, and our analysts have been featured in a range of other publications. Ultimately, Sino-NK seeks to function as a bridge between the ubiquitous North Korea media discourse and a more specialized world, that of the academic and think tank debates that swirl around the DPRK and its immense neighbor.

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April 2013

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### **DOSSIER NO. 1**

Adam Cathcart, ed. “China and the North Korean Succession,” January 16, 2012. 78p.

### **DOSSIER NO. 2**

Adam Cathcart and Charles Kraus, “China’s ‘Measure of Reserve’ Toward Succession: Sino-North Korean Relations, 1983-1985,” February 2012. 38p.

### **DOSSIER NO. 3**

Adam Cathcart and Michael Madden, eds. “‘A Whole New Blueprint’: Chinese-North Korean Relations at the End of the Kim Jong Il Era, October 21-December 17, 2011,” preface by Stephan Haggard, August 2012. 88p.

### **DOSSIER NO. 4**

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## *Preface*



*Young female guide at the monument to the well from which Yanji derives its name (Photo: Warwick Morris)*



*Jim Hoare and Warwick Morris on their Yanbian odyssey. (Photo: Jim Hoare)*

The first issue of this journal appeared in April 2013. The second goes to press as we greet the Year of the Horse and a number of other momentous events, not least the 100th anniversary of the outbreak of the First World War. In East Asia, at least, last year drew to a close with a moment of high drama. The sudden and brutal fall of Jang Sung-taek in early December has so far not had any obvious ripple effects on the Tumen Triangle (rather zealous border clampdowns notwithstanding), but, given Jang's close ties to China, it is not impossible that such effects may emerge in due course. The other dramatic event at year's end was Japanese Prime Minister Abe's decision to make a controversial visit to Tokyo's Yasukuni Shrine. While this evokes echoes of Japan's colonial past, it is unlikely to have much impact on the Tumen area, either. Back in the 1990s, when the Tumen River Development Project first got underway, Japan was seen as a prime regional player. But those days have long gone, and Japan shows little interest in the area nowadays.

Another echo of the early days of the Tumen project was the visit of Mongolian President Tsakhia-ginn Elbegordj to the DPRK in October. The two countries have a reasonable economic relationship. Politically, however, they have grown apart since the demise of the Soviet Union and Mongolia's abandonment of state socialism. Refugee issues have also driven bilateral tensions. The visit was no-



*Pochonbo Battle Monument (Photo: Anonymous)*

table, therefore, precisely because the DPRK leader did not meet Elbegordj, and because the latter used the occasion of a visit to Kim Il Sung University to warn in a public address that “no tyranny lasts for ever,” as well as to draw attention to Mongolia’s acceptance, and growing affluence, under a capitalist economic system.

Turning to this new issue of the Tumen Triangle Documentation Project, I am, for obvious reasons, somewhat diffident about commenting on the first item, since I am one of the co-authors. The editors said that they would like something, and so there is a write-up of a trip with Warwick Morris, who would later become Ambassador to Seoul, but then, like me, a First Secretary. He was visiting Beijing from Seoul, where I was then posted, and together we made a short trip to the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Region, which lies at the heart of the Tumen Triangle. Reconstructing a visit made over twenty years’ ago was not easy—I began by setting the whole story a year later than it actually was—but fortunately, Warwick had kept better records than I, and so here you have what the editors have kindly called a featured essay, but which is really our holiday reminiscences (and holiday snaps) from early summer 1990. At that time, China was embroiled in the aftermath of the events of April–June 1989

but, in general, that seemed far away from Yanbian. The Yanbian Region was relatively little visited by foreigners and there was no body of North Korean refugees whatsoever. We were made very welcome and learnt a lot in a very short time. Perhaps others might be encouraged to offer their accounts of the region in the past.

This issue’s other essays are more concerned with the present. Two, one each by Dr. Benjamin Habib and Geoffrey See, deal with Rason, the first North Korean special economic zone. Habib’s account indicates that it may at last be going to take-off, though this has been prophesized many times before. See, who wants to extend the training that Choson Exchange provides for DPRK officials to the provinces, has an entertaining account of his first, and seemingly underprepared, visit to the area. But difficulties became opportunities and I am sure that he will go back.

The main feature of this issue, however, is on Ryanggang Province, in particular on Hyesan. Hyesan was chosen in the 1990s as the site of a new town. There were ambitious development plans, with promises of new hous-

ing and a good life. The reality seems to have been somewhat different. Houses were built, but, as elsewhere in the DPRK, they were often poorly constructed to low standards using inferior materials. Thin walls and ill-fitting windows were of little use against the bitter cold that makes the province North Korea's coldest, with the lowest recorded temperature. Yet it is clearly still a privileged place in which to live and people there are conscious that many others envy them. Life is made easier by access to China and legitimate and illegitimate cross-border trade. This brings in not only Chinese goods but also CDs, DVDs, and other relatively luxurious items that remain much prized. One obvious theme is that of a divide: between those who see themselves as the "people" and "them"—government officials and law enforcement staff who are seen as preying on ordinary folk. This is coupled with a general feeling that everything has deteriorated since the death of Kim Il-sung in 1994. Attempts to portray his son and successor, Kim Jong-il, as a smiling man of the people seem to fall on stony ground here.

New problems do not help. While officially, the whole country and the whole people are galvanized by the DPRK's nuclear success story, there is evidence that at the local level people may be concerned by the longer term consequences of living close to North Korea's nuclear test ground in Kilju County, especially when they rely on local rivers for their water supply. The concerns recorded here come from those who have left, but the distress they express for family members left behind has a genuine feel about it. And if Nick Miller's paper is accurate, there is a growing drug problem that spreads over both sides of the border. According to this account, the peaceful town of Yanji that we saw in 1990 now has a large number of registered drug addicts, whose habit is being fed from illegal outlets in the DPRK. In the DPRK itself, illegal drugs provide a substitute for a collapsed medical system.

A somewhat more bucolic note comes with Robert Winstanley-Chesters' account of the DPRK's approach to potato farming in Ryanggang. The whole issue of potatoes in North Korea is a fascinating one. Long employed to make side dishes (반찬; the ubiquitous range of foods found alongside rice and soup on the average Korean dining table), under Kim Jong-il their cultivation was encouraged as a staple food to help make up the shortfall in rice during the famine years of the 1990s. This was seen by outside commentators, including me, as a break from the days of Kim Il-sung, when potato cultivation was frowned upon. But as Winstanley-Chesters shows, Kim Il-sung was not against the growing of potatoes. Rather the opposite, since he encouraged the producers of Ryanggang, one of the big centers for potatoes, to use new and more imaginative ways of presenting their product. What Kim was against, however, was growing potatoes in wet fields where rice and maize could be produced, rather than in dedicated dry fields. Winstanley-Chesters also looks at the scientific underpinning of the potato industry. This struck a chord, reminding me of a fascinating afternoon spent with a European Union delegation at an experimental potato farm on the upper reaches of the Taedong River. The dedication of those working there was obvious and the food was excellent. So we are back to holiday reminiscences again—and I have the photographs to prove it!

*J.E. Hoare*  
*Executive Editor*

# **PART ONE**

## **FEATURED ESSAY**



## *Yanbian Korean Autonomous Region 1990*

*By Warwick Morris and James (Jim) E. Hoare*

From June 22 through 26, 1990, we visited the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Region of China, generally known as Yanbian. Warwick was then Head of Chancery<sup>1</sup> in the British Embassy in Seoul, and Jim held the same post in the British Embassy in Beijing. We were not the first British officials to visit Yanbian; as we found later out, members of the Beijing Embassy's Commercial Department had been there before and there had been some British tourists. We were, however, probably the first political officers to have visited since the 1940s or even earlier.

Both of us wrote official reports, which no doubt lie somewhere in the archives. Warwick has since found a copy of one of them, and the present account is based partly on that document and partly on our collective memories. We both took a number of photographs, many of which are reproduced here. The quality of the photographs is not great and has not been improved by the



*Warwick and Jim at Tumen town, with North Korea in the background. (Photo: Jim Hoare)*

<sup>1</sup> There are no longer Heads of Chancery in British diplomatic missions. In the early 1990s, they were replaced with deputy heads of mission on the American pattern.

shift from slide to digital, but, like holiday photographs the world over, they have a certain period charm. The overall result is probably more travelogue than political thesis, but is offered as reportage from an area that has changed greatly since we visited it more than twenty years ago.

## Background

Our visit took place at a time when there were no diplomatic relations between the Republic of Korea (ROK) and China; relations between the two weren't normalized until 1992. Chinese trade relations were developing apace, however. Korean Air had erected a huge sign at Beijing Airport, just as the airport road joined the road into the city. Of course, Korean Air did not fly to Beijing—that would not happen until 1994—but they were getting ready. Within the airport, the luggage carts all advertised Samsung or Hyundai, while the arrival and departure screens came courtesy of LG. There were plenty of South Korean businessmen visiting China, and a fair number of officials, too. The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) firmly denied that there were negotiations in hand with the ROK. But the diplomatic tide was clearly going in the ROK's favor, and Chinese denials were taken with a large grain of salt.

Chinese relations with the DPRK appeared to be good. The DPRK had supported Beijing's crack-down following the student demonstrations of April and May 1989 and occupation of Tiananmen Square. But as far as the British embassy was concerned, North Korea might as well have been a remote planet. Britain neither recognized the DPRK nor had any form of diplomatic relations with it. Although the



*Korean Air hoarding, Beijing Airport Road Spring 1990. No flights as yet, but getting ready. (Photo: Jim Hoare)*



*Downtown Yanji, from our hotel. The view has changed dramatically since this was taken. (Photo: Jim Hoare)*



DPRK and British embassies in Beijing are quite near each other, there were no contacts. One occasionally saw North Korean diplomats shopping at the Friendship Store or in the distance at diplomatic receptions, but there were no dealings with them. Most European countries were the same, although a few had diplomatic relations. The British position was in contrast to the Americans, who had been talking to the North Koreans since 1988, and the Japanese, who were in serious—and tough—negotiations that it was hoped would lead to diplomatic relations. So close was British purdah as far as the North Koreans were concerned that Jim only met one North Korean official in three years in Beijing. At the Polish National Day reception in 1991, an American colleague introduced a young North Korean woman, who was part of the DPRK Defence Attaché's office. She left for home a few days later, though no doubt this was pure coincidence. So the idea of getting close to the North Korean border with China had a strong appeal.

### The Visit

Neither of us can now remember how the idea of visiting the Korean Autonomous Region first emerged. But it was an area that we both wished to see. An approach was made to the MFA and the visit was agreed.<sup>2</sup> The only thing they refused was entry

to the town of Hunchun.<sup>3</sup> Our formal hosts, essential for such a visit, were to be the foreign affairs office of the local Yanbian government. We set off on a Friday evening on a flight to Shenyang, where we would spend a night and part of a day before flying on to Yanji, the capital of the Yanbian region. At that time, there were no direct flights from Beijing to Yanji.

The evening was clear as we started out, but we were not long past the Great Wall when a massive thunderstorm began to throw spectacular lightning across the mountains. When we arrived in Shenyang, we saw the results. The city was flooded and the car from the Phoenix Hotel—then claiming to be the best in town, now long disappeared—had failed to get through. Eventually we found a taxi driver willing to take us. It was a highly circuitous route, avoiding the deeply flooded streets. The journey took ninety minutes; next day in reverse it was twenty minutes. Not surprisingly, he rejected our standard tip, demanding, and getting, quite a substantial sum.

The next day there was little sign of the rain and the sun shone. We spent part of the morning in a call on the United States Consulate General, a some-

3 Hunchun sits at the point where the Chinese, Russian and North Korean borders meet. Warwick had been told in Seoul that it would open in July 1991 as a special economic zone. However, when we asked, we were refused, and in Yanji when we again raised the question of visiting Hunchun—in China, unlike North Korea, things often became possible locally which had not been possible in Beijing, but this time we got nowhere. All this changed a year later, but in 1990 we were not going there and our hosts denied any knowledge of a special zone being opened. In 1992, however, it became a “border economic co-operation zone,” and its role in economic co-operation was further increased in 2001–2002. Many tourists now visit.

2 Although foreigners' travel in China had steadily become easier in the 1980s, 1989 had led to some tightening. In any case, resident diplomats (and journalists) normally needed permission to travel much beyond the major cities. I am still awaiting the MFA's answer to a request to visit Tibet made in May 1991 (JEH).



*Makeshift drinks stall, Yanji City.*

*(Photo: Warwick Morris)*



*Yanji municipal buildings. (Photo: Jim Hoare)*

what beleaguered outpost. Although it was a Saturday, several members of staff came in to brief us. They clearly had a difficult time, with the People's Armed Police carefully monitoring all visitors, not just Chinese as in Beijing. We were not allowed past the gates until a member of staff came to collect us. Sino-US relations had been publicly in the doldrums because of the presence of the dissident scientist Fang Lizhi<sup>4</sup> on the US Embassy compound in Beijing since the previous year. Access to the US compound was closely monitored, as was staff travel. All customs' clearances had to be done in Beijing, causing much delay; although, they conceded, probably not much more than Chinese consulates had to undergo in the United States. The absence of an expatriate community made life more difficult. Even US "foreign experts" employed in the region tended to avoid the consulate. The staff thought that this was because most of them were clandestine missionaries.

They briefed us on the local political scene. Shenyang was going through economic reforms led from the top. What happened on the ground did not necessarily reflect the aims of the leaders, though. Although there was supposed to be a bankruptcy law in force, no real bankruptcy had occurred. Enterprise debt was growing, which to some extent was being overcome through barter trade.

Cross-border economic links with the Soviet

4 Fang Lizhi (1932–2012) was a Chinese astrophysicist and political activist who took refuge in the US Embassy in Beijing in June 1989 as the authorities suppressed the demonstrations. He remained there until June 1990, when he was allowed to leave. During the period of his detention, US Embassy staff were closely followed and subject to petty vandalism such as slashing of car tyres, and locally, consular staff were harassed.

Union were important and growing. As well as conventional trade, there was a steady growth in labor trade, with increasing numbers of Chinese skilled workers (from 900 to 11,000 in two years) working across the border. In addition to the Chinese, there were Vietnamese female textile workers.

The largest group of industrial workers, however, came from North Korea. The consulate general was interested in both the Yanbian region, to which they made regular visits, and North Korea. The former was an area of high educational attainments and an increasingly active populace. They noted that there was established cross-border trade in the region. Recently, however, North Korean traders had been increasingly slow in paying. This they attributed to two successive bad harvests in the North, which had begun to affect the ability of even small traders to meet their debts.

We then spent a brief period of strategic tourism looking at Manchu remains before flying on to Yanji in the afternoon. The flight to Shenyang had been mainly Chinese, but the flight to Yanji provided a surprise: it was full of South Korean businessmen. (It was in fact a charter flight for South Koreans officially on holiday, but many of them made clear that they were going in search of business opportunities.)

Even from the air, it was obvious that Yanbian was different. Partly this was because the steep mountains between Beijing and Shenyang were replaced by more gentle rolling hills, but it was also the neatness of the farms and fields. Upon arrival, Wei Yunbin and An Zhengshan from the local Foreign Affairs Office met us. They would then guide and look after us during the visit. The office must have been busy, since then-Foreign Minister Qian

Qichen was on an inspection tour there, but apart from Wei disappearing to take part in a briefing for the minister one evening, this did not affect our visit.

Yanji itself was also a surprise. In some ways it was typical of many Chinese provincial towns at the time. It was a relatively new development in what had originally been the Manzhou lands. Its population in 1991 was about 240,000 (it is now some 400,000—the Yanbian area as a whole was 2.4 million then); Koreans formed about 59 percent of the total. The main streets were paved, but the opposite was true for the side streets. There were some grand buildings, including those of the local government, but there were also a lot of very ramshackle constructions, especially shops, restaurants, and houses. Women carried goods on their heads, as in Korea. But the biggest surprise was the Korean-language signs everywhere. The majority of signs were in two languages, but a good percentage were Korean-only. Korean was also clearly the main language spoken. People would respond to Jim's limited Chinese, but when Warwick addressed them in fluent Korean they got really interested.

The name of our hotel has completely disappeared from memory. The Daewoo and other “international” hotels had not yet been built, while the contemporary Lonely Planet guide tells that when we were in town the two main hotels were the Yanji Binguang and Minzu Fandian. I think it was probably the first of these, as the guidebook notes that a “fancy female flunkey” ushered you in and then ignored you. It sounds familiar. Most of our fellow travellers from the aircraft were there, too. Apart from breakfast we did not eat there, though we may have had the occasional drink. What we did eat was generally

Korean food—for obvious reasons, then more akin to North Korean style than that of the South, though one suspects that this has changed over the intervening years.

In our general briefing, there was much stress on the hoped-for benefits of the Tumen River Development Region, which was then just getting under way. There were high expectations of developing links with the ROK. We got many facts and figures. The Yanbian area was 81 percent forest at the time, and totalled 42,900 square km; it had eight cities and three counties, seven ports, and 600 villages. There were ten newspapers and fifteen journals, and illiteracy was virtually unknown. It had a 562.5km border with North Korea and and 182.7km one with the Soviet Union.

It was also an area very keen on links with the outside world. After more than ten years under Deng Xiaoping's reform and open door policy, the Yanbian region had begun to attract a steady stream of visitors. These included both business people and tourists. The first British had come in 1985, and in 1989 there had been 2,000 visitors from twenty-one countries. The events of June 1989 had worked to their benefit, in that visitors wanted to avoid Beijing. Only one foreign expert had left during that period, and even he had soon returned. In the year that we went, they had already received more visitors by late June in than in the whole of the previous year. In addition to tourists, there were foreign business people. South Korean visitors were increasingly common. Foreign trade in 1989 amounted to 150 million Yuan, two-thirds of which was with the Soviet Union and North Korea. There were thirty-four joint ventures and one fully foreign-owned venture. The-



*Railway station across the Tumen River, a North Korean village somewhere south of Tumen City. The village may be Changson. (Photo: Jim Hoare)*

joint ventures included a number with North Koreans. Most of the latter were probably small, like one of the restaurants in which we ate reasonably well, served by a Kim Il-sung badge-wearing North Korean manager. There was also a Sino-Japanese joint venture in Longjing that processed ginseng.

We were also briefed on the area's history and revolutionary tradition. Chinese Koreans (chosunjok) were not a resentful, conquered minority. They had come to the region voluntarily and were well integrated. Yanbian had been a center of resistance in Japanese days. Liberated in 1945, it had never been under Nationalist rule. This had not prevented revolution-era cadres being denounced during the Cultural Revolution, but the implication was that this was all now forgotten. (That this might not be entirely the case was shown to us at Yanbian University, where a permanent exhibition on the university's history showed scenes of teachers being denounced during the Cultural Revolution; this



was the only time Jim had seen such a display in a Chinese university or anywhere else. Generally, the Cultural Revolution was passed over in silence.) As in other minority areas, the one-child policy was not enforced and Koreans could have two children.

There followed a couple of days travelling around the area, visiting Yanji town itself but also going further afield. We saw trim villages with houses in Korean style, often still with thatched roofs. Around them were neat, prolific vegetable patches. Collectivization had long gone and the farms were individual enterprises; some had tractors. The North Korean style of traditional costume was much in evidence among women on what appeared to be special occasions such as outings; we saw no men dressed accordingly. In a group we saw dancing in Tumen, most of the women were dressed in the Korean style, while the men were all in Western-style suits, most with ties. Younger women tended to dress in Western-style clothing, too, at least when going about their ordinary business. Away from the few main roads, the rural roads were uniformly bad, though no worse, it seemed, than most South Korean rural roads had been in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Talking to our guides, one reason given for the refusal to let us visit Hunchun was that the road was in particularly bad shape. Given the state of the roads that we did go on, this seems highly likely.

As noted, our agenda included Yanbian University, a place very proud of its long tradition as the oldest university in a minority area, founded in 1949. For the first ten years, it had only taken Korean students, but has since accepted all nationalities. With a claimed literacy rate for the area of 98 percent and with over 99 percent of eligible children attending

school,<sup>5</sup> it clearly had a solid foundation upon which to build. However, possibly reflecting the effects of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), the total number of graduates was said to be only 15,000 (the total number of university graduates in China between 1949 and 1991 was two million). The university offered master's degrees in fifteen subjects and a doctoral degree in Korean studies. Few of its postgraduate students went abroad to study, but some staff had done so. Only one had been to Europe; several had been to North Korea. Close links were developing with South Korean educational institutions, and so academic visitors were frequent. The library had a reasonably up-to-date collection of South Korean newspapers and journals, and received material from the Japanese, German, and US embassies. These countries had also provided teaching assistants, as had Canada and Australia. There were no links with Britain.<sup>6</sup>

The main industrial enterprise that we visited was a tobacco processing factory: agriculture and service industries aside, this seemed to be the main local employer with 3,000 staff. We were told that it accounted for one-third of Jilin Province tax revenue, though it was not the largest taxpayer in the province. It seemed to have links with British American Tobacco, and, we were shown with pride, much of the equipment was British, evidence of past

5 Even allowing for some exaggeration and local pride, these figures were impressive and gave the area the highest rate of literacy in all China.

6 I later arranged for some material about Britain to be sent to the university and also wrote to the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, and to the University of Sheffield, then the main centres of Korean studies in Britain. I do not know if they acted on the letter (JEH).



*Korean-style housing, Yanji city. (Photo: Jim Hoare)*



*Yanji city in the morning. (Photo: Jim Hoare)*

links with the British Embassy commercial section. Some of the senior management had visited Britain for training. We were told that the Director was currently there, looking at the type of rigid packaging that would be needed if they expanded, as they hoped to do, into the Southeast Asian market. They also noted increasing links with South Korea. The Chinese government had just started a campaign to draw attention to the dangers of smoking, and we asked about the effects of this on the company's output. We were assured that it was having no effect since the Chinese people had long since grown accustomed to government campaigns and tended to ignore them.

Otherwise, we spent much time visiting villages and the other major town of the region, Tumen. We also visited Longjing. Tumen, about a third of the size of Yanbian, had few distinguishing features apart from the Tumen River upon which it stands and which marks the Sino-North Korean border. We had another briefing here, concentrating on the prospects for the future once the Tumen River Development Zone got underway and on cross-border links with the DPRK. We were told that at the Tumen border crossing, one of three between China and North Korea at the time, the number of crossings had risen from about 200 in 1983 to over 120,000 in 1990. The DPRK was clearly visible on the other bank. We were told that when the bridge across the river was open (Monday to Saturday), people from either side could cross without travel documents. The majority of Koreans in the Yanbian Region were descendants of those who had crossed into Chinese territory (and later the Japanese puppet state of Manzhouguo) in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but

many families still had cross-border links.

Tumen's museum was closed, but we were shown the former Japanese Consulate General buildings, now the local government and party headquarters. It was a formidable reminder of what Japanese imperialism had meant. Although in 1990 North Korea was generally more prosperous than Northeast China, there were already signs of economic strife. Many coming from the North brought local products or simple manufactured items for sale in Tumen's market, and if they could not sell these themselves, they would leave them with relatives. Often the latter would pretend that they had sold the goods and give their relatives the money.

When we visited the Yanji free market, we saw the problem first hand. The market was a substantial two-story building with a huge range of foodstuffs available: fruit, vegetables, and plenty of seafood and meat. The quality of the fruit and vegetables was particularly good. This our guides attributed to the economic reforms of recent years. Until the mid-1980s the Koreans in Yanbian had been forced to focus on rice cultivation, but since then they had been allowed to grow vegetables and fruit as well and the result was the abundance available in the market.

However, we were most anxious to buy something from North Korea. Much of the ground floor was devoted to North Korean goods, but these were for the most part basic rusty tools and shoddy shoes. We searched high and low for souvenirs, but foodstuffs apart, there seemed little worth buying. Eventually, Jim settled on a small oil lamp. Boat shaped, it was of a type that would have been familiar to the Romans. It was never used and soon rusted badly. Warwick bought an illustrated fan that had been pre-



*The thriving market in Yanji (Photo: Jim Hoare)*

pared for the previous year's Pyongyang Youth Festival.<sup>7</sup> There were clearly many left unsold.

The market had other attractions. For many of the North Korean women visiting, one prime amusement was the chance to dress up in the South Korean-style traditional dresses displayed on the second floor. The pleasure was in dressing up rather than buying. People did not take photographs, since no doubt such things could get you into trouble at home.

We took photographs at various points along the river, but most of those posing were Chinese-Koreans rather than North Koreans. Clearly, the best picture was the one with the river and North Korea as the backdrop. For boys, there were model tanks, MiG aircraft, and miniature uniforms. Girls had to make do with Korean dresses. Women, presumably Chinese rather than Koreans, could also pose behind cut outs of Korean-style dresses. Not sure what men

<sup>7</sup> The 13th World Festival of Youth and Students, held in Pyongyang in 1989.



did!

We spent much time driving along the river and just looking at North Korea. The northern banks were clearly visible. We saw a station with the standard portrait of Kim Il-sung, as well as sections of collective farms. Large slogans were prominent on the hillsides. All seemed quiet. There were few people about on the DPRK side. No border guards were visible on either side. We saw some people from the Northern side fishing in the river. It is clearly very shallow in places and the fishermen waded out with nets. Nobody waved or paid much attention to us.

There was no heavy military presence, either, although a few soldiers were about. We saw some light field guns lined up near Yanji with their barrels covered and nobody paying much attention. On arrival at Yanji airport, we saw some fifteen MiG fighters some way from the civilian runway, all covered. On Sunday and Monday we saw some of these in the air, and on our departure on the Tuesday there were about thirty of them uncovered at the airport, apparently being fuelled for take-off.

## Conclusion

We visited at a time when Yanbian was on the cusp of undergoing a boom. With the establishment of diplomatic relations between the PRC and the ROK, there seemed limitless opportunities for both sides. ROK investment was already underway in 1991, although the visitors were officially described as tourists. One South Korean businessman who was already running a pharmaceutical factory in Yanji confidently expected to expand his business. The Tumen River Development project seemed to be on the point of take-off.



*Alley in Yanji – probably best avoided on a dark night!*  
(Photo: Jim Hoare)

Some of the hopes were met but many more were disappointed. Yanbian remained a place for investment, but some South Korean companies felt that they were being exploited. Perhaps needless to say, the same feeling existed among many of the Chinese and Sino-Koreans. We were told that South Koreans promised more than they delivered. Kinship ties counted for little.

And the problems in North Korea also impinged more and more on Yanbian by the mid-1990s. As economic difficulties increased, there was a change in the nature of the cross-border traffic. People now came from the North and did not go back. The Chinese operated a policy, long agreed with the DPRK, that there was no right of asylum for North Koreans in China and that those caught must be returned. Those who managed to remain hidden were always at risk, even when they married Chinese citizens. Before long, Yanbian became a center where humanitarian groups, intelligence agencies, criminals, and others all competed. The Tumen River Project, although nominally still in existence, has not met





*Overseen by his mother and a stuffed panda, a small boy prepares for military service on the banks of the Tumen River. (Photo: Jim Hoare)*



*New housing in the countryside; note the tiled roofs, replacing the thatch of older buildings. (Photo: Warwick Morris)*

any of the hopes that were expressed to us in 1990. There has been some regional development but international cooperation has been minimal and the project seems unlikely to amount to much.

There was no follow-up to our visit. Warwick returned to Seoul for another year, although he did visit North Korea via Hong Kong and Beijing in May 1991 as an advisor to the British delegation to the Inter-Parliamentary Union meeting in Pyongyang. He and a colleague from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office Parliamentary Unit were probably the first British officials to visit North Korea since the Korean War. Jim left Beijing in December 1991. The local government officials who were our hosts expressed the hope that the ambassador and the Cultural Section of the embassy would visit, but this did not happen. At that stage there was not much interest in North Korea in the Beijing embassy; indeed, a colleague later said that it was of no interest to them since it was not listed in their official “objectives.” As the North Korean refugee issue attracted more international attention, this view changed somewhat and there have been visits to the border area. But these have tended to be confined to Dandong at the western end of the border and a long way from Yanbian. So our 1990 visit remains something of an oddity, but one recalled with pleasure and not a little fascination.

Perhaps one day we will get back there.





Full size image of the well that gives its name to Yanji alongside its briefing guide. Also see page 7.

(Photo: Jim Hoare)



North Korean village across the Tumen River, somewhere south of Tumen Town. (Photo: Jim Hoare)

SinoNK.com



Dancing on the banks of the Tumen River, Tumen Town. (Photo: Jim Hoare)



Souvenir picture stand – costumes for hire, perhaps. Tumen Town, North Korea in the background. (Photo: Jim Hoare)



Houses in the countryside. (Photo: Jim Hoare)





Homemade anti-drunk driving poster in Yanji. Take to the bottle and you go over the edge! (Photo: Jim Hoare)



Yanji in the morning. Warwick crosses the road.  
(Photo: Jim Hoare)



Typical back street in Yanji. (Photo: Jim Hoare)



Businessman off to work through the back streets of Yanji. Note shop and restaurant signs in Chinese and Korean. (Photo: Jim Hoare)



Yanji – new and old housing. (Photo: Jim Hoare)

# PART TWO

## EYE ON RASON

## *North Korean Economic Development and the Urban Landscape of Rason*

*by Benjamin Habib*

In mid-2013 I visited Rason for the first time, though it was not my first visit to the DPRK. I embarked on this trip hoping to see visual evidence of the much-debated tentative structural changes across the North Korean economy under Kim Jong-un's leadership. After all, the Respected Leader's 2013 New Year's address<sup>1</sup> emphasized developing the country's scientific and technological capabilities to "fan the flames of the industrial revolution in the new century."

The restructuring of the institutional arrangements governing the Rason Special Economic Zone have been codified domestically in the *Law of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea on the Rason Economic and Trade Zone* in conjunction with Sino-North Korean ministerial-level cooperation to improve the investment climate in Rason for joint venture projects.<sup>2</sup> My objective was to see what these changes looked like on the ground.

Given the well-known restrictions placed on visitors and the difficulties of conducting traditional field research, I took my cue here from the work of Peter Atkins who has argued that culture, politics, and economy are encoded into landscapes. For the in-country observer, landscapes—urban built environments, rural agricultural settings, and wilderness areas—can be a rich source of information about the political economy and culture of the nation-state. Reading the encoded landscape therefore became the methodology for my observations on the ground.

1 "[New Year Address Made by Kim Jong Un](#)," *KCNA*, January 1, 2013

2 Adam Cathcart, "[Translating Jang Song Taek in Beijing: A Communique Troika](#)," *Sino-NK*, August 18, 2012.





Rajin harbor (Photo: Benjamin Habib)



Solar-powered street light in Rajin.  
(Photo: Benjamin Habib)

If the broad boulevards and large monuments of Pyongyang's urban landscape are an ideological theme park coded with the power and personality of the Kim dynasty, and smaller industrial cities like Hamhung and Chongjin scarred with the detritus of *Chollima*-era heavy industry, then Rason is increasingly characterized by physical evidence of 21st Century economic production. Herewith follows physical evidence suggesting a gathering momentum of development activity in Rason.

**Infrastructure:** The newly paved road from Wonsong to Rajin and the new hot spring tourist center en route both facilitate increased trade and tourist traffic into Rason from the Yanbian region of China. Russian interests have also invested in upgrading the railway line from Rason into Russia,<sup>3</sup> and the construction of a new pier<sup>4</sup> at [Rajin harbor](#). If Rason is to become an export hub, the upgrading of transportation infrastructure is critical.

**Manufacturing facilities:** Sino-North Korean JV (Joint Venture) manufacturing facilities on our itinerary in Rajin and Sonbong, and the seafood processing facilities dotted along the Rajin shoreline all, from what we could see, contained modern industrial equipment. These facilities make a striking contrast with the rundown vintage 1950s machinery on show at Hungnam Fertilizer Factory in Hamheung.

**Energy systems:** Solar-powered streetlights and small-scale wind turbines evidence decentralized energy generation that circumvents the poorly main-

3 Sabine van Ameijden, "[Peacemaker or Political Hostage? Prospects for the Moscow-Busan 'Iron Silk Road Express'.](#)" *Sino-NK*, November 11, 2013.

4 Andray Abrahamian, "[A Convergence of Interests: Prospects for Rason Special Economic Zone.](#)" *KEI Academic Paper Series*, February 24, 2012.

tained national electricity grid.<sup>5</sup>

**Marketization:** Most interesting, however, was our visit to the market in Rajin, the physical manifestation of the nexus between the government hand and grassroots change in shaping the North Korean economy. The market is huge, encompassing two large halls and surrounding outdoor bazaars all packed with customers buying consumables—everything from fruit and vegetables to clothing and Chinese-manufactured white goods—from all-female market vendors.

Two thoughts come to mind here: First, if the market is providing consumable goods to the public, it means the state does not have to, thus freeing up resources for the government to distribute to the military under the Songun allocation model or devote to other productive enterprises. Second, there is the notion that the supply networks undergirding the market might provide an avenue for social organization outside of sanctioned collective activities, as argued by Andrei Lankov; this seems highly plausible given the scale of the market that we saw.<sup>6</sup> This contrast between opportunity and danger in the government's tentative embrace of local-level market trading is illustrative of the Faustian bargain that marketization presents for the North Korean leadership.

**Security:** From the checkpoints and razor wire bordering Rason, it is clearly visible that this area



*Construction at Russian-financed pier in Rajin harbor.  
(Photo: Benjamin Habib)*



*Production line at a shoe factory in Rajin.  
(Photo: Benjamin Habib)*

- 5 David von Hippel and Peter Hayes, "[Foundations of Energy Security for the DPRK: 1990-2009 Energy Balances, Engagement Options, and Future Paths for Energy and Economic Redevelopment](#)," *Nautilus Institute and Korea Energy Economics Institute*, September 13, 2012.
- 6 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 (Spring 2008): 53-72.

is an extra-territorial enclave shielded from the rest of North Korea. It's not difficult to see why; as the Rason development project begins to take off, one could envisage its magnetic attraction to North Koreans from other areas looking to cash in on new opportunities for wealth acquisition. If there is a danger of "ideological pollution," internal migrants are likely to be the vehicle of transmission.<sup>7</sup> These security barriers keep other North Koreans out as much as they corral foreigners and their "dangerous" ideas in.

In conclusion, the Rason zone is still fairly rudimentary in comparison with the Kaesong Industrial Complex, but the development trajectory is clear from the physical evidence on the ground.

7 KCNA, "Meetings Held to Pledge Loyalty to Kim Jong Un," February 7, 2014. <http://www.kcna.co.jp/item/2014/201402/news07/20140207-35ee.html>



## *Training in Rason?*

*By Geoffrey See*

Last year, Choson Exchange had more than 200 North Koreans participate in workshops on economics, business, and law in North Korea. Some came from the provinces and showed incredible promise, and as we start to reach a critical mass of alumni in Pyongyang, we are looking at taking our programs out to regional areas. Last year, participants working on economic zone policies suggested that we go out to every province in North Korea. Given the limited resources we have, we decided to focus on Wonsan as a test-bed.

Northeastern North Korea, where Rason is located, could of course be another focus. Local officials there argue that they are at the forefront of knowledge and experimentation given their long history as a special zone. Having a separate pool of candidates there would also ensure that we maintain the quality of the candidates being admitted into our Singapore-based programs even as we expand the number of candidates we take out of the country.



*Customs House at Quanhe border crossing on the Tumen River in China.*

*(Photo: Geoffrey See)*

This was the context of my first trip to Rason. My colleague Andray had been urging me to make the trip for more than a year. On past trips, Andray had made the journey with a partner foundation, and despite agreements to start programs nothing ever happened. This is typical of North Korea, even though one wished Rason were somehow different. My objectives on the trip were to identify whether we should dedicate resources to the area and to establish those relationships necessary to make it happen. Colleagues in Pyongyang had made introductions, and so I prepared to enter via China just a week after I had last left the capital.

I admit to being nervous and unprepared for the trip. After two practically back-to-back workshops in Pyongyang, I had no time to figure out the logistics of getting to Rason. I had also heard stories of visitors to the zone paying exorbitant sums for hotels and transport. My initial contact was not promising. The Rason representative in Yanji emailed me the day before I was to set off from there. It was a last-minute email asking me who I was, why I wanted to go, and when I was coming, so I dropped by the office to explain Choson Exchange's work. Shortly thereafter I received a call from the Foreign Affairs Department in Rason asking when I was coming. We agreed to meet at 09:00 at Wonjong Border Customs Office.

The next morning some North Korean friends helped me with my luggage, bought me breakfast, and put me in a car heading to the border near Hunchun. As the car dropped off co-passengers all over Hunchun I took the chance to glimpse the frenetic construction going on in what had been a sleepy bor-

derland town. As strange as it sounds, only at the border did it dawn on me that I was actually leaving.

I had planned on being at customs at 09:00 China time, and the North Korean guide meeting me there had been waiting since 09:00 Korean time (08:00 China time). My name was not in the computer and the customs officer tossed my passport back at me. "I knew this was coming," I thought. Somewhere, somehow, some documents got lost in the bureaucracy and I was not getting in.

But this was quickly resolved as my guide spoke to someone at customs. We breezed through the long lines of Chinese held up by security as my guide pulled me to the front of the line, raising a slight grumble from the crowd behind. It was a beautiful ride from customs to the city as we sailed down the finally completed main road. The odd truck rumbled past carrying processed seafood back to China. I was told that the railway from Russia was finally complete, too, and the opening ceremony was to happen in a few days' time. Coal from Mongolia was to be carried to the port via this new railway. The promised electricity from Jilin still had not arrived, though.<sup>1</sup> One North Korean claimed tigers were holding it up; or, more likely, the Chinese central authorities still needed to approve the power lines, which had to cross a Chinese-Russian joint protection zone for rare Siberian Tigers.

My guide belonged to a cohort of Pyongyangites sent there in 1998, at which point North Korea had

1 At the time of the visit, electricity links had yet to agreed on. As of January 2014, it was announced that work on the Chinese-side of the border had been completed after starting in October 2013 following a feasibility study concluded by the Chinese State Grid Corporation.

made another attempt to revive the zone. I joked that living in Rajin must feel like exile from the capital.

I checked into the hotel on arrival. My guide helped me bargain down the price to less than \$20. Bargaining! At a hotel! Perhaps this truly is the economic frontier of North Korea. I was told to take a nap or walk around Rason on my own. I decided to visit a few neighboring hotels to check out the prices and conditions. Unlike staff in Pyongyang, who would often ask for my guide when I did this, hotel staff here seemed accustomed to Chinese-looking strangers poking their noses into everything. I seemed to fit their profile.

In the afternoon I visited the investment office. After I had introduced Choson Exchange, which is based in Singapore, the investment officer told me he had studied in the city-state in the 1990s as part of the UN Greater Tumen Initiative. He mentioned how impressed he had been with it, and pulled out discolored business cards he had held on to since then. “Please contact my professors and thank them for their efforts. I have applied what I learned here, and hope they can visit.” It was heartbreaking thinking that he had held on to those very cards for fifteen long years, imagining that one day he would find a

chance to reach out. He made an enthusiastic pitch on why Choson Exchange should conduct programs in Rason: “We are in a special zone. We have experience with what your workshop leaders teach. We can implement what we learn!”

We toured several investment projects that afternoon. At one I asked the Chinese manager about the problems they faced. The manager complained of two problems: that electricity was expensive and that they had a large number of job vacancies. The first problem was hard to solve, but my guide was shocked by the second because, he said, people were looking for jobs. He mentioned that he would look into it. (Instant Choson Exchange impact!)

I left the next day. I waited a while for the North Koreans to hand me a bill for the transport, but it never came. Instead, I left a bunch of Snickers with the driver and my host. “Come back soon,” they chirped.

Back in Yanji, the Rason representative office asked me to meet again. He had done his research on Choson Exchange and was excited at the prospect of training and our focus on young professionals: “You are young. I am young,” he said. “We should be working together!”

**FOCUS ON...**

**HYESAN**

## *Hyesan Roundtable Q&A with Three North Korean Refugees<sup>1</sup>*

*By Brian Gleason*

Three North Korean refugees from the northerly provincial center of Hyesan in Ryanggang Province agreed to sit down and answer Sino-NK's questions about their hometown. The method was semi-structured: after each question the interviewees took turns to provide an initial response, and then the group filled in additional details if they felt it was necessary. Once the group had reached a consensus that the question had been sufficiently discussed, they moved to the next question. Therefore, the three interviewees were not all obliged to respond to every question. Names of the interviewees have been changed.

### **The Interviewees**

- Young-min: Male, age 27; arrived in South Korea in 2010.  
Socioeconomic status: Slightly above average ["My father had a position in the North Korean military so we get food and other things we wanted."]
- Jin-ok: Female, age 32; arrived in South Korea in 2007.  
Socioeconomic status: Middle class.
- Sung-ok: Female, age 51; arrived in South Korea in 2009.  
Socioeconomic status: Working class.

1 Interviews in this essay were conducted in Korean. Transcripts were later translated by Robert Lauer.





*Pochonbo Battle Monument. (Photo: Anonymous)*



*Pictures of Hyesan taken in 2010 from the border in China. (Photos: Anonymous)*

***Q1:** Please give us a comparative analysis of Hyesan in the 1980s, 1990s, 2000s, and today. What were the physical changes within the city? Were there any changes in the way people viewed the regime?*

**Young-min:** In the early 1980s the local authorities started building apartments and houses in several districts in Hyesan under a new project called “Development of a New City.” This project was expanded in the mid-1980s with the construction of a massive housing complex in Yeonbong, a museum of the revolution, an art theater, an international hotel and other developments, as well as the remodeling and expansion of the existing stadium.<sup>2</sup>

At this time, most people believed in the regime, and if you spoke negatively about it, especially the leadership, then you would be sent to a political concentration camp, in some cases with your whole family; three generations of them, in fact, depending on the gravity of your comments.

Later, in the 1990s, the authorities couldn’t continue to build apartments and houses because of the deteriorating economic situation. The housing conditions actually started to get worse; government programs stopped because of the collapsing public

2 According to KCNA, on July 30, 1989, the North Korean authorities held a rally in Hyesan Main Square related to “the development of a new city.” There they made a public announcement: “We are going to build terraced houses in areas like Yeonbong and Wiyeon with more than 10,000 homes, and will build a museum of revolution, a palace of the students and youth, an art theater, circus theater, synthesized bathhouse, and a medical university, while simultaneously remodeling and expanding the stadium in Hyesan. We will also construct a synthesized gymnastic-building equipped with ice and swimming facilities near the stadium.”

distribution system, meaning that the local authorities couldn't repair them regularly.

By this time, since a lot of people were suffering from starvation, mindsets started changing; people realized the importance of money and started running their own businesses. That's why, although many innocent people were starving, a middle class began to grow, too.

In the mid-2000s, the authorities resumed building houses and apartments; for instance, an art theater was built in Hyesan. At the beginning it was called "Art Theater of Kim Jong-suk, Mother of Kim Jong-il," but later, after Kim Jong-il's inspection, its name was changed to "Art Theater of Hyesan." In any case, the quality of houses and apartments stayed very poor because construction workers weren't complying with construction standards. They used too much sand and not enough cement to make their concrete because they wanted to sell the extra cement in the market to make money. Of course this was technically illegal, but most ignored the safety regulations. That's why people worried about moving into the new houses built in the mid-2000s.<sup>3</sup>

Of course, by this time the influx of South Korean dramas and movies was immensely affecting people's minds. They were viewing the world from a new perspective. Before the famine many people would emphasize the importance of loyalty to the regime. In the past, North Korean men had to fulfill at least one of the following three standards to



*Hyesan Railway Station. (Photo: Anonymous)*

be highly regarded by North Korean women: military service of seven to 10 years, membership of the Korean Worker's Party, and/or a university degree. These days, the most important consideration is the ability to make money. Women also value men who have family abroad and/or rich parents.

**Jin-ok:** I think the city I experienced in the 1980s was better than the one of the 2000s. By the late 1990s there were hardly any new buildings being built, and the existing buildings were either losing their color or becoming dilapidated. During the 2000s more apartments and public facilities were built, but there really was not a big difference between the 1980s and 2000s. That being said, while the residents of Hyesan harbored unconditional loyalty to the government in the 1980s, the great famine and information flowing in from the outside world thereafter caused a great number to distrust the government.

**Sung-ok:** There were no differences in the city between the 1980s and 2000s. Towards the late

<sup>3</sup> Beginning in May 2013, the authorities started doing reinforcement work on the only bridge that connects Hyesan, with Changbai, China. Most of Hyesan's official trade is conducted via this bridge in cooperation with the local Chinese authorities.

2000s construction began on apartments, but the construction process went very slowly because there was a lack of construction materials.

Hyesan residents all know about the outside world because of the influx of South Korean movies, dramas and music; however, no one dares to talk about the outside world in public. If they did, they would face severe punishment from the government, so people are very careful. Instead, they talk about their discontent with those very close to them, or with relatives.

***Q2: Has life in Hyesan been getting better? Please discuss education, government-imposed burdens, access to food, and any other relevant information.***

**Young-min:** Many students from the middle class feel burdened since their school and university authorities demand cash, gasoline, cement, scrap metal, and other kinds of payment. At the same time, private tutors (teaching Chinese, English, music, etc.) are also popular with the rich elite. The government continuously imposes burdens on schools and universities, too, especially via people's units (인민반; *inminban*), for instance repairing roads for the government.

As far as food is concerned, it all depends on class: for the elites and business class the situation is much better than for other people living in the countryside, or on farms.

**Jin-ok:** I think that the privileges the government enjoys and its demands toward Hyesan residents are the same as in the past. Moreover, I believe that the situation has worsened.

I would estimate that the quality of education increased somewhat in the 2000s compared to the 1980s or 1990s. During the 1990s, the quality of education seems to have significantly deteriorated because even some of the teachers were not able to go to school. From the 2000s, the general condition of Hyesan improved so the quality of education seems to have improved as well. I reckon that employment was more difficult in the 2000s than in the past. Most Hyesan residents earn a living as traders or through smuggling, while there are relatively few people who work for government offices. They give money to their companies and use the time they earn to do their own work.

The word "freedom" has no meaning in North Korea, no matter where you are. That being said, the rapid spread of capitalist thought among the young people of Hyesan probably makes them freer in thought than those in other regions of the country.

**Sung-ok:** The government's restrictions and controls over the people are more severe than in the 1980s and 2000s. Misconduct by the government and authorities has gotten worse as life in general has become more difficult, and the authorities are abusing their power to do things that only benefit themselves. The quality of education plummeted in the 2000s compared to the 1980s.

Living is so much more difficult now than it was in the 1980s that teachers make only a cursory effort to teach their students. In terms of jobs, many factories in North Korea closed down in the 2000s, so many lost their jobs and thronged to the markets to earn money. In terms of food, while living conditions in the 1980s were good, by the 2000s the gap



between the haves and the have-nots had become so severe that those earning money could eat well while those who couldn't have led much more difficult lives.

I think that the government's intense control over the people in the 1980s has now loosened considerably. In the past, the rule of law intervened in all parts of society, but by the 2000s the government had lost some of its control over the people and they could enjoy more freedom than in the past.

**Q3: Did the Kim Jong-il era bring change to Hyesan?**

**Jin-ok:** I would call the Kim Jong-il era a major period of transition, one that got the people of the city to distrust the North Korean government.

**Sung-ok:** The Kim Jong-il era created a great deal of discontent among Hyesan people toward Kim Jong-il. During the Kim Il-sung era there was nothing like the horrible situation of the famine, so people would commonly compare the two leaders. That being said, they could not publicly voice their complaints for fear of the government. Instead, people would whisper to each other about their discontent with those around them in the markets.

**Q4: Hyesan is a frontier town: can it be compared to inland areas of North Korea? How is it different?**

**Jin-ok:** Compared to other areas of North Korea, Hyesan has a relatively large amount of money floating around. People like to say that living there is second best to living in Pyongyang. I think that trade and smuggling with China has made the quality of



A truck, which observers report is rarely operational, sits in front of a monument to the eternal life of Kim Il-sung. The so-called "Tower of Eternal Life" (영생탑; yeongsang-tap) is flanked by further propaganda slogans. (Photo: Anonymous)

life there better, and has led people to have more freedom than the interior regions.

**Sung-ok:** Hyesan's economic conditions are better compared to interior regions simply because it is near the border. Frequently, flour and other food or feed for animals is brought over from China, but these things are not generally available to locals. When people from interior regions come to Hyesan they say that it looks like a really good place to live.

**Q5: How do people from rural areas of Ryanggang Province view Hyesan? Is it a relatively good place to live or not?**

**Jin-ok:** People from areas other than Hyesan think it is a really, really great place to live, but it is practically impossible for them to move there or become residents of the city. They cannot even dream of living there. The system in North Korea forces people who are residents of the countryside to live

their entire lives in that place, so they cannot switch their residence to the city. This shows how restricted movement is.

It is also difficult for people living in cities in other regions to move to Hyesan. Hyesan is on the border with China so it is difficult to move into the city and the process of acquiring a pass to travel there is also exceptionally complicated. However, it is possible to get a pass if you have enough wealth to bribe government officials.

**Sung-ok:** In the countryside, no matter how hard someone works it is impossible to earn a profit, and because farmers have to give all their money to the government their lives are always difficult. Farmers in the Hyesan region can smuggle quite a lot, and they are envious of the residents of Hyesan City, who can sit in the market and sell items quite freely.

***Q6: How do people from Hyesan view people from Pyongyang, and how do they view the capital itself?***

**Jin-ok:** Pyongyang is the capital of North Korea, and in the minds of Hyesan city residents Pyongyang is where everyone really wants to live. Hyesan residents are envious of Pyongyang residents, while people from other regions are envious of those in Hyesan.

**Sung-ok:** When Kim Il-sung was alive, Pyongyang was the city where everyone wanted to live. But during the Kim Jong-il era, people believed that the lives of Pyongyang residents were actually more

difficult and lacked the freedom of those in other regions. So, people in Hyesan these days do not have so many illusions about the lives and people of Pyongyang.

***Q7: Is there any additional information that we should know about Hyesan?***

**Young-min:** There are a number of social censorship groups in Hyesan. They are made up of people recruited from the provinces and Pyongyang who have to crack down on so called “anti-socialist activities” like smuggling, spreading foreign videos and materials, CDs, USB sticks, and other bootlegged items. Unemployment is also a big problem in Hyesan, as well as crystal meth.

**Jin-ok:** Around 60 to 70 percent of the people of Hyesan have accumulated a good deal of money. Several years ago an apartment building in Hyesan collapsed and a whole load of dollars was found in the rubble. Hyesan is the hometown of Kim Jong-il and is under the control of the central government, so Kim Jong-il cared a lot about what happened in the city. Hyesan is located on the border and in the 1990s Kim Jong-il said that the “Fatherland will be united even without the youth of Hyesan.” This was when the youth of the city began to move away from North Korean socialism and their loyalty toward the government faltered. This shows how the thinking of Hyesan residents is more open compared to other regions.

# **PART THREE**

## **ESSAYS AND COMMENTARIES**

## *China's Struggle with North Korean Meth Production*

*By Nick Miller*

Methamphetamine production and use in both North Korea and China is a growing problem for the region. Meth, or “bingdu” as it is colloquially known, has reached epidemic proportions from state-run<sup>1</sup> production facilities to underground kitchens. It was originally manufactured as an export to China in the 1990s and 2000s, as the state sought new sources of income to sustain its ailing system.<sup>2</sup>

According to Kim Seok-hyang, one of the co-authors of “A New Face of North Korean Drug Use: Upsurge in Methamphetamine Abuse Across the Northern Areas of North Korea,” the drug addiction rate within the population is estimated to be as high as 40–50 percent, with every adult having consumed the drug at least once.<sup>3</sup> Production is widespread, from the North via the Tumen River to Northeast China (Hunchun, Longjing, Helong) and then down toward to Shandong, Tianjin, and Beijing.<sup>4</sup> The key areas for drug transportation of meth are said to be the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture and Changbai Korean Autonomous Zone within Jilin Province and Dandong in Liaoning Province.

In South Hamkyung, the Chongjin Nanam Pharmaceutical Factory served as the center for illicit drug production during the 1980s and 1990s creating opium for Kim Jong-il’s “white bellflower campaign.” After the focus became meth production, the North Korean government moved production to Hamheung, which became

- 1 It is unwise to speak in general terms of “government-run” production as if it were clear-cut. In the 1990s, many North Korean state functions declined to near-collapse, and the grey zone between official and unofficial economic actions grew markedly. However, there was, and remains, clear acquiescence to the manufacture and export of drugs by individuals with power derived from positions in the state hierarchy, at the very least.
- 2 Robert Smith and Zoe Chace, “[Drug Dealing, Counterfeiting, Smuggling: How North Korea Makes Money](#),” *NPR*, August 11, 2011.
- 3 Jason Strother, “[North Korea Grapples With Crystal-Meth Epidemic](#),” *Wall Street Journal Asia*, August 20, 2013.
- 4 Yong-an Zhang, “[Drug Trafficking from North Korea: Implications for Chinese Policy](#),” *Brookings Institution*, December 3, 2010.



the trusted source of quality for those within Pyongyang, Sinuiju, and Chongjin.<sup>5</sup> Hamheung was one of the top chemical industrial centers in North Korea, with Hamheung Chemical Industry College, Heungnam Fertilizer Factory, and Heungnam Pharmaceutical Factory located in the region.<sup>6</sup> It is common knowledge amongst Chinese businessmen who do business in North Korea that Hamheung is one of the main centers for North Korean illicit drug production. The drugs sold from Hamheung go between \$9,000–\$10,000/kilo, and are resold for three times that price within China.

Meanwhile, most of the drug users in North Korea, according to traders,<sup>7</sup> are in Pyongyang, Hamheung, and South Hamkyung Province. The average citizen turns to drugs because of a lack of healthcare within the country and concomitant easy access. The most common abusers are long distance drivers, traders, and security agents, or so it is said.<sup>8</sup>

For the average citizen, meth abuse is done in order to control all kinds of ailments. The North Korean security apparatus has its own addiction problem, with reports that everyone from low-level security officials to high-ranking officials been struggling with addiction despite a ban on its use by Kim Jong-un.<sup>9</sup>

North Korea is not solely focused on selling meth in China, either; there have been attempts to move it across the world using diplomats as couriers. In 2004, the Turkish authorities arrested two North Korean diplomats for trafficking 700,000 pills of fenethylline, a synthetic drug, via diplomatic cars.<sup>10</sup> In 2013, South Korea's Chosun Ilbo cited an unverified report that North Korea had sent illegal drugs to its embassies in Eastern Europe in December 2012 to harvest the profits by April 2013. Further, a North Korean defector supposedly claimed that the government had ordered overseas diplomats to raise \$300,000 in order to show their loyalty to the state by April 15, the birthday of Kim Il-sung.<sup>11</sup>

It should be noted that there have also been reports of much reduced state involvement in narcotics production in North Korea. Officially, researchers Yun Minwoo and Eunyoung Kim, and a 2011 US State Department Report on International Narcotics Control Strategy, have concluded that the state production of narcotics has been scaled down, and that this has led to the rise of private production to fill the gap.<sup>12</sup> A number of anonymous sources recently told Christopher Green that, as ever, the truth is somewhere in the middle. In other words, the international community is aware of continuing, moderate state-led production of narcotics in North Korea, but does not currently wish to expend scarce resources on addressing the issue.<sup>13</sup>

5 Kim Min Se, "[Philopon, a Panacea for North Korean People](#)," *Daily NK*, July 14, 2007 and Kim Min Se, "[Chinese Government Demands Abolition of North Korean Drug](#)," *Daily NK*, July 17, 2007.

6 Kim Min Se, "[Foreign Sales of Drugs Decline, North Korean Citizens Surface as Consumers](#)," *Daily NK*, July 17, 2007.

7 "[Philopon, a Panacea for North Korean People](#)," *Daily NK*, 2007.

8 Kim Min Se, "[Drug Addiction Worsens Amidst Tradesmen](#)," *Daily NK*, July 16, 2007.

9 "[Study finds North Korea hit by methamphetamine drug epidemic](#)," *ABC (Australia)*, August 29, 2013.

10 "[Turkey Arrests Two North Korean Diplomats in Seizure of Drug](#)," *Turkish Weekly*, December 9, 2004.

11 "[N.Korean Diplomats 'Sell Millions of Dollars Worth of Drugs'](#)," *Chosun Ilbo*, March 20, 2013.

12 [2011 INCSR: Country Reports – Moldova through Singapore](#). Report for US Department of State, March 3, 2011. See entry for "North Korea."

13 Sources withheld for security reasons.

## Breaking Bad

The research done by Andrei Lankov and Kim Seok-hyang suggests, meanwhile, that the scaling back of production at the state level led to the growth of private production in 2004–2005.<sup>14</sup> These independent producers started in the Hamheung region and spread throughout the country. These semi-independent operations employed the laid off technicians and scientists who produced the government's illicit meth.<sup>15</sup>

The spread of private meth production is attributed by North Korean defectors to collusion between Chinese and North Korean organized criminal enterprises with the Chinese providing North Koreans access to the raw materials (ephedrine and phenylacetone) that are difficult to get in North Korea, and because the fumes from the production would be too noticeable in the densely populated cities of China. The North Korean gangs would usually produce in the old dilapidated factories and smuggle the product back into China. The risk for illicit production is far less in North Korea than China as the defectors commented that with the high level of corruption within the government it is easily dealt with bribes.<sup>16</sup>

The widespread meth use occurred in three waves starting in 2004–2005, hitting the children of elites, state officials, and foreign traders to help them keep up with their workloads. The decline of the state surveillance system within North Korea is attributed to the spread of meth use within the country. Meth use was seen as a sign of elite privilege and it would be used in the restaurants after a meal like you would have a cup of coffee or men would use it to woo women as a way to show that they had wealth.<sup>17</sup>

Eventually the meth use spread to the lower economic classes and the youth to manage medical problems and for recreational use. The usage of meth amongst the youth was attributed to the fact they saw how their parents and grandparents to help them overcome physical hardships used it. While it is unknown how many users there are within North Korea it seems from the interviews of North Korean defectors that meth usage is widespread across all economic classes and is no longer the drug of the elites. Within North Hamgyong province where most of the defectors who were interviewed came from the most frequent users were students and youths.<sup>18</sup>

The North Korean government has been attempting to stem the problem through education and the prosecution of drug producers. However, defectors say that this education does not focus on any of the health risks involved in drug use, but rather on how drug use hurts the state. Drug producers, if caught, do not face harsh penalties, usually a jail sentence of two years, even ignoring the fact that drugs can be used to pay bribes. Lankov and Kim paint a dire picture for the North Korean government: a growing drug epidemic on top of a non-existent

14 Andrei Lankov and Kim Seok-hyang, "[A New Face of North Korean Drug Use: Upsurge in Methamphetamine Abuse Across the Northern Areas of North Korea](#)," *North Korea Review* 9, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 45-60.

15 State protection would be needed for any such operation at a minimum, so it cannot be called "private" in the truest sense of the word.

16 Lankov and Kim, "A New Face of North Korean Drug Use," 52-53.

17 Minwoo Yun and Eunyong Kim, "[Evolution of North Korean Drug Trafficking: State Control to Private Participation](#)," *North Korea Review* 6, no. 2 (Fall 2010): 55-64.

18 Lankov and Kim, "A New Face of North Korean Drug Use," 55-56.

health system and lack of food security.<sup>19</sup>

### China's Management of North Korean Drugs

In 2011, Chinese officials announced a seizure of \$60 million dollars of illegal drugs from North Korea. This was the first time the Chinese government had acknowledged the problem publicly. A diplomatic source told Dong-a Ilbo that North Korean drug trafficking and production had incensed the Chinese government.<sup>20</sup> In an effort to show meaningful intent, Chinese state media called for a war on drugs and broadcast trials of drug traffickers. However, one Chinese-North Korean businessman told Daily NK that the crackdown within China had led to increased domestic consumption.<sup>21</sup>

The Chinese border city of Yanji, which is within 50 miles of the Sino-North Korean border, has been hit hardest by the meth trade from North Korea. Yanji is a crossroads, a place that houses smugglers, refugees, organized crime, and evangelical Christians seeking to save the souls of North Koreans. In 1991 it had only had 44 registered drug addicts, but by 2010 there were 2,100. In Jilin Province as a whole there were 10,000 registered addicts by 2010. These may be small numbers compared to total populations, but they are constantly rising.<sup>22</sup>

The Chinese National Narcotics Control Commission (NNCC) has recognized that the Jilin Province border serves as one the key battlefields, but the problem in managing a successful counter-narcotic policy, as Yong-an Zhang contends, is that China's success in stopping North Korean illicit drug production will always remain a secondary goal in Chinese foreign policy towards North Korea as the Chinese leadership wants to maintain generally good relations and not risk further instability in the region.<sup>23</sup>

Dr. Zhang's suggestions to the Chinese government on how to curb North Korean drug production, such as China taking a more proactive stance with North Korea by providing assistance both in technology and joint training to stop the smuggling, does not seem like a feasible solution if there is any level of official acquiescence to drug production involved.

It is also doubtful whether China would support a call for a regional international counter-narcotic organization focused on dealing with North Korea. China does not want to lose face vis-à-vis its inability to manage North Korea, and nor does it want to lose any access to sensitive information regarding what goes on within the country. If China took part in such international security projects it would likely enrage the North Korean leadership. This option would untenable to the leaders within China Politburo Standing Committee, as they likely see the drug problem as a nuisance. A nuisance, perhaps, but, once again, it is not one that is worth the risk of setting off the powder keg between the two countries. As the Chinese government sees the drug trade from North Korea

19 Ibid., 57-58.

20 "NK's massive drug trafficking angers China: source," *Dong-a Ilbo*, July 5, 2011.

21 Kim Min Se, "Chinese Government Demands Abolition of North Korean Drug," *Daily NK*, July 17, 2007.

22 Yong-an Zhang, "Drug Trafficking from North Korea: Implications for Chinese Policy," *Brookings Institution*, December 3, 2010.

23 Ibid.

as not a high enough security risk it is only going to continue as it remains a highly profitable industry for the Chinese mafia who is assisting the North Korean Ministry of State Security's Escort Command in the distribution of narcotics into Japan and Southeast Asia. The North Korean government will continue the manufacturing as the Escort Command uses the profits taken from the drug trade to increase the private funds of Kim Jong-un. Until the Chinese government begins to crack down harshly on the drug trade along the border it will only continue to spread throughout East Asia unchecked.



## *The People of Kilju County Do Not Want Nuclear Tests<sup>1</sup>*

*By Kim Joo Il*

In 2013, the entire world voiced concern over North Korea's third nuclear test. The North Korean authorities may brag that they succeeded in launching the Unha-3 and its satellite payload into orbit with domestic technology; however, the probability is that this "satellite" was nothing less than a long-range missile test, and this led the UN Security Council to unanimously pass a resolution slapping more sanctions on North Korea.

North Korea condemned the passage of the UN Security Council resolution pursuant to the launch, and Kim Jong-un soon announced to a gathering of the Party Central Military Commission: "I have made an important Party policy decision to protect our country's security and sovereignty." Then, on April 12, North Korea conducted its third nuclear test.

There are people who stay up at night worrying about both the third nuclear test and the rapid process of change in North Korea. These are the people who call Kilju County home.

These people always say that their concern for their families in Kilju County grew considerably after they escaped from North Korea and learned about the world. This is because they learned of the extraordinary pain of the Japanese survivors of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings, even after half a century had passed.<sup>2</sup>

Kim Guk-hwa, who escaped Kilju County in 2007, says that each time she hears about North Korea's nuclear tests on television she worries for her family there.

Kim says that ordinary North Koreans have usually heard of the Hiroshima incident, but are unaware of how terrible the aftereffects have been. They have been blinded by the North Korean authorities' official talk of sovereignty, and cannot fathom how exposed they are to radioactivity from the nuclear tests.

"The biggest victims are people living in Kilju County," she says. "Being from there, my stomach churns whenever I hear anything about nuclear tests."

Situated in North Hamgyung Province, Kilju County is a city-sized administrative unit of 10,320,000 square

1 This essay is based upon the personal experiences and reflections of Mr. Kim, a former soldier who escaped from North Korea in 2005 and has since gone on to an active career in North Korean human rights promotion based in the United Kingdom. The essay was first written in Korean and translated by Robert Lauler.

2 "Nukes and Peace," *Rodong Sinmun*, April 24, 2013.

km, but has a population of just 130,000. The Kilju Plateau is a mountainous area that stretches out like a traditional Korean folding screen. The mountains that stretch from east to west, from Eulong County in the northeast to the border of Baekam County in the west, are home to Mt. Mantap, which reaches up 2205m above sea level. Called the “father mountain” of Kilju County, Mt. Mantap is partnered by Mt. Jangdeok, the “mother mountain” in the southwest, and this is where the town (읍; *eup*) of Kilju is located.

Then there is the “mother river” of Kilju County. “Namdaecheon” (남대천; Namdae River) flows down from Mt. Mantap, curves around Mt. Jangdeok, and then heads out to the East Sea through Hwadae County. Living without functioning plumbing, the people of Kilju County still use subsurface wells supplied by Namdaecheon for their drinking water.

Defectors from the county argue that when the North Korean authorities conduct nuclear tests at their underground test facility in the village of Punggye-ri on Mt. Mantap, drinking water for nearby residents is exposed to high-level radioactivity.

Han Song-chol (an alias) left North Korea for political reasons some years after passing out of a military academy in Kilju County. He says it is perfectly possible that some Kilju County residents could be suffering from exposure to radioactivity flowing downstream following the first, second, and third nuclear tests.

Han points out that in a society like North Korea, victims have no one to whom they can speak because everyone is too atomized and disconnected. Thus, even if someone were suffering from an illness, he says, they would be unaware of whether that was from exposure to radiation or not. He calls on the international community to at least try and undertake an investigation into whether or not radiation exposure has occurred in the region.

Of course, the authorities would surely seek to isolate those suffering from the effects of radioactivity. Therefore, Han adds that it is imperative for the truth to be revealed even if this has to be done through secret routes used by defectors.

The North Korean dictatorship talks about “sovereignty” and cries out that it is the Korean people who are demanding these nuclear tests. But the fact of the matter is that ordinary North Koreans have no desire for them whatsoever. What ordinary North Korean would oppose the idea of using the vast sums of money spent on nuclear tests to resolve their food shortages? Who would ever welcome the spread of birth deformities and a host of other diseases caused by radiation exposure?

## *Developmental connectivity in the Tumen Triangle: Potato, “King of Crops”<sup>1</sup>*

*By Robert Winstanley-Chesters*

*“We want to live our own lives in our own way.”<sup>2</sup>*

Although located a continent away, development in the peripheral spaces of the United Kingdom is not entirely unlike that of the northern half of the Korean Peninsula, and nor are the challenges presented by individual and institutional agendas entirely novel. In the UK, peripheries and borderlands are abundant; Lord Leverhulme’s paternalistic and impositional conception of economic and environmental possibility in Stornoway and the Isle of Lewis at the turn of the twentieth century is fairly typical of grand schemes and projects in the marginal spaces of the British Isles. Development in the periphery of any nation can thus appear peripatetic, marked by hard-to-navigate realities and unsatisfactory outcomes.

Undeniably, the areas investigated by the Tumen Triangle Documentation Project were once regarded as peripheral, distant, and marginal spaces, though this has become much less true in recent times. Ryanggang Province is arguably the most peripheral and distant of the provinces of the Tumen borderland. Comprising much of the DPRK’s interior northern border with China, Ryanggang is mountainous and forested, regarded by Kim Il-sung as a safe space even in the throes of war. Representing as it does the border with China’s Changbai region, the province is about as far from Pyongyang and the institutional centers and structures of charismatic Kim-ism as one is likely to find.

This essay serves as a demonstration of the assertion that no matter how peripheral a space may be, developmental approaches can be enacted within it by both local institutions and national agendas.

1 Readers may find that some of the links to official North Korean documents are dead. This is a direct result of amendments to online archives made on the North Korean side following the purge of Jang Song-taek in December 2013.

2 John R. Gold and Margaret M. Gold, “To Be Free and Independent: Crofting, Popular Protest and Lord Leverhulme’s Hebridean Development Projects, 1917–25,” *Rural History* (1996), 191–206.

Within national industrial strategy, Ryanggang has long been regarded as dysfunctional, but is also home to a now operative copper mine,<sup>3</sup> the only such mine in North Korea. It is also key to the historical narrative of Kimist legitimacy due to the presence of the Mt. Baekdu<sup>4</sup> massif with its accompanying Korean genesis mythos and authority- and legitimacy-generating narratives of Kim Il-sung's guerrilla struggle and the birth of Kim Jong-il. Given the presence of Mt. Baekdu and wider knowledge of the topography of the Korean peninsula, it will not have surprised the reader to learn that the province is both highly mountainous and quite heavily forested. What might be surprising would be to learn if such a peripheral, marginal space played an important role within national political narratives.

While it is not possible to declare that the province and its provisional locus of power, Hyesan, have always been at the center of agricultural possibility in North Korea, narrative connections do start comparatively early. However, general systemization of these connections did not occur cohesively until the publication of Kim Il-sung's "Theses on the Socialist Rural Question in our Country"<sup>5</sup> in 1964.

However, what are termed "foundational events" in North Korea's developmental and agricultural sectors can be found prior to 1964. Examples include the Potong River Improvement Project in 1946 (foundation for the hydrological sector), or the tree planting on Munsu hill (also in 1946 and used as a foundational moment in the forestry sector).<sup>6</sup> This is also true of Ryanggang Province.

1958 saw the publication of the text "Tasks of the Party Organizations in Ryanggang Province," ostensibly a recounting of an "inspection" tour made by Kim Il-sung in May of that year. Unlike a number of similar tours or moments of guidance in North Korean narratives, activities in the province appear to have deeply impressed the Great Leader, who stated that "considerable progress has been made so far in Ryanggang Province, which formerly was a backward region," and going on to cite "great achievements [which] have been made in all fields of politics, economy and culture."<sup>7</sup>

Ryanggang is marked out as needing to adopt a particularly local yield and production strategy, distinct from elsewhere in the North Korea of the time. Whereas the 1950s saw a great deal of focus on increasing the production of rice and grain in North Korean agriculture, Ryanggang was to adopt measures seen much more recently in the North's media output, and which can be thematically connected to this earlier era, establishing a line of narrative connectivity stretching back comfortably far.

In short, Ryanggang was to focus on the realm of the tuber. In his marked observational style, Kim noted: "Potato is a high-yielding crop in Ryanggang Province. In this province potato, not maize is the king crop of dry

3 ["China-N.Korea JV starts production at copper mine."](#) *Reuters*, September 20, 2011.

4 Benoit Berthelier, ["Symbolic Truth: Epic, Legends, and the Making of the Baekdusan Generals,"](#) *Sino-NK*, May 17, 2013.

5 Robert Winstanley-Chesters, ["Treasured Swords Redux: \(Re\)Construction and the 'Rural Theses' of 1964,"](#) *Sino-NK*, June 21, 2013.

6 Robert Winstanley-Chesters, ["Forests as Spaces of Revolution and Resistance: Thoughts on Arboreal Comradeship on a Divided Peninsula,"](#) *Sino-NK*, June 28, 2013.

7 Kim Il-sung, *Tasks of the Party Organizations in Ryanggang Province* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1958), 219.



fields.”<sup>8</sup> It seems as if farmers, cooperatives and collectives had previously utilized this non-normative agricultural output goal (non-normative in the context of East Asia), but not to the extent required by Kim: “In plays and sketches you presented for us, you boasted so much about your potatoes. Although you are very proud of your potatoes, the area allotted to potato crops is small.”<sup>9</sup> Accordingly, agriculturalists and their institutions in Ryanggang are to disregard the non-normative element of this approach. (“Some people seem to be become baffled and worried when they hear me saying this [and make production of tuber the key goals].”<sup>10</sup> Kim Il-sung went so far as to call for all land (with the exception of “the areas marked for industrial crops”) to be planted with potatoes.<sup>11</sup>

North Korean state narratives are marked by repetitive practice and connectivity between sectors. Thus, just as in the forestry sector, the agricultural sector of Ryanggang must “learn by doing” (or by not doing as the case may be). Kim Il-sung’s next interaction would be on much more combative terms, as, similar to foundational events or themes, secondary visits of chastisement are familiar in North Korean narratives.

Four years later, a return visit is documented in the forceful “Tasks of the Party Organizations in Ryanggang Province” from August 1963 (the same title), the introduction to which asserts that “you should not become complacent with successes already registered...you should maintain the spirit of advance and continue to battle hard.”<sup>12</sup> While it seems that for the most part Kim was satisfied with developments, in the agricultural field it was a different matter: the section addressing the sector begins with the statement “the output of Ryanggang Province in negligible compared with that of other provinces.”<sup>13</sup> Potato development has not apparently been at the forefront of institutional priorities within the province, or at least not in the way envisaged by Kim. In fact Kim refers to his previous visit for contrast “potatoes must not be planted without considering the consequences. I once said that the potato was king of the dry-field crops.”<sup>14</sup> Agricultural workers have entirely misunderstood Kim’s direction and emphasis so that “Ryanggang Province grows it [potatoes] even in rice paddies and maize fields. This should not be done,” and requires reiteration of the policy with extra explanation: “You should not plant potatoes in areas where rice and maize grow well. The potato is king of dry-field crops in the highlands where grain does not grow well.”<sup>15</sup>

1964’s “Rural Theses on the Socialist Rural Question” principally focused on the systematization of productive and resource-driven agricultural approaches, and although it included calls for the adoption of a wider repertoire of productive strategies it did not address peripheral spaces or non-normative markets or production. Following the publication in May of 1964 of “Let Us Make Better Use of Mountains and Rivers,” Kim Il-sung

8 Kim, *Tasks of the Party Organizations in Ryanggang Province* (1958), 231.

9 Ibid., 231.

10 Ibid., 232.

11 Ibid., 231.

12 Kim Il-sung, *Tasks of the Party Organisations in Ryanggang Province* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1963), 276.

13 Kim, *Tasks of the Party Organisations in Ryanggang Province* (1963), 277.

14 Ibid., 291.

15 Ibid.

embedded the “Rural Theses” approach within the forestry sector and the wilder geographies of North Korea, and in December the text “For the Development of Agriculture in Ryanggang Province” appeared.

Within that, institutional focus shifted from direct focus on potato focused agriculture, apparently at the behest of “scientificization” and “technicalization,” key themes of the Theses. In light of the provincial authorities continued failure to follow Kim Il-sung’s direction (“this province has not carried out the Party’s policy thoroughly and has failed to improve farming methods. Because farmers have continued to grow only potatoes on land where they can cultivate other grain crops, they have been unable to produce sufficient grain. Even the potato crop has been attacked by disease and its seeds have degenerated.”<sup>16</sup>) the institutions of Ryanggang are further instructed to take light of developments in agricultural research which have begun to focus expertise on agricultural practice at altitude. Intriguingly under this new industrial-scientific approach, it is grains and legume crops that are relegated to a different category of marginal land; “as a matter of course, in those areas which have a lower altitude than 1000 meters above sea level you should continue to grow...potatoes widely.”<sup>17</sup>

As perhaps is now common knowledge, institutional and charismatic narratives have a tendency to contradict each other, and hence Ryanggang’s potato agriculture appearance in 1974’s “Let us Make Ryanggang Province a Beautiful Paradise” firstly features a slightly bizarre anecdote from Kim Il-sung’s guerrilla campaigning, in which the Great Leader has a disappointing, difficult encounter with the potato: “During the anti-Japanese armed struggle I lived on nothing but potatoes at the secret camp of the Tenth Regiment. I stayed with the regiment for nearly one month...they were reasonably good for a few days, but later it was hard to eat them.”<sup>18</sup> However even in the mid 1970’s potatoes are still in institutional focus in the context of the province; as Kim wrote, “it would be desirable to plant them in wide areas because their yield is high...your province should make [potato] syrup and supply it to the children and working people in the province, including the workers in the forestry and mining sectors, and to the visitors to the old revolutionary battlefields.”<sup>19</sup>

The level of relevance of potato production within institutional and narrative priorities and accompanying tuber-related science is difficult to ascertain in the decline of the 1980s and the chaos of the 1990s. However, if there is one thing in North Korean charismatic politics that is more predictable than the tendency towards repetition, it is the utilizable nature of themes from previous Kimist eras in contemporary times. It would not thus be surprising if Ryanggang echoed the institutional memory and memorialization of the province under Kim Il-sung in the era of Kim Jong-un the Young Generalissimo.

The first stage in the recovery of a dormant theme is its reiteration under a previous incarnation of Kimist legitimacy and authority. Kim Jong-il, according to this author’s reading, had very little to say on the matter of

16 Kim Il-sung, *Let us Make Better Use of Mountains and Rivers* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1964), 410.

17 Ibid., 416.

18 Kim Il-sung, *Let us Make Ryanggang Province a Beautiful Paradise* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1974), 301.

19 Ibid., 304.

potato production, the narratives addressing tuber husbandry under the Dear Leader's reign being extremely hard to follow. However, recently narrative connections began to be made in this area.

It is recounted, for example, that Kim Jong-il made a visit in October 1998 to Taehongdan County in Ryanggang during which he “initiated a proposal on bringing about a radical turn in potato farming” and “set the county as a model in potato farming and put forward tasks and ways for a leap in potato farming.”<sup>20</sup> This visit and this desire to see potato production focused on the peripheral spaces of the Tumen Triangle once more. The necessary text setting all of this out is referred to as “On Bringing about a Revolution in Potato Farming.” Aside from the determination to initiate and drive development in a conventional yield-based direction, potatoes and Ryanggang are connected here with North Korea's almost cultic or fetishistic approach to science and research. Further reportage notes this: “there is in Taehongdan County a well-furnished Potato Research Institute under the Academy of Agricultural Science, which solves the issue of potato seeds in our own way.”<sup>21</sup>

Of course the next important element of this rediscovery and repositioning is that the themes be brought into the present day, preferably in the same geographical locale and physical space. Hence in May of 2012 Rodong Sinmun reported that “Potato planting began in Taehongdan Plain, Ryanggang Province,” making sure of course to note that “the officials of the ministries and national institutions also went down to the fields to help the farmers in carrying out the behests of leader Kim Jong Il.”<sup>22</sup>

Unlike the almost random inculcation of interest in potatoes that marked the drive and development of the sector initially under Kim Il-sung (in 1958), this is an element that not only echoes the assertions and apparent considerations of both previous Kims, but also the framework instituted under the 1964 Rural Theses which instigated concern for scientific development. Taehongdan and Ryanggang's exploits in the field of potato development would be harnessed by the need for all of it to at least appear possessed of a deep commitment to empiricism and evidence-based practice. Wonsan University of Agriculture's “Bio-Engineering Institute,” for instance, is noted in the narrative as having “succeeded in breeding a new species of potato, which contains much starch and makes it possible to raise the per-hectare yield by far, pooling their wisdom and efforts.”<sup>23</sup> There are other similar appearances by Pyongyang's “Agro-Biological Institute,” which has been “culturing virus-free potato tissues in a scientific and technological way.”<sup>24</sup>

North Korea's “Byungjin line” approach can seem a long way away from the potato fields of Ryanggang; however, the line's parallel conception of political, ideological and institutional formation, utilizing as it does twin themes of nuclear deterrent strength and scientific/technological development, allows such apparently peripheral elements as potato production in the Tumen Triangle to both contribute to and be directed by the line.<sup>25</sup>

20 “[Model in Potato Farming](#),” *Rodong Sinmun*, January 10, 2013.

21 Ibid.

22 “[Potato Planting Begins](#),” *Rodong Sinmun*, March 5, 2012.

23 “[More Research Successes](#),” *Rodong Sinmun*, March 22, 2013.

24 “[At Agro-Biological Institute](#),” *Rodong Sinmun*, June 13, 2013.

25 Heonik Kwon, “[North Korea's New Legacy Politics](#),” *e-IR*, May 16, 2013.

The focus on scientific and technological ways of approach potato and tuber research, based in the paradigms of pure science but harnessed by goals of capacity increase and efficiency, is also driven by a long asserted desire to embed multi-functionality in productive sectors. Hence, perhaps, the potatoes emerging from the marginal earth of Ryanggang will not simply be consumed in the conventional manner, but through the efforts of “Byungjin science” adopt radically different forms. “The Foodstuff Institute of the Light Industrial Branch” for instance was recently recorded as having “added much to the variety of processed potatoes by producing sweet drink, lactic fermented sweet juice, lactic fermented carbonated juice with potato.”<sup>26</sup>

Ultimately what Byungjinization allows for and promotes by way of its multi-stranded development approach has always been possible and desired in the North Korean institutional mind. As we can see from the case of Ryanggang up in the Tumen Triangle and developments surrounding the production, research, and development of tuber-focused agriculture, marginal and peripheral spaces can always be utilized and harnessed for the requirements of narrative development. The narrative of the anti-Japanese guerrilla struggle undertaken by Kim Il-sung, from which Kimism draws much of its authority and which serves as the genesis myth and mythos for the North Korean political, reflects this most of all, but marginal narratives such as potato production at Taehongdan equally reflect this tendency. Ryanggang’s potatoes and other counties and provinces of the Tumen Triangle may indeed be a long way from the institutional and narrative heart of the nation in Pyongyang, but, in terms of narrative, the Tumen Triangle and its developmental spaces are right next door.

26 “[New Potato Beverage](#),” *Rodong Sinmun*, January 25, 2013.



## Yuanization Writ Large: *Daily NK* Confirms the Rush to RMB

by Christopher Green

On April 17, 2013, the Seoul-based Daily NK released a new video.<sup>1</sup> Produced in February that year, the film shows both official markets (장마당; *jangmadang*) and unofficial alley markets (골목장; *golmokjang*) in and around Hyesan, a major border city in Ryanggang Province. The film clearly shows not only the public sale of South Korean products—a source of fascination for domestic South Korean readers of Daily NK and other web-sites like it—but more importantly that the overwhelming majority of products on sale in the markets are priced not in North Korean Won (KPW) but in Chinese Yuan, and that most customers pay in *Renminbi*, too.

As such, the video lends great currency to a burgeoning trend that I first reported on for Sino-NK in January 2012 and again in March the same year,<sup>2</sup> but which has been underway for years: namely, the slow but steady movement toward the “yuanization” of North Korea. As I wrote that frigid January day in 2012, responding to concerns over the danger of an impending famine being voiced at the time:

“I actually wonder whether [persons concerned about famine] are looking at the wrong signals. In other words, I wonder whether the Yuan has become so overwhelmingly ubiquitous that we can legitimately claim that North Korea has become the first ever “yuanized” state. Such a development would account for the fact that the price of rice denominated in North Korean Won is becoming entirely irrelevant on-the-ground because the buyers buy and the sellers sell in Chinese Yuan and, therefore, almost nobody is prepared to keep their savings in domestic currency.”<sup>3</sup> The true ubiquity of the Yuan (and the US Dollar) in North Korea remains a focus for research, and there is more to do in this regard, but the new video offers strong preliminary evidence that people across North

1 “[EXCLUSIVE] Border Cities Love Chinese Yuan,” Daily NK, April 17, 2013.

2 Christopher Green, “[Encroaching Devastation: Chris Green On Rice, Markets, and the Yuanization of North Korea](#),” *Sino-NK*, July 1, 2012.

3 Ibid.

Korea are strongly cognizant of the need to hold liquid assets in Chinese and/or American currency where possible.

Looking back, it is a trend that can be dated at least as far as 2002. The cause being that, contrary to prevailing wisdom, the economic reforms enacted in July of that year were neither universally welcome nor universally beneficial. In the analytical frame employed by pro-engagement analysts, the reforms, or “improvements” (개선; *kaeseon*) in the parlance of the North Korean side, raised incomes and prices in tandem, rebalancing the economy to better reflect the cost of production. However, the very act of increasing prices in this way was also inherently confiscatory, in that it heavily eroded the value of whatever savings in local currency may have existed at the time. While concomitant measures conferring modest autonomy on individual enterprises were indeed popular, the real lesson for any well-connected trader or other businessperson whose famine era market earnings were then held in North Korean Won was that they must henceforth shift to holdings in foreign currency.

The attraction to a North Korean trader of holding cash assets in Yuan or another foreign currency is self-evident, because the country suffers from increasingly intractable inflationary pressures. These are exacerbated by government choices,<sup>4</sup> but the ongoing tale of the Kaesong Industrial Complex offers another contemporary case in point. First and foremost, it is clear that the North Korean government sees Kaesong as a bargaining chip in political relations with the outside world, specifically South Korea, rather than as a source of hard currency income that they would be wise to ring-fence from political interference. This represents a cost of doing business in North Korea, one that companies are forced to factor into their calculations and most will eschew. It counteracts the low cost and relatively high level of education of the North Korean labor force, and makes North Korea an unattractive business destination.

Now, more than a decade after the 2002 changes, the Daily NK video shows the road down which North Korean society is inexorably heading. One source recently commented to me that in 2002 the number of people with access to foreign currency in Wonsan, a city in Kangwon Province, was “certainly not more than 10 percent.” Upon defection he lost touch with the region, which lies far from the Sino-North Korean border and its raft of Chinese cell phones. But more recent defectors from the city now say that what was 10 percent is now nearer 50 percent. Of course this is “anecdotal” of a kind that should be viewed with care and may indeed be uncomfortably imprecise, but the flow of history is nevertheless clear. The days when the North Korean state brought the free market to heel via the “7.1 economic management system improvement measure” (7.1 경제관리개선조치; *7.1 gyeongjae gwanli gaeseon jochi*) and “11.30 currency redenomination” (11.30 화폐개혁; *11.30 hwapye gaehyeok*) are surely numbered, if not already gone.

4 Ibid.



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