*The Wall Which Crumbles:*

*North Korea and the Outside World*

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The last 15 years have been a time of profound – if often underestimated – transformation of North Korean society. The official facade of the regime might remain the same, but almost everything else beyond this facade has changed – society, economy, worldview.

In the long run, none of these changes might prove to be as significant as the slow transformation of North Koreans’ ideas about the outside world. Gone are days when the North Korean populace swallowed the official propaganda which presented their country as an island of prosperity in an ocean of suffering and destitution. A more realistic picture of the world is emerging – and in the long run it will have serious consequences for the regime.

The present article traces the changes in the information environment of North Korea and mass perceptions of the outside world. In a nutshell, these changes can be described as a slow but accelerating decline of the self-imposed information isolation, which has for decades been a unique feature of North Korean society.

This article is not based on statistical data or other types of hard evidence which are usually used in social and political studies. There have been attempts to make relatively reliable estimates – like, say, the recent report by the Intermedia research group which attracted much international attention.[[1]](#footnote-1) However, all these findings should be taken with a grain of salt. When it comes to North Korea, such evidence is notoriously difficult to get – or, as Markus Noland nicely put it, one should not “trust any datum on North Korea that comes with a decimal point attached”.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The following article takes a different approach. It is largely based on the present author’s interactions with North Korean refugees (over the last two years, I have interviewed some 150 North Koreans). While the major focus was on the economic conditions of their lives and their coping strategies, their worldview and information environment have been mentioned very frequently – and became a foundation of this article.

LIVING BEHIND A WALL

All communist countries were remarkably unenthusiastic when it came to unauthorized exchanges and interaction with the outside world. They just did not want their common people to mingle with foreigners freely. This reluctance was often explained to the faithful by citing the threat of espionage, as well as worries about possible ideological contamination of simple-minded folks. These threats and worries were present, to be sure. But it seems that the ruling elite in the Communist states simply did not want their people to learn about the level of material abundance and political freedom enjoyed by the peoples of the developed world – hence restrictions on overseas travel, heavy censorship of foreign publications, jamming of broadcasts, and other similar measures which were routinely employed even by the most permissive of Communist states.

Even against such a backdrop, North Korea seems to be an exception. Virtually no other communist state has gone so far in enforcing and maintaining a self-imposed information blockade. North Korea might be the world’s only country where since the 1960s, it has been illegal to own a tunable radio set. All radio sets legally sold in North Korea must have fixed tuning, which allows people merely to listen to broadcasts from a small number of official stations. Officials regularly undertook random searches of private houses in order to make sure that people had not remade their radios into tunable sets.

Foreign publications, with the exception of technical manuals and some textbooks, cannot be owned privately, and in libraries foreign books and periodicals are stored in special sections, only to be accessed by those with the requisite security clearance. Interestingly, no exception was made for periodicals and publications coming from ostensibly friendly communist countries like China and the Soviet Union – both the Soviet *Pravda* and the Chinese *People’s Daily* were officially considered to be as subversive as *Choson Ilbo* or *The Wall Street Journal*.

A very small number of North Koreans were authorized to travel overseas until very recently. Interactions with foreigners inside the country was ill-advised and avoided by all prudent citizens; long-term foreign residents of Pyongyang (who never numbered more than a few hundred) lived in a virtual gilded cage and could interact only with North Koreans who had been pre-selected for the purpose by the North Korean authorities. They also had to deal with a long list of bans. In the mid-1980s, for example, when I lived in Pyongyang, foreigners were not allowed to visit private houses and most museums. For some reason, they also could not buy movie tickets and, of course, they could venture outside Pyongyang only with special prior permission.

These measures ensured that until the late 1990s, the average North Korean would know surprisingly little about life outside the borders of his or her country. One should also add that unusually strict control over internal movement also made North Koreans remarkably ignorant about conditions in other parts of their own country as well. Since 1969, private trips outside one’s native city or county of residence are impossible without the proper travel permit, which must be issued by the authorities in advance. [[3]](#footnote-3)

This self-isolation might appear to be excessive and paranoid, but as is often the case with North Korea, there is a sound, if somewhat ruthlessly Machiavellian logic behind these policies. Even compared to other communist countries, North Korea is remarkably vulnerable to the spread of information about the outside world.

One should keep in mind that North Korea is not a fundamentalist religious state. Its leadership’s claims of superiority are not based on their alleged ability/duty to keep the populace spiritually pure and hence ready for the wonders of the afterlife. Instead, North Korea’s leadership claims a knowledge of theories which when/if applied properly, will assure unprecedented socio-economic development and growth. In other words, the North Korean leadership does not promise the faithful the joys of paradise (like say unlimited amounts of sex with 72 ever willing virgins), but rather the wonders of modern technology and the abundance of food, clothes and household amenities.

Paradoxically, this is the area where North Korea’s leadership has failed in the most spectacular way. This epic failure is further emphasized by the incredible success enjoyed by North Korea’s twin, now affluent and free South Korea, which once was the agricultural backwater of the Korean peninsula. Depending on who is to be believed, the per capita income difference between the South and the North might be as much as 40:1, or at least 15:1[[4]](#footnote-4). Even if the latter “optimistic assumption” is to be believed, this still constitutes the largest difference in per capita income between two countries which share a land border. This gap continues to grow with the passage of time.

Therefore, the North Korean government has realized that stability in the country can be effectively maintained only so long as the vast majority of the population remains ignorant about the state of affairs in other countries, above all in South Korea – and this assumption seems to be well-based. This necessitates the above described self-isolation measures, which were first introduced, tellingly, in the mid-1960s, when the once backward South began to catch up with the North.

These policies were further strengthened by the harsh punishments which were given to people who were discovered seeking out contact with outsiders. Listening to foreign broadcasts, or in some cases, merely possessing a tunable radio set, is technically a political crime, which might lead to a few years in a concentration camp, followed by lifelong discrimination.[[5]](#footnote-5) One of the reasons why North Koreans were extremely reluctant to talk to a foreigner on the street was the assumption that any lengthy interactions with a foreigner would make a person the subject of an unpleasant and potentially dangerous investigation. As a result, in the 1970s, North Koreans were known to have virtually run away from such hazardous encounters (this is not the case anymore).

For a brief while, the system worked quite well. This was because, with the technologies available to North Koreans in the 1960s and 1970s, isolation was technically feasible. Therefore, North Koreans tended to accept what they were told by the official propaganda – being deprived of any alternatives, they hardly had a choice.

The official message was simple: North Korea was the best imaginable place to live. At the Kim Il Sung era the media told that inhabitants of the Communist bloc and Third World were doing relatively well, but their lives still were inferior to those of the lucky North Koreans. Things were worse in the countries of the West, above all, in the United States, the embodiment of all things evil. However, the worst place on earth to live was South Korea, ‘a land without light, a land without air’.

Until recently, the South was depicted as a land of terror and poverty where penniless students sold their blood to pay for their textbooks, and sadistic Yankees drove their tanks over Korean girls just for pleasure. The Year One textbook presents North Korea’s children with a terrifying picture: “A school principal in South Korea beats and drives from school a child who cannot pay his monthly fee on time”.[[6]](#footnote-6) In high school they learn that “Nowadays, South Korea is swamped with seven million unemployed. Countless people stand in queues in front of employment centers, but not even a small number of jobs is forthcoming. The factories are closing one after another, and in such a situation even people who have work do not know when they will be ousted from their position”.[[7]](#footnote-7) Needless to say, these stories are inventions, pure and simple: primary education in South Korea is free, and even in the worst moments of its economic history the number of unemployed people in the South did not even approach seven million.

THE PROPAGANDIST’S BLUNDERS

Somewhat surprisingly, the first breaches in the wall were made possible by mistakes committed by North Korean propagandists themselves. In 1980, South Korea experienced a massive pro-democratic movement, known as Seoul Spring. This culminated in the Kwangju Uprising of May 1980 in which civilians resisted well-armed government forces. Predictably, these events were presented by the North Korean media as signs of a coming revolution in the South, which would bring South Koreans to the warm embrace of the Great Leader and his world-saving Juche Ideas (it is possible that at the time North Korean decision makers sincerely believed themselves that the South Korean revolution was just around the corner)

Therefore, in outbursts of expectation and enthusiasm – and also as an attempt to show alleged support for North Korea in the South – footage from Kwangju and other South Korean cities began to be frequently broadcast on North Korean TV. However, this footage produced completely unexpected consequences.

The present author has talked about this with refugees in the South and North Koreans inside the North and all of them recollected the great surprise they felt when they saw the unfolding South Korean revolution. They noticed that protesting South Korean students were dressed much better than the children of North Korean officials. They also discovered that Kwangju, a provincial South Korean city, actually had more high-rise buildings than Pyongyang, the “capital of the revolution” itself. It was evident that, contrary to the official propaganda, South Korea was by no means a land of poverty and destitution. North Korean agitprop workers soon realized their mistake and stopped broadcasting the offending footage, but it was too late: the damage had been done.

Soon after, the North Korean agitprop department made another significant blunder. In 1989, Pyongyang hosted the 13th World Festival of Youth and Students – an international gala event which was supported by the Soviet Union and other communist countries as a part of their united front policy. In the peculiar case of Pyongyang, the 13th World Festival was meant to be North Korea’s answer to the success of the 1988 Olympic Games in Seoul.

The North Korean authorities invited South Korean delegates to participate in events. The South Korean government, stubbornly anti-communist at the time, refused to allow members of the left-leaning South Korean nationalist student groups to go to Pyongyang. However, some members ignored the ban and went nonetheless.

One of them was Im Su-kyŏng, then a student at Hankook University of Foreign Studies – charming, good-looking, charismatic and, at the time, an ardent believer in the views of the more radical South Korean “progressives” (a peculiar mix of nationalism and Leninism). The North Korean agitprop department saw her as a godsend. Indeed, Im Su-kyŏng said exactly what South Korean students were supposed to say according to North Korean discourse. She generally followed the suggestions of her minders and did not create much trouble. As a result, she spent 46 days touring the country and participated in many events, which were widely publicized by the official media.

However, her visit produced a somewhat surprising and unintended result. Almost all of the refugees with whom I have spoken mentioned the short visit of Im Su-kyŏng as being a pivotal event in changing perceptions of the South in North Korea. Im Su-kyŏng looked different, and, irrespective of her statements (usually parroting the North Korean propaganda), she behaved in a way which made the North Koreans question many official statements about the South. Im Su-kyŏng was clearly spontaneous, and unlike North Korea’s normal speakers at public events, she improvised her speeches. She was not afraid to break some minor rules and even at points made very mild critical remarks about organization (like complaining publically about excessive security, which prevented her from mingling with North Koreans frequently). All of this was new and shocking, like her fashionable clothes, which for many years following determined fashion trends in North Korean society.

Having completed her Pyongyang trip, Im Su-kyŏng crossed the DMZ to go back to South Korea and, as expected, was arrested immediately by the South Korean authorities. Since the notorious National Security Law makes unauthorized trips to the North illegal, she stood trial and spent several years in prison. This was when the North Korean propaganda machine would make another grave mistake. North Korean journalists used an officially approved trip to Seoul in order to meet Im Su-kyŏng’s parents in their Seoul apartment. The North Koreans were surprised to see that the family of a known political criminal was not shipped to a concentration camp (as was customary in the North) and even could continue to live in the nation’s capital and give interviews to the “enemy journalists”. This was a massive blow to the image of South Korean society as an exceptionally repressive state. North Koreans began to suspect that the ‘fascist puppet clique in Seoul’ might just be surprisingly soft on internal dissent.

Tellingly, from the mid-1990s, references to Im Su-kyŏng and her exploits all but disappeared from the North Korean media. Her views have not changed that much, she worked as a journalist, visited the North again and in April 2012 was elected a member of parliament from the centre-left Democratic Party list. Nonetheless, Im Su-kyŏng’s moderate prominence in South Korean politics has not been advertised by the North Korean media since the mid-1990s.

THE CROSS-BORDER MOVEMENT

But the real changes were to begin in the mid-1990s. By far the single most important new factor was a massive move of North Korean refugees to China. Strictly speaking, the Sino-North Korean border has never been well protected. Excessive security was seen by both sides as superfluous. Until the late 1980s, few North Koreans would consider escape to China; after all it was little different from the North in terms of political freedoms and until the mid-1980s had significantly lower living standards. At the same time, in the conditions of tight surveillance and control, typical of Mao and early post-Mao period, escapees were almost certain to be apprehended by the Chinese authorities and then extradited back to the North, where a few years of imprisonment would await them.

Things changed in the mid-1990s when cross-border movements began in earnest. Both push and pull factors were at play. North Korea at the time was experiencing a catastrophic famine and as a result, many who escaped to China did so to avoid the real threat of starvation. Concurrently, changes in China itself created manifold employment opportunities for refugees who were willing to take badly paid, unskilled jobs. As a result, the number of refugees peaked at an estimated 200,000 in 1999. Since then their number as dwindled to a mere 20-30,000.[[8]](#footnote-8)

It is important to remember that they constitute a floating population. Many refugees, having spent a few months or even some years in China, voluntarily return home, stay with their families for a while then go back to China again. No reliable statistics exist, but Courtland Robinson of John Hopkins University, whose group conducted systematic research on the North Korean refugee population in China, once estimated that up to half a million North Koreans have visited China up to 2009.[[9]](#footnote-9) Once back home, the former refugees discuss their experiences in China, so the stories of Chinese prosperity are widely known and frequently – if cautiously – discussed in North Korea. Taking into account the large number of North Koreans who have visited China, the impact of the rumours and stories is bound to be significant.

Indeed, even a short visit to China has a great impact on a refugee’s worldview, since the per capita income in the borderland provinces is two or three times higher the income in North Korea (the gap is larger than gap between two Germanies in the 1980s). To the impoverished North Koreans, China looks like a land of plenty. One of my interviewees recalled how shocked she was in the late 1990s by the sight of a brightly lit evening market in what is essentially a seedy borderland Chinese town (she was taken there by her relatives virtually next day after her defection): “Everything was so fresh, so beautiful and so strange. I saw bananas and thought they must be some kind of peculiar looking cucumber”.

The impact of Chinese prosperity is further increased by recent memories of Chinese poverty. Indeed, until the late 1980s, the borderland areas of China were worse off compared to the northern parts of North Korea, and so it was customary for North Koreans to provide their Chinese relatives with some help. Indeed, many North Koreans in the northern part of the country have relatives in China. The borderland part of northeast China is largely populated by ethnic Koreans whose ancestors moved to the area in the early 1900s and who maintain relations with their relatives in North Korea. In recent years, largely thanks to massive cross border movements, North Koreans stay in constant touch with their Chinese relatives (the recent proliferation of Chinese mobile phones helps them, as well as the activities of brokers who specialize in moving people, money and letter across the border).

This news from China is widely seen as proof of the efficiency of market-style reforms (switching to a family responsibility system in agriculture, in particular). In this new situation, North Korean propaganda is compelled to look for some excuse to justify Pyongyang’s stubborn unwillingness to emulate China’s success.

China is important in itself, but it is even more significant as a conduit for information about South Korea. The borderland areas of China, where a majority of refugees reside, are much influenced by South Korean culture. Even a humble farmhouse in the area might have a satellite dish which is used to watch South Korean broadcasts, remarkably more attractive to Chinese viewers than even the contents of Chinese TV, already very free and entertaining by North Korea standards. Many ethnic Koreans in the area have visited the South in various capacities, as legal or illegal workers, students and tourists.

Therefore, every North Korean refugee in the area is almost certain to encounter stories about South Korea’s material prosperity and individual freedom – indeed, in this part of China, South Korea is almost universally perceived as the embodiment of material success. Refugee interviewees say that back in the 1990s, it usually took a few weeks in China for them to realize that South Korea is rich beyond their imagination. In recent years, such a revelation no longer happens – North Korean refugees learn about South Korean prosperity well before they arrive in China. To a large extent, they learn it through word of mouth, but the spread of new information technologies also plays a large and important role in the spread of South Korean culture.

THE ARRIVAL OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES

In a sense, the Kim family regime is unlucky. These people run a dictatorship whose internal stability depends on a self-imposed information blockade. However, they have to do it in times when maintaining such a blockade is increasingly difficult due to advances in digital and information technologies. The Kim Family Regime is fighting an uphill battle: information storage and dissemination devices are getting smaller (and also more powerful) with remarkable speed.

Historically, the first media device which managed to penetrate the North Korean isolation was radio. While the ban on tunable radio sets technically remains in effect, it has become increasingly difficult to enforce. When the ban was first adopted, the typical radio was a large, valve-based contraption virtually impossible to hide in a typical North Korean house. Over the last 15 years, small and easy-to-hide transistor radios have been smuggled into the country in unknown but significant quantities.

It seems from interviews with refugees that North Koreans still tend to perceive listening to foreign broadcasts as a dangerous and somewhat improper activity. This is a large difference with the situation in the Soviet Union of the 1970s, where for a significant number of urban families, regular listening to foreign broadcasts had become a sort of established ritual (unlike North Korea, it was perfectly legal to listen to foreign broadcasts there). A popular joke of my youth put it nicely: ‘There is a wonderful tradition in our Russia: listening to the BBC every evening’. Indeed, a 1984 research project stated that in an average week some 14–18% of adult Soviet citizens listened to the Voice of America, 7–10% to the BBC and 8–12% to Radio Liberty (these figures agree well with my own reminiscences).[[10]](#footnote-10)

Nonetheless, those in North Korea who listen to foreign broadcasts tend to be those with heightened interest in political and social matters, often intellectuals and/or members of the official elite. Perhaps the real or perceived risks which are still associated with foreign broadcasts make listening to such programs appear to be a serious matter. In other words, from refugee interviews one can get the impression that the penetration rate of radios is indeed not very high, but it might still be politically the most significant form of media, since its audience largely consists of real or potential opinion makers. It also remains the only source of up-to-date political information and opinions.

In terms of the overall impact on the general populace, however, nothing can compete with the DVD player which seems to be by far the most significant tool of information dissemination in North Korea. Technically, VCRs were available in North Korea from the early 1990s, but for years this tape-based equipment was very expensive and beyond the reach of the average person. Indeed, in a country where the average monthly wage was in the region of $5 (and even less in some periods), few people were willing to pay $200 to purchase a VCR.

Things changed however around 2000. First, the North Korean market was flooded with cheap used VCRs which began to come in from China. Not long after, DVD players took hold. The cheapest DVD players are readily available at North Korean markets for $20 or less (Kretchun and Kim cite the price for a DVD player at $13, but my interlocutors usually quote somewhat higher figures)[[11]](#footnote-11). Unlike radio sets, DVD players are perfectly legal: it is officially assumed that North Koreans would purchase these contraptions to watch ideologically wholesome North Korean movies – biopics of the Great Leader and the like. In real life, there are few North Koreans who find these kinds of movies interesting, rather they use their DVD players to entertain themselves with illegally imported foreign video.

Hollywood blockbusters (many North Koreans have seen *Titanic*) and Hong Kong martial arts movies make up a sizable portion of the DVDs watched by northerners, as do Indian movies. However, the dominant role is that of South Korean video (both movies and TV dramas). South Korean movies are technically banned, but this ban is frequently ignored by the people and not always enforced by the authorities. This behavior might be risky, but of dozens people with whom I discussed the issue, none said that he or she personally knows somebody who got in trouble for watching South Korean movies (nearly all of them watched the forbidden videos while still in North Korea). One North Korean whom I interviewed, a minor police official in the past told of how police discovered a large shipment of South Korean DVDs in his county. The people who were smuggling these DVDs across the border were apprehended, but got very light sentences – only a few months of imprisonment. To a very large extent this was because the ring was run by the children of top officials in the county, but it is still partly indicative of the changes in North Korea’s law enforcing environment. There is little doubt that had this taken place in the 1990s, all the participants would have disappeared into a concentration camp for years and their well-placed relatives would have lost their jobs and possibly be sent to prison as well.

Unlike radio broadcasts, which form part of large-scale political campaigns being waged by South Korean and foreign governments, the proliferation of South Korean DVDs is being guided by the proverbial ‘invisible hand of the market’. First, the video is recorded by ethnic Koreans in China who often use satellite broadcasts to get the most recent episodes of TV dramas. Then the disks are smuggled across the border and are bought by wholesalers in North Korea. From there, the disks are distributed across the country.

The available data does not allow us estimate the DVD penetration rate with any precision. My North Korean interlocutors have stated many times in recent years that some three quarters of all households have a DVD player. This may, though, be a geographically biased view, since most of them come from borderland areas of North Korea, where incomes are higher and foreign influences are understandably more pronounced. Kretchun and Kim, however, come up with very similar estimates (but they admittedly dealt with a similar biased sample). According to their survey, 46% of the sample had access to the DVD players (an additional 25% had access to a VCD player – VCD technology is quite prominent in North Korea).[[12]](#footnote-12)

Watching South Korean movies has produced much impact on North Koreans not least because these movies are clearly not a part of some deliberate propaganda efforts: it is obvious that the movies are produced exclusively for South Korean internal consumption. North Koreans might be somewhat skeptical and they might even assume that South Korean videos exaggerate the actual living standards of South Korea – after all, North Korean propaganda and art has always embellished life in the North. Nonetheless, there are things in the video which could not be faked for the sake of show – like, say, the skyline of Seoul, dotted with high rise buildings, bright lights and impressive bridges. As one interviewee said: “Until 2000, people believed that South Korea is a very poor country, so we felt sorry about the suffering of the South Koreans. But then people began to watch South Korea movies, so now only kids in primary schools might think that South Korea is poor”.

As a matter of fact, even primary school kids are no longer likely to receive education about the alleged poverty of South Korea. Over the last 10 years, the depiction of South Korea in North Korean propaganda has undergone a profound transformation. In North Korean propaganda South Korea is no longer presented as a destitute place. It is tacitly admitted that South Korea is quite affluent. Therefore North Korean propaganda dwells on other problems in South Korean society, real or alleged – like environmental degradation, crime, income inequality etc.[[13]](#footnote-13) This sea change took place exactly when the cross-border movement and the spread of new technologies began in earnest – around 2000. One can be pretty certain that this was prompted by the changes in the information environment. In the new situation, the warriors of North Korea’s agitprop department realized that they needed new weapons to counter their foe. It seems that the future has in store an even worse surprise for North Korean propaganda makers: computers, the ultimate dissemination tools, have finally arrived in North Korea.

The common image of North Korea is that of a destitute country, a sort of a sub-Saharan African nation with unusually cold weather. But this makes us forget that North Korea, in spite of being very poor indeed, is an urban society and an educated one at that. In other words, there is a significant number of North Koreans who have little problem with using computers and know perfectly well why they need to use them.

When the present author visits borderland areas of China, I go to the markets which cater for the needs of North Koreans. In recent years, one of the most notable features of such markets is a small computer shop or two. They usually sell cheap used desktop computers and notebooks. In the summer of 2010, a used notebook in Dandong would cost less than $100. This might be a large amount of money for the average North Korean worker or farmer, but it is within the reach of a slightly corrupt official or even a moderately successful merchant, so one should not be surprised that such computers are selling like hot cakes (at least this what the shop owner told me). It is remarkable that computers are not unheard of even in small and remote towns and villages. Even a village school might nowadays have a computer or two, and relatively affluent families in the countryside often buy computers to be used as status symbols.[[14]](#footnote-14) As a refugee remarked: “Here in South Korea, people buy expensive foreign cars to show off. In North Korea, they buy computers and refrigerators.” As people in the above mentioned computer shops told me, North Koreans largely buy computers for two reasons – word processing and watching foreign movies and TV shows.

North Korean computers are not connected to the Internet. At best, one can use the nationwide intranet system, which is known as Kwangmyŏng, but even access to this intranet is much restricted. Nonetheless, in spite of all restrictions, computers remain powerful information technology tools. They can be used for not merely perusing but also disseminating information.

The North Korean authorities seem to understand some of the dangers which are brought by the arrival of computers. It is remarkable though that the government has not made any significant efforts to curb or restrict computer ownership. As a matter of fact, the spread of computers and computer-related knowledge has been welcomed and explicitly encouraged by the North Korean state. This might reflect the somewhat naive belief that such a spread may create the foundations for a miraculous economic breakthrough. Stalinist regimes have always been notorious for their technological fetishism – that is, belief that all their economic problems can be overcome by the discovery of a miracle technology.

To counter the potential political threats, all computers are registered and their hard drives are subject to random checks by the authorities (recently, the security bureaucracy created a special division – the so-called Bureau 27 – to monitor and control privately owned computers). Frankly, though, one should be sceptical about the effectiveness of such checks: a teenage computer enthusiast will always outsmart an aging policeman, especially if the latter does not see a good reason to be excessively vigilant.

CONCLUSION

Therefore it seems that the information environment has changed completely and irreversibly. The North Korean government is not happy about it and does everything it can to put the genie back in the bottle. However, these efforts are in vain – and likely to remain so.

This is not to deny that in some areas, the North Korean government can stop and even partially reverse these dangerous developments. For example, after 2008 there has been a notable decline in cross-border movements, which has been the result of a dramatic increase in border security. That said though, the North Korean government is fighting an uphill battle it is unlikely to win.

Change is especially noticeable among younger North Koreans, those now in their 20s and 30s. These people never lived in the old state socialist economy and since their teens they have been exposed to knowledge of the outside world. They are therefore likely to be skeptical about official propaganda and one might speculate that recent efforts to replace the image of poverty-stricken South Korea with that of crime-ridden South Korea is unlikely to be successful with them.

There is little doubt that in the long run such contacts will produce much political impact and perhaps will even lay the ground for a dramatic transformation of the North Koran regime (or its collapse). After all, it was the spread of information about the outside world which undermined the Soviet Union and other Communist countries in the 1980s. In this regard, one has to agree with Yale Richmond who wrote recently: “There are a few grains of truth in some of these explanations [of the Soviet collapse], and more than a few in others, but I will provide many grains of another explanation – that the end of the Cold War and the collapse of communism were consequences of Soviet contacts and cultural exchanges with the West, and with the United States in particular, over the years that followed the death of Stalin in 1953.” [[15]](#footnote-15)

This does not mean that a North Korean revolution is around the corner (even though this might be case, revolutions are sudden events usually). The spread of knowledge about the outside world is bound to make North Koreans more disbelieving of the government, but this does not immediately translate into anti-government actions. There are other conditions which make a revolt possible. Nonetheless, it seems that the old information blockage has ceased to be sustainable and in spite of all efforts by the authorities, within five to ten years the majority of the North Korean population will come to realize that they are living in a very poor and unusually repressive state which is the object of contempt, pity and ridicule among their successful neighbors. This is not a discovery that the North Korean government would welcome, but it seems that it is bound to happen nonetheless.

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1. Nat Kretchun and Jane Kim, *A Quiet Opening: North Koreans in a Changing Media Environment* (Washington: Intermedia, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Marcus Noland, *Famine and Reform in North Korea. Working Paper 03-5* (Washington: Institute for International Economics, 2003), 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For a detailed description of travel restrictions, see Kim Sŭng-ch’ŭl, *Pukan tongp’otŭl-ŭi saenghwal munhwa yangsik-kwa machimak hŭumang [The Way of Life of the North Korean Compatriots and the Last Hope]* (Seoul: Charyowon, 2000), 185-97. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For details on the ongoing argument over the actual size of North Korean GDP, see I Chong-sok, “Pukhan kukmin sotuk chaepyongka” [Reassessment of the National Income of North Korea], *Chongsewa chongchaek,* 2008, no. 3: 1–4. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In the published lists of the people who are known to have been inmates of the North Korean camps, one often comes across references to people who were arrested for listening to foreign broadcasts. See: *Ichhyŏhin irŭmtŭl [Forgotten Names]* (Seoul: Sidae chŏngsin, 2004), 118, 187, 224. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Kang Ch’ŏl-hwan, “Pukhan kyogwasŏ sok-ŭi Namhan [South Korea in North Korean textbooks]”, *Chosŏn ilbo*, 7 December 2001. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Yi Hyo-bŏm and Ch’oe Hyŏn-ho, “Pukhan kyokwasŏ-rŭl t’onghan ch’ŏngsonyŏn kach’igwan yŏngu: Kodŭng chunghakkyo kongsanjujŭi todok 3,4 haknyŏn chungsim-ŭro. Pukhan yŏngu hakhoebo [A Study of the youth value system through North Korean textbooks: Centered around the textbooks for the ‘Communist Moral’ for the Year 3 and 4 of the high school]”, *Pukhan yŏngu hakhoebo,* 2000, no.2: 250. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For some (inconclusive) remarks on the refugee numbers, see: Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland, *Witness to transformation: refugee insights into North Korea* (Washington, DC : Peterson Institute For International Economics, 2011), 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. An oral communication with Courtland Robinson. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Michael Nelson, *War of the Black Heavens: The Battles of Western Broadcasting in the Cold War* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1997), 163. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Nat Kretchun and Jane Kim, *A Quiet Opening,* 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Nat Kretchun and Jane Kim, *A Quiet Opening,* 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. For work on the recent changes in North Korean propaganda, see publications of Tatiana Gabroussenko and Brian Myers. For example: Tatiana Gabroussenko, “From Developmentalist to Conservationist Criticism: The New Narrative of South Korea in North Korean Propaganda”, *The Journal of Korean Studies 16* (2011), no. 1 (Spring 2011) [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Remarks about the role of the computer as a status symbol: Kim Po-kǒn. “The 5 storages and 6 contraptions which serve as symbols of prosperity in North Korea,” *T’ongil Hankuk 2009*, no. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Yale Richmond, “Cultural Exchange and the Cold War: How the West Won,” *American Communist History 9* (2010), no. 1: 62 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)