

Spheres of Influence:

A Comparative Study of Political Legitimacy in North Korea

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Abstract

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Studies of North Korean defectors indicate fundamental transformations in contemporary North Korean society. Interpreting these changes through the lenses of Cold War theories, mainstream narratives conclude the DPRK's socialist, totalitarian leadership is anathema to North Korea's current transition, and that the regime retains its power only by coercion. However, the growing evidence of political and economic transformation in North Korea ought not only to call into question the regime's legitimacy, but also our understanding of the very systems, structures, and dynamics upon which our theories of legitimacy have been based.

Joining a project already underway to revise our fundamental assumptions and understandings about North Korean society (Demick, 2009; McEachern, 2010; Kwon & Chung, 2012), this thesis 1) critiques the ill-fitting but still dominant narratives and theories of political legitimacy in North Korea, 2) conducts three different sets of contrasts to derive novel features of

contemporary political legitimacy in North Korean society, 3) and applies these features to re-evaluate the conclusions of five recent and influential studies of North Korean defectors.

Socialism and totalitarianism, the two systems most commonly invoked when assessing North Korea's political legitimacy, are shown to be inappropriate for the North Korean case. Contrasts with Eastern European, authoritarian, and Asian socialist states respectively distill the following three features of political legitimacy in North Korea. 1) Unlike socialist Eastern Europe, the North Korean regime is argued to have originally derived its legitimacy from a post-colonial mandate to protect national sovereignty as well as a late-industrialization mandate to rapidly develop its economy. 2) Local innovation and civil disobedience may often be legitimate feedback and negotiating mechanisms in authoritarian systems rather than rebellious protests against an illegitimate regime. 3) Institutional reform in China and Vietnam may have been instigated locally but was only implemented globally when sufficient pluralism existed among the political elite and when the state no longer faced an existential threat by its Cold War counterpart. Using these features to reevaluate five studies of North Korean defectors reveals a regime and society transitioning in tandem, casting significant doubt on the hypothesis that the North Korean regime is illegitimate.

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1. Narratives of Illegitimacy

Two decades have passed since the Wall fell in Berlin and three since China implemented Opening and Reform. Cyclical coverage of the North Korean nuclear stalemate and boiler plate chatter about the eccentric Kim family give the impression of an ahistorical DPRK, standing still and alone while the world around it rushes by. For many, the DPRK is a living Cold War anachronism in the post-Cold War world and one of the few remaining places on earth to which the antiquated “isms” are yet applied: Communism, Stalinism, socialism, totalitarianism.

Evidence from the margins, however, reveals a very different image, that of a rapidly changing society. In ten years’ time, the annual number of North Koreans migrating to the South has increased from the tens to the thousands. Markets and family farms have supplanted centralized food distribution and now constitute families’ primary sources of income. Cell phones along the border link North Koreans with their family members on the outside and foreign media is reported to be widely circulated by DVD. Radical changes in economic and social organization are transforming North Korean society from the margins inward. Assuming the conventional “isms” still adequately model North Korean society, forthcoming evidence begs the question of the current government’s relevance and legitimacy. Accordingly, most popular and scholastic narratives conclude that famine, repression, and decades of economic stagnation have irreparably compromised the regime’s political legitimacy, that the DPRK’s socialist, totalitarian leadership is anathema to North Korea’s current transition, and that the regime retains its power solely by virtue of its material strength.

However, a growing minority of North Korea watchers are setting aside the Cold War lenses and contributing fresh perspectives, proposing new models and understandings of the DPRK’s contemporary political system, social transformation, and state-society relations. Political legitimacy theory indeed depends on accurate understandings of each of these domains including systems of governance, the social structure within which those systems are embedded, and the interactions between the individuals and groups in that structure. The growing evidence of political and economic transformation in North Korea suggests axiomatic changes in the systems, structures,

and dynamics upon which our prior theories were based. A more proper understanding requires us to revisit and remodel the theories of legitimacy we use to understand governance and authority in contemporary North Korean society. Joining a project already underway to reassess our fundamental assumptions and understandings about North Korean society (Demick, 2009; McEachern, 2010; Kwon & Chung, 2012), this thesis 1) critiques the ill-fitting but still dominant narratives and theories of political legitimacy in North Korea, 2) conducts three different sets of contrasts to derive novel features of contemporary political legitimacy in North Korean society, 3) and applies these features to re-evaluate the conclusions of five recent and influential studies of North Korean defectors.

Chapter 1 reviews the legitimacy narratives of the last two decades found in the North Korea studies literature and argues that they are primarily founded on perceptions of the North Korean state as a classical socialist and totalitarian regime. Chapter 2 deconstructs classical socialist and totalitarian theories of legitimacy and demonstrates their limited relevance to contemporary North Korea. Well-accepted evidence is presented which demonstrates the regime's pragmatic flexibility and increasing deviance from the precepts of the ideological systems.

While Chapters 1 & 2 address what political legitimacy in North Korea is not, Chapters 3 & 4 undertake the more constructive task of elucidating how it is constituted. Applying the method of contrasts to three sets of cases, Chapter 3 identifies key features of political legitimacy in North Korea. Contrasts with Eastern European, authoritarian, and Asian socialist states respectively distill the following three features of political legitimacy in North Korea. 1) Unlike socialist Eastern Europe, the North Korean regime is argued to have originally derived its legitimacy from a post-colonial mandate to protect national sovereignty as well as a late-industrialization mandate to rapidly develop its economy. 2) Local innovation and civil disobedience may often be legitimate feedback and negotiating mechanisms in authoritarian systems rather than rebellious protests against an illegitimate regime. 3) Institutional reform in China and Vietnam may have been instigated locally but was only implemented globally when sufficient pluralism existed among the political elite and when the state no longer faced an existential threat by its Cold War counterpart. Using these features to reevaluate five

studies of North Korean defectors, Chapter 4 reveals a regime and society transitioning in tandem, casting significant doubt on the hypothesis that the North Korean regime is illegitimate.

The thesis concludes by outlining an alternative interpretation of the complex relationship between the center and margins of power in North Korean society. The gradual easing of restrictions and implementing reforms, albeit several steps behind prevailing, informal social change, indicates that the North Korean government would rather opt to manage the country's ongoing transition and remain in power than attempt to forestall change and risk losing everything. The center's lagged response to changes on the margins constitutes an indirect form of state-society interaction which may prove to prolong the regime's relevance and lend to its domestic political legitimacy.

1.1 1990-2001: Muddling through on Belief?

By the early 1990s, there were strong indications that North Korea's preliminary attempts at opening up to foreign investment had failed. More critically, the collapse of the Soviet Union cut off key subsidies to the country's economy almost overnight. The title of Nicholas Eberstadt's early book, *Reform, Muddling Through, or Collapse*, concisely posed what were believed to be North Korea's options (Eberstadt, 1993). Assessments became even bleaker following the death of Kim Il Sung in 1994; however the first nuclear crisis prompted scholars to discuss how North Korea had made it this far as a state and why it had failed to reform. In the edited volume *Korea Briefing: Toward Reunification*, Young Whan Kil attributed the unwillingness of North Korea's leadership to reform to the security asymmetry between itself and the South. In the same volume (Kihl, 1997), Charles Armstrong proposed that it was Juche Ideology that possibly afforded some economic latitude to the North Korea's nationalist-leaning socialism (Armstrong, 1997). In a study of North Korean negotiating strategies, Snyder also cited ideological reasons such as the state's historical sensitivity to sovereignty and reluctance to open its doors to capitalism as reasons for the delayed reform (Snyder, 1999).

At the turn of the millennium, North Korea's economy and infrastructure were in shambles (Eberstadt, 2000; Noland, 2000), details of a devastating famine had trickled out (Choŭn Pöttŭl, 1999 & 2001; Nastios, 2001), and the country's leadership had finally stooped to request for aid from the international community (Flake & Synder; 2004). Even still, popular analysis relied primarily on culture and ideology to explain the state's reluctance to reform and the populace's reluctance to resist. Kongdan Oh and Ralph Hassig's book, *North Korea Through the Looking Glass*, was one of the first attempts to explain to the outside world the inner workings of what many considered to be an impenetrable black box (Oh & Hassig, 2000). Based on their cumulative studies of North Korean society over the previous decade, the authors reasoned that the extreme hierarchy and cult of personality among the country's leadership elite had induced policy paralysis at the state level. At the popular level, they argued that the cultural conditioning and historical unfamiliarity of North Korea's masses with the institutions of capitalism could help explain the people's reluctance to embrace market-based reforms.

Another important publication at the turn of the millennium was Samuel Kim's *The North Korea System in the post-Cold War Era* (Kim, 2001). While Kim's introduction to the edited volume foreshadows the wave of system studies that would follow throughout the next decade, few contributors to the volume actually adopt a systems approach. Charles Armstrong recites a litany of non-democratic historical influences: totalitarianism, Stalinism, corporatism, and neo-traditionalism (Armstrong, 2001). Dae-sook Suh concludes that "Kim Il Sung and his son have either done a magnificent job of brainwashing the entire 22 million people of North Korea or else they have leadership skills that we fail to comprehend (Suh, 2001)." David Steinberg makes a valuable point that international standards and norms cannot be applied to understand the domestic legitimacy of the North; however, his study of the North's domestic legitimacy dwells exclusively on the persistent legitimacy of Kim Jong Il as a person and charismatic embodiment of the state and not on its material dimensions, bureaucracy and policies (Steinberg, 2001). In spite of the variety of approaches and focal points, these authors all begin from the shared assumption that North Korea's persistence, in spite of all its problems, implied that its population still viewed its government as legitimate.

Most notable among this body of literature is the absence of references to material poverty or physical coercion on the political attitudes of the North Korean people. This indicates that authors during this period did not yet believe that the government of the North had lost its legitimacy, domestically. Rather they were trying to explain the persistence of an internationally rebellious regime that yet enjoyed the confidence of its citizens domestically, even amid extreme material privation. While preservation of regime security, a material factor, is cited as a primary motivator of political elites, explanations of popular support for the government strongly leaned towards cultural and historical factors. The second wave of literature over-corrects for this bias, swinging as far towards the material pole of the causal spectrum as this first wave did to the ideological pole.

As for the ideological foundations of the regime's legitimacy and the political attitudes of ordinary North Koreans, this earlier literature presents North Korea's culture and history in broad strokes, and for good reason. Most defector surveys and food assessments were conducted and published after 2000, meaning that at the point this wave was published, 1991-2001, little data from the famine and post-famine era had emerged from the country. General references to the tenacity of Juche propaganda, Kim Il Sung's thirty-year personality cult and Korea's pre-modern dynastic and feudalist traditions are typical of this lack of specificity. While these cultural and historical factors no doubt continue to influence contemporary political attitudes in profound and subtle ways, better data would no doubt have explicated these deep influences with much greater temporal proximity and specificity.

1.2 2002-2012: From Ideology to Illegitimacy?

Following the revelation of North Korea's uranium enrichment program, 2002, and collapse of the 1994 Agreed Framework, 2003, the international community began to doubt that socialist ideology alone could sufficiently account for North Korea's uncanny ability to muddle through economic stagnation while simultaneously pursuing an ambitious nuclear agenda. New attention was given to material security interests as the likely link between resisting reform and pursuing a nuclear deterrent. Yun argued

that the siege mentality of North Korea's elites and their motivation to preserve their regime ruled out coercion as a feasible foreign policy option for the US and South Korea (Yun, 2006). Jonsson held that distrust and the security concerns were the primary obstacles to Korean reconciliation (Jonsson, 2006). In multiple articles, Eberstadt cited military spending and security interests as the central root of North Korea's economic woes (Eberstadt, 2007). The same reason was given to explain the state's reluctance to receive diplomatically conditioned foreign aid (Haggard & Noland, 2007). *North Korea*, a volume edited by Sonia Ryang, comes across as a collective plea to stop bullying the DPRK, as multiple contributors cite foreign threats to North Korean sovereignty as the primary reason for the regime having locked down the country (Ryang, 2009).

Interestingly enough, a select body of literature produced in the last few years has been highly revisionist, not unlike the recent literature on post-socialist China and Vietnam, which has attempted to re-evaluate concepts such as state, society, state-society relations, legitimacy, reform, and market transition.¹ State-level analyses on North Korea have shifted from uniform interpretations of a singular state apparatus and now cite the increasing evidence of factionalism, systemic dissonance, and post-totalitarian policy debates both within the country's elite, informal political networks and among its formal governing institutions (Kim, 2006; Lim, 2009; McEachern, 2010; Kwon & Chung, 2012). This departure from personifying the state as an ideologically-motivated actor, or portraying the state as a collectively subservient extension of a

¹ Recent work on the Chinese state and economy has begun replacing the preposition "toward" with "beyond", exposing the growing dissatisfaction with classical Western paradigms: *Beyond Liberal Democracy*, Bell, 2006; *China's Emerging Middle Class: Beyond Economic Transformation*, Li, 2010; *Before and Beyond Divergence: The Politics of Economic Change in China and Europe*, Rosenthal & Wang, 2011; *In Search of China's Development Model: Beyond the Beijing Consensus*, Hsu, Wu & Zhao, 2011. Interestingly enough, a similar phenomenon is occurring in recent titles on North Korea, although the objects of the preposition are quite different: *North Korea: 2005 and Beyond*, Yun & Shin, 2006; *Energy Assistance to North Korea: Options to be Considered by the Six-Party Talks and Beyond*, Choe, 2007; *Beyond North Korea: Future Challenges to South Korea's Security*, Kim, Shin & Straub, 2011; *The North Korea Nuclear Calculus: Beyond the Six-Party Talks*, BibloGov, 2011; *North Korea: Beyond Charisma Politics*, Kwon & Chong, 2012.

solitary, charismatic leader has subsequently prompted a reinterpretation of the political attitudes and motives of North Korean society.

While this reformulation of North Korean society from the bottom-up is a welcomed change, and is largely responsible for triggering the recent reevaluation of political legitimacy in North Korea, unfortunately, it has not yet inspired widespread abandonment of Cold War systems theories and top-down models of the regime. After a decade of writing about the famine, economic difficulties and political viability of the North Korean state, by the mid-2000s, Marcus Noland and Stephan Haggard also joined the conversation about North Korea's domestic legitimacy. Summarizing a string of earlier studies and publications, *Witness to Transformation: Refugee Insights Into North Korea*, asserts that material interests have trumped ideological concerns in contemporary North Korea and that the regime is essentially illegitimate both inside and out (Haggard & Noland, 2011). Citing evidence of widespread economic non-compliance and critical political attitudes of defectors, the authors point to coercive force as the means by which the DPRK suppresses unsanctioned market activity and political resistance. In their latest volume, *The Hidden People of North Korea: Everyday Life in the Hermit Kingdom*, Oh and Hassig revise their earlier assertions (Oh & Hassig, 2000) about historical and cultural indoctrination and accept that while there is likely an element of internal loyalty among certain social strata, it is more likely that external social controls keep the majority of the population in check (Hassig & Oh, 2009).

Domestic political legitimacy in North Korea has become such a focal point in North Korea studies that this year alone, two books have hit the shelves, both dedicated to this topic: *The Impossible State: North Korea, Past and Future* (Cha, 2012) and *North Korea: Beyond Charismatic Politics* (Kwon and Chung, 2012). Both books conclude that any crisis of legitimacy in North Korea will hang on the disparity between North Korea's political ideology and the conditions on the ground. Cha believes that North Korea's government has only survived this long "due to a unique confluence of factors that include geography, humanitarian assistance, a temporarily generous South Korean government, Chinese support, and some dumb luck (Cha, 2012: 13)." However, as this confluence dissipates, he argues that "a growing space between the state and the people cause a crisis of governance and uproot the foundations of the regime." On the

one hand, state ideologies and political institutions are becoming increasingly controlling, he argues, while on the other, North Korean society are embracing markets and entrepreneurialism. Kwon and Chung delve into the nature and meaning of North Korean politics, identifying two instruments, the partisan state, and the family state, which by design appeal to different subpopulations: urban elites and the rural masses, respectively. They argue that to the extent that North Korea's famine and economic hardship may be attributed to government policy, these tragedies will be perceived by North Korea's people as a "radical moral failure of the family state". While North Koreans have demonstrated an amazing capacity for personal and collective sacrifice in years past, these authors echo Cha's doubts that this capacity is eternal and limitless, particularly if the disparity is perceived to arise from some material or moral failure of the state.

The narratives cited from 1990-2001 hold constant the relationship between regime and society against North Korea's failing economy and the changing backdrop of the post-Cold War world. These early explanations charge cultural and ideological forces accountable for the North Korean society's willingness to support their regime in spite of the country's obvious material decline. The second wave of narratives, 2002 to 2012, adopts a much more critical tone. Still holding constant the regime's methods and motives, authors cite evidence of a changing society. The regime, assumed to be unwaveringly socialist and totalitarian, is thought to be less and less relevant to the increasingly disillusioned masses.

This thesis concurs that North Korean society has long since been disillusioned with socialist ideology and is pushing the boundaries of reform from the bottom up. However, it also challenges the assumption that amid this change, the North Korean state has remained an unyielding totalitarian and socialist system from the top-down. To the contrary, the regime and its role in the economic and political spheres have transformed significantly over the last two decades to the point that it could hardly be recognized as either totalitarian or socialist. Chapter 2 supports this assertion by critiquing the classical socialist and totalitarian theories of legitimacy and demonstrating their limited relevance to the contemporary North Korean state.

2. Systemic Theories of Legitimacy

Modern theories of legitimacy may generally be divided into three traditions. Max Weber first distinguished legitimate domination from illegitimate domination in his magnum opus, *Economy and Society* (Weber, 1978). In the decades since, social science has widely applied Weber's ideal types of legitimate domination, namely charismatic authority, traditional authority, and rational-legal authority, to characterize and contrast the source of legitimate authority in modern states. Though modern statecraft has undergone myriad transformations in the century since, his overall approach remains relevant to understanding contemporary states because it is system-independent. Rather than analyze the legitimacy of a particular form of political or economic system, Weber contrasted seemingly similar structures in order to reduce and identify a few essential modes of legitimate authority. Thus, Weber's method, if not his specific types, allows us to contrast differences in the sources of legitimacy even within similar types of social systems, for example the varying sources of legitimate authority in communist Russia, Eastern Europe, China, Vietnam and North Korea.

With respect to legitimacy, Weber begins at the center and works outward, first contrasting the sources of legitimacy and then explaining the effects of each mode of authority on each respective institution. Two additional bodies of literature take the opposite approach. They begin with a typology or grouping of structurally isomorphic institutions and then compare these systems to in order to identify common elements of legitimacy germane to each type or group. With respect to legitimacy, this is an outward-in approach. Janos Kornai adopts this methodology when extracting the general attributes of socialist economic systems (the explicit contrast being market economies) and a wave of political scientists have done the same, contrasting legitimacy in democratic, authoritarian, and totalitarian states. Using the North Korean case to test the theories of legitimacy in socialist systems and totalitarian states, respectively, this chapter exposes the shortcomings of the systemic approach to explaining variation among instances within a given category of economic or political system. It is precisely in the misapplication of these within-system comparisons, the misclassification of North Korea as a socialist and totalitarian regime, that we discover

the origins of many current misconceptions about the DPRK and its domestic legitimacy. It is also in the re-application of cross-case contrasts that we discover analytically defensible explanations of the DPRK's unusual state-society relations and unlikely persistence.

2.1 Legitimacy in Socialist Systems

Perhaps the single most comprehensive analysis of socialist systems is Janos Kornai's *Political Economy of Socialist Systems* (Kornai, 1991). Kornai adopts a dualistic view of power in socialist systems where material force is "the body of power" and ideology "its soul" (Kornai, 1991: 33). Power in the socialist state, Kornai argues, is embodied in the socialist bureaucracy and is composed of a combination of material and ideological cohesive forces: ideology, power (position in the party and bureaucracy), prestige and privileges, and coercion. Referencing the other two traditions of legitimacy, Kornai generalizes socialist bureaucracy as totalitarian and paternalistic. Socialist bureaucracy is totalitarian in three dimensions; it has the potential to permeate every sphere of life, influence every citizen, and is not subordinate to any stable legal system (Kornai, 1991: 46-47). Openly dictatorial, socialist bureaucracies openly pursue a class policy where the party must educate, lead, and make decisions in behalf of the general population. This paternalistic role is one of the major ideological justifications for centralization and the bureaucratic organization of power (Kornai, 1991: 57). Kornai describes the bureaucracy's power as self-legitimizing; in other words the party has the power and the party knows best. The bureaucracy's party may further be consolidated around a singular cult of personality, such as was the case with Stalin, Mao, and Kim Il Sung.

Official sources of legitimizing ideologies derive from four primary sources. The first source is the thinking of early socialists, Marx in particular, as well as the European labor movement prior to the socialist revolutions (Kornai, 1991: 49). From its very inception, socialism was conceived in opposition to capitalism as a morally superior alternative to capitalist corruption (Kornai, 1991: 51). Kornai emphasized that Marx and Lenin's beliefs in socialism's superiority was manifested in economic achievement and

not on ethical grounds (Kornai, 1991: 52). The second source of legitimacy is the ideas, aspirations, and values of each country's revolutionary movement (Kornai, 1991: 49). Third are the "sphere of ideas that arose at the revolutionary-transitional stage out of the experiences of the Communist party once it has made the transition from a revolutionary party in opposition to a governing party with full responsibility, along with the pledges it made in that period to the people (Kornai, 1991: 50)." Kornai notes that historically, socialism was implemented in countries which, prior to revolution, were poor, backwards, and suffered from extreme inequality. Along the path to power and the transition to stable governance, the party's reputation profits from popular malcontent as it promises to leap beyond the economic gap between capitalist countries and eliminate the disparity between wealthy and poor, domestically (Kornai, 1991: 53-54). Fourth are the ideological elements that emerge as the classic socialist system is constructed (Kornai, 1991: 50). Here, Kornai means variations on the classical system including Stalinism and Maoism. To that list we might add Ho Chi Minh Ideology, Deng Jiao Ping Thought, and the North Korean variants of Juche and Songun.

Inherent in Kornai's formulation is a developmental mentality. Borne of the competition between socialism and capitalism, the discipline, willing sacrifice and vigilance required by militant revolutionary movements are justified by the promised ends of catching up with more developed countries and raising the standards of living domestically. Continued revolution and social restructuring requires continued mobilization and sacrifice (Kornai, 1991: 58). The sacrifices endured by socialist societies may be incomprehensibly great; and as Kwon and Chung point out, the populace may indeed make these sacrifices willingly, so long as the state's legitimacy is intact.

Kornai's post-Cold War analysis of socialist systems charts precisely those contradictions that are wont to erode the state's legitimacy and induce change. While central planning initially leads to rapid industrialization, the intractability of coordinating an increasingly complex economy and the inefficiencies of soft budget constraints eventually lead to egregious production shortages, surpluses and economic stagnation, which in addition to destabilizing the supply of food and consumption goods, raise the relative cost of maintaining a military force. As growing dissatisfaction in the public

sphere erodes the regime's legitimacy from the outside, the loss of confidence in the system by those in power weaken the bureaucracy from the inside. The growing arbitrariness and inefficiencies of the economic system and political governance contradict the earliest notions of socialist ideology as a superior economic model. The growing disparities between elites and masses compounded by the state's failure to realize economic prosperity domestically and international status and security vis-à-vis the capitalist world undermine its revolutionary promises.

Kornai's model is well supported by historical evidence, particularly in the Western world. Gorbachev's efforts to reform the Soviet Union stemmed from his own reservations about the classical system, and his policies further delegitimized socialism in the eyes of an already disillusioned Eastern Europe. Economic reform in China and Vietnam can also be traced to a combination of local economic resistance and the efforts of elite reformists within the Communist parties of each respective state. Kornai's model fails, however, to explain how the Asian socialist states retained their political legitimacy in spite of the utter loss of confidence in the socialist economic model. North Korea represents an even greater puzzle as its government has persisted nearly forty years in spite of the economic stagnation of the 70s and 80s, famine and nearly complete economic collapse of the 90s, and failure of the state to embrace comprehensive reform in the decade since.

Kornai's model does allow for ideological variations of the classical model such as Stalinism or Maoism. However, as historical circumstances render the competitive developmental assumption less and less relevant, nativist ideological variations may emerge that so completely alter or replace the classical structure that the economy of the so-called socialist state no longer resembles a socialist system. In other words, failures of the socialist economy not only induce major changes in the economic structure, but also in legitimizing ideology. To the extent that their official ideology may be watered down or relinquish entirely their socialist heritage, these systems may be so transformed that they are no longer socialist in the classical sense. Indeed, such is the case in North Korea where amendments to the constitution in 2009 consciously removed all remaining references to Communism. In other words, North Korea no longer even stakes a historical claim to Communism in its official ideology (Petrov,

2012). And yet many outside observers, perhaps confused by lingering Cold War paradigms or constrained by a finite taxonomy of “isms”, continues to misapply Kornai’s model to North Korea, not acknowledging that North Korea’s legitimizing ideology and economic structure have both transitioned beyond the model’s scope.

In *Korea vs. Korea*, Gills aptly depicts the hubris of the Cold War victors and the international community’s view of North Korea (Gills, 1996). In the eyes of the free-market world, South Korea was able to triumph over the North by virtue of its capitalist economy and political ties to the liberal democracies. This Cold War lens is so satisfying to its victors that they have difficulty setting it aside to view the world from any other perspective. While Gills does not forward an alternative theory of North Korean political legitimacy, he does caution applying international norms and perspectives onto North Korea’s domestic population, which may the same set of circumstances through very different lenses. Regrettably, much contemporary work on North Korea is guilty of ignoring Gills’ warning. The most egregious cases, popular media in particular, completely bypass theories of socialist systems and misapply the legitimacy criteria of the UN, World Bank, and Western world order established during the era of post-WWII US hegemony.

Scholarly works tend to avoid the obvious incongruity of viewing North Korea from the capitalist side of the Cold War paradigm and instead fall victim to the less obvious incongruity of applying, explicitly or implicitly, the socialist side of the paradigm, when in fact the Cold War paradigm itself may no longer be suitable to today’s North Korea. This trend strongly influenced literature of the 1990s which assumed that North Korea still followed the classical socialist model. Scholars reasoned that if its socialist economy was failing, just as all other socialist economies had, then its political system would same crisis of legitimacy which forced Eastern European socialism to collapse or China and Vietnam to reform. As North Korea’s economy showed few signs of either collapse or reform, then the explanation for its persistence, scholars believed, must lie in the ideological realm. The work during this period did much good to highlight variations in North Korean political ideology from classical socialist ideology; however, this body of literature largely misses equally influential shifts in North Korea’s economic structure. The inability to integrate the state’s contemporary economic transition with

ideological explanations was bound to result in underspecified narratives which painted the uncanny persistence of North Korea's political legitimacy in broad, historical, and cultural strokes.

While the literature of the 90s suffered from a lack of data more than theoretical blinders, the same may not be said of scholarship on North Korean legitimacy since 2001. Defector studies that emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000s reported unimaginable hardships. By the mid-2000's, however, a finer-grained picture emerged. The distribution of suffering had differed greatly by region, and defectors from the hardest hit regions, it turned out, had also defected in the greatest numbers and were therefore the most frequently surveyed. The famine and post-Cold War environment induced a great number of changes in North Korea's economic structure including the discontinuance of the public distribution system, emergence of privatized farming on family managed plots, and expansion of markets and entrepreneurial activity. If one assumes that North Korea's government is ideologically committed to socialism in the classical sense, or even in "the classical sense, with North Korean attributes", then it is difficult not to view this post-socialist market activity as blatant disregard for Pyongyang's policies and legitimacy. This perspective has been repeated *ad nauseum* in the literature on North Korea since 2001 to the present.

However, if one believes that state and society have transitioned beyond the scope of the classical model, developed a new system with new properties, and negotiated a kind of pragmatic compromise, then the improvements of the last fifteen years may instead be viewed as a type of interaction with Pyongyang that rather bolsters its domestic legitimacy. Chapter 4 reevaluates data from studies assuming North Korea's illegitimacy and shows that given a different model and perspective, such as that presented in Chapter 3, the same data can be used to draw very different conclusions. Of course, in order to understand how North Korea's supposedly totalitarian state might even be capable of compromising with its population, we must first revisit another systemic theory of legitimacy, that of totalitarian states.

2.2 Legitimacy in Totalitarian Systems

While Kornai's formulation of socialist systems has reinforced critiques of North Korea's supposedly socialist economy, a much more extensive tradition on political systems underwrites critiques of the DPRK's supposedly totalitarian regime. Some of the earliest scholarship on the subject recognizes that power in totalitarian systems depends on an ideology that is "no longer an objective issue about which people may have opinions, but as real and untouchable an element in their lives as the rules of arithmetic (Arendt, 1951: 61)." It is this ideology that qualitatively distinguishes totalitarian from authoritarian or democratic regimes (Linz & Stepan, 1996), by not only exercising ultimate coercive or material power, but also providing "some ultimate meaning, sense of historical purpose, and interpretation of social reality (Linz, 1975: 187)." Linz argues that in order to project a consistent message and eliminate competing interpretations, totalitarian power is typically wielded by a single mass power and concentrated in an individual or small group. Authoritarian power may tolerate some limited and weak political plurality, and rather than mobilizing society by means of a uniquely customized ideology, may simply claim to exercise legitimate authority by virtue of the de facto values of modern rational-legalism, such as efficiency, procedural consistency, and productivity (Huntington, 1991). Totalitarian power, on the other hand, has zero tolerance for plurality. Furthermore, "the distinction between state and society is obliterated and participants in politics by the citizenry is encouraged, demanded, rewarded, and channeled through the party. Passive obedience and apathy are considered undesirable by totalitarian rulers (Linz, 1975)." Whereas authoritarian states may tolerate indifference but not resistance, a totalitarian "regime does not tolerate resistance or indifference (Tilly, 1978)." Under totalitarian authority, the difference between state and society is erased as society is absolutely mobilized and a singular political ideology pervades all dimensions of life.

As totalitarian authority has often accompanied centrally planned economic regimens throughout the Twentieth Century, the violence, extremism, and invasiveness of this type of political system have most commonly been justified within a developmental context similar to that described by Kornai. Implemented in highly unequal, developmentally backwards, and impoverished societies, totalitarian regimes reason that radical action is required to correct the extreme failures of prior generations

of rulers and transform society into the ideal state as canonized by official state ideology. In their study *Political Terror in Communist Systems*, Dallin and Breslauer lay out a developmental model of terror comprised of a 1) take-over stage, 2) mobilization state, and 3) post-mobilization decline of terror (Dallin & Breslauer, 1970). Just as communist ideology posits that upon the realization of the communist utopia, the revolutionary vanguard will be rendered unnecessary and disassemble, so too does totalitarian authority promise that once political goals have been achieved, the regime will no longer have need to resort to cruel and arbitrary violence. Thus while openly acknowledging the severe sacrifices required of society under its administration, the totalitarian state also offers reassurances that the era of sacrifice is a temporary but necessary developmental phase.

Not unlike Kornai's exposition on the loss of legitimacy in socialist systems, the maintenance of legitimacy in totalitarian systems rests on the consistency between the state's official ideological narrative and the state of affairs on the ground. Perhaps counterintuitive to citizens of liberal democracies, Kornai argues that a decline in terror in totalitarian societies can actually destabilize legitimacy as it may be perceived as a sign of softening or disillusionment on the part of officials. Likewise, as in the decline socialist systems, blatant failures to achieve developmental landmarks will, over time, prolong fatigue, engender dissatisfaction, and erode legitimacy both within and without the upper echelons of power.

Models of the totalitarian system help us to understand the longevity and internal logic of brutal regimes, governments whose existence and legitimacy baffles those whose identities, social relations, and public life are not entirely submerged in the all-encompassing ideology. The model can also help us to understand how the injection of plurality, embrace of reform, or failure to achieve developmental goals can destabilize system legitimacy and induce changes in the state's ideology or claim to authority. However, evidence of the North Korea's increasing political plurality, tolerance of activities once heavily censored, and the erosion of the developmental rationale all suggest that the ideal type of totalitarianism may not be as appropriate a label for the DPRK as has been believed. As with Kornai's theory of legitimacy in socialist systems, my critiques with respect to system-based theories of political legitimacy are not aimed

at the theories themselves, but rather the application of these system labels as operational categories rather than instructive ideal types. The direct extension of irrelevant theoretical concepts or empirical cases imposes irrelevant assumptions to the North Korean case and obscures the complex reality on the ground. I summarize my critiques into three categories.

First, a few key publications as well as North Korea's recent tendency to suddenly flip-flop policies and commitments, suggest that authority in North Korea is being redistributed across an increasingly plural power base. *North Korea Under Kim Jong Il: From Consolidation to Systemic Dissonance* forwards this thesis based on analysis of primary official and unofficial source documents and *Inside the Red Box: North Korea's Post-Totalitarian Politics* concludes the same following an extensive analysis of speeches, commentaries, and articles (Kim, 2006; McEachern, 2010). Following the decline of his father's health in the early 90s, Kim Jong Il is believed to have faced a great challenge in consolidating power across the party, state bureaucracy, and military. The above studies argue that Kim Jong Il appears not to have achieved the same level of control his father had, and instead resorted to political maneuvers such as stove-piping parallel organs to minimize between-agency communication and marginalizing elite leadership by commandeering their chains of command directly under his control. Nonetheless, Kim and McEachern believe that in spite of these maneuvers to consolidate power absolutely, signs of plurality and differences of perspective appear commonly in official documents and media. One can only imagine that such plurality will become increasingly pronounced now that the inexperienced, twenty-something Kim Jong Un has taken the reigns. As McEachern pronounces with the title of his book, the fact that this plurality has already manifest itself publicly casts doubt on the future applicability of the totalitarian model to the North Korean case.

Second, evidence of widespread market activity, the spread of DVD players and foreign media, the normalization of criticism regarding Pyongyang's poor economic prowess, and the state's only recent tolerance of these activities suggests an increase in political liberalization and a reduction, not necessarily in the severity and frequency of violence, but in the arbitrariness of its application. In fact Pyongyang's use of terror has reportedly increased in the months since Kim Jong Un assumed power however the

regime's use of violence has been concentrated on political, and not economic deviance. Thus the bureaucracy has ample capacity for coercion, but is making conscious decisions to censure some activities and not others. Given that both state official ideology and state security divisions have both strongly opposed free markets, foreign media, and all forms of political criticism in the past, the government's present policies to overlook these activities constitutes considerable flexibility for a supposedly totalitarian regime which is theorized to tolerate neither resistance nor indifference.

Third, the developmental perspective is a keystone of both Kornai's analysis of socialist legitimacy as well as Dallin and Breslauer's model of totalitarian terror, because in these theories it is the engine of hope that motivates the costly and exhausting mobilization and justifies the many sacrifices required of society by the state. However, fifteen years have passed since the peak of the famine, two decades have elapsed since the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe, Beijing announced its groundbreaking reforms well over thirty years ago, and North Korea's economy is still muddling along while those of its former Cold War allies are growing in leaps and bounds. North Korea has few friends in the international community, and its erratic security policies place immense strain on its existing diplomatic relations. I would venture to say no one outside of North Korea believes that the country is poised to take a great leap forward in its current state. And from my in-country interviews with government officials and aid recipient families, I can attest that no North Koreans I met harbor such fantasies either. This prolonged state of affairs has not only shattered all beliefs in the superiority of socialism as an economic system, but has also eroded confidence in the developmental thesis of North Korea's economic and political ideology.

As with the misapplication of the socialist type, many misunderstandings in the recent literature on North Korea may be traced back to the false assumptions that accompanied the improper characterization of North Korea as totalitarian, particularly in the literature since 2001. A more proper understanding of political legitimacy in North Korea requires more suitable theories about the regime's shifting identity amid the country's economic and political transitions. Applying the method of contrasts, Chapter 3 identifies key features of political legitimacy in present-day North Korea which

distinguish it from that of the socialist and authoritarian states of East Asia and Eastern Europe.

3. Comparative Features of North Korean Legitimacy

Considering the differences and similarities in totalitarian and authoritarian regimes, one can imagine the transition of an ideologically grounded totalitarian system to an authoritarian system wherein the role of political ideology has been weakened and layered alongside rational-economic values. If one still insisted on labeling the North, it might be classified as somewhere between totalitarian and authoritarian and somewhere between a socialist and post-socialist economy. But rather than crudely stitch these ill-fitting theories into some odd, hand-me-down model, thereby giving further credence to North Korean exceptionalism, let us apply the method of contrasts to those cases most similar to North Korea and derive some essential features of legitimate authority useful for distinguishing those cases.

This chapter presents three sets of contrasts from which are distilled three features of political legitimacy in North Korea. The first comparison contrasts the Asian socialist states, socialist China, North Korea, and Vietnam, with the Eastern European socialist states. Unlike socialist Eastern Europe, Asia's socialist regimes are shown to have originally derived their legitimacy from a post-colonial mandate to protect national sovereignty as well as a late-industrialization mandate to rapidly develop its economy. The national sovereignty mandate remains intact in all three Asian states in spite of socialism's economic failings in both Europe and Asia. The lack of this second layer of legitimacy in Eastern Europe helps explain why the Asian socialist states have been able to survive a post-socialist transition while Eastern Europe's socialist regimes were not.

The second comparison contrasts state-society relations and modes of instigating institutional change in authoritarian and democratic systems. Political freedoms enable direct participation in economic and political processes in liberal democracies. In authoritarian systems where such direct participation and flexibility is not present, civil disobedience and local deviance from national policies may often be legitimate feedback and negotiating mechanisms in authoritarian systems rather than rebellious protests against an illegitimate regime.

The third set of comparisons contrasts North Korea with China and Vietnam. Though similar in many ways, China and Vietnam have been able to implement economic reforms and sanction phenomenal social change from the top down whereas North Korea has yet to do so. Contrasts reveal that while institutional reform in China and Vietnam may have been instigated locally, it was only implemented globally when sufficient pluralism existed among the political elite and when the state no longer faced an existential threat by its Cold War counterpart. While pluralism appears to be on the rise within North Korea's elite political institutions, its strategically disadvantaged position relative to South Korea remains a major obstacle to the sanctioning and implementation of top-down reforms.

3.1 Multiple Legitimizing Criteria

Transitions are ideal starting points as the transition from a socialist to post-socialist economy and the transition from totalitarian to post-totalitarian authority are precisely what communist China and Vietnam were able to achieve and Eastern Europe was not. Totalitarian communism first gained a foothold in Eastern Europe immediately following the chaos of WWII, Eastern Europe's poverty and underdevelopment relative to the West, and with the coercive assistance of the Soviet Union. Heavy handed Soviet intervention eroded communism's political legitimacy in Eastern Europe as manifest in such events as the 1956 Hungarian Uprising, 1968 Prague Spring, and 1980 Polish Solidarity. The stagnation and systemic inefficiencies of socialism fostered ideological doubts among state officials and society alike. The dependence of Eastern Europe's communist parties on the superiority, leadership, and economic support of the Soviet Union left them even more vulnerable when Gorbachev finally announced his policy of Perestroika.

The foundations of legitimacy in Asia's socialist states arise from considerably different factors. In addition to being economically underdeveloped relative to the former industrialized nations, early Communist North Korea, China and Vietnam also found themselves emerging from extended periods of foreign occupation which fed into protracted civil wars and national division along ideological Cold War battle lines. In

their 1995 study contrasting Vietnam with China, Fforde and Goldstone forwarded a legitimacy thesis for these countries based primarily on their modern experience with imperialism and civil war. The legitimacy of Asia's Communist Parties, they argued, was rooted less in promises of capitalist prosperity nor socialist egalitarianism, and more in their claims to liberating their respective peoples from colonial rule and guarding society from further threats to national sovereignty and ethnic unity (Fforde & Goldstone, 1995). While the independence of Soviet-backed Communist parties throughout Eastern Europe was weakened by domestic skepticism and the Soviet Union feared as a potential benefactor-turned-occupier, the legitimacies of Mao, Kim, and Ho's fiercely independent governments were doubly legitimized as they promised rapid economic development within a larger, predominant sphere of a secure, sovereign, ethnic-nation state.

To these ends, Asia's Communist parties implemented socialist bureaucracies and totalitarian systems not unlike those in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. However, if at times policies in these three countries seemed to favor political education, indoctrination, indeed a radical overhaul and militarization of social life at the expense of economic development, this only indicates the primacy of each country's homegrown ideology of national identity and unity relative to secondary domestic economic concerns. The dual mandates of economic progress nested within the preservation of a strong, independent, national identity is a feature of 20th Century China, North Korea, and Vietnam, not shared in degree and quality by their fellow Communist parties in Eastern Europe, and a critical difference in the legitimate authority structure of these countries.

Major revisions to the socialist economic model began in China in Vietnam even earlier than they did in Eastern Europe, and yet these governments were able to remain in power, relinquishing some control in the economic sphere yet retaining a monopoly of power in the political sphere. Economic liberalization was accompanied by elite factionalism and the introduction of pluralism, albeit limited, into the sphere of national politics; these and the loss of faith in Communism required a radical restructuring of political structure and official ideology. However, while the changes in the economic and political sphere are closely related, they may not simply be reduced to a single,

confounded dimension, i.e. totalitarian-Communism to democratic-capitalism. Those familiar with the transformations underway in contemporary China and Vietnam are aware of the strains, contradictions, and institutional layering brought on by an economic revolution bounded within a changing, but otherwise unbroken political tradition.

It was precisely the national independence component of the dual mandate which has allowed the Asian Communist parties to remain relevant and legitimate, at least in the political sphere, even after their economic policies failed and they lost all legitimacy in the economic sphere. It was precisely the absence of a second, non-economic legitimizing criterion in the Eastern European states which in every case rendered their leadership irrelevant and illegitimate as belief in the Communist economic model crumbled. Thus the structure of legitimating criteria, visualized in this thesis as two concentric spheres (economic, and political) which may be tightly fused (Eastern European cases) or loosely linked (Asian cases), is the first important feature of legitimacy proposed by this thesis.

3.2 Civil Disobedience under Authoritarian Rule

The dual legitimacy structure manifest in states such as socialist, post-colonial China, Vietnam, and North Korea explain the possibility for leadership to retain legitimate authority in the political sphere while permitting radical changes to occur within the economic sphere; however structure alone does not account for the timing and motivation of those changes. The next two sub-chapters consider the positions and actions of masses and elites as they negotiate between prosperity, freedom and regime control within the dual legitimacy structure specified above.

When discussing the political participation of masses in totalitarian and authoritarian regimes, it is helpful to review Weber's ideal types of charismatic and patrimonial authority. As cited earlier, Kornai notes that socialist bureaucracies openly pursue a class policy where the party must educate, lead, and make decisions in behalf of the general population. This paternalistic role is one of the major ideological justifications for centralization and the bureaucratic organization of power (Kornai, 1991:

57). Kornai describes the bureaucracy's power as self-legitimizing; in other words the party has the power and the party knows best.

However, the patriarchal nature of authoritarian authority is not unique to socialist economies. A project was undertaken in 1995 by Brown, Jayasuriya, Bell, and Jones to contrast an Asian model of illiberal democracy from the West's model of liberal democracy (Jones, 1995: 163). Where "enlightenment rationalism has, to a very large degree, shaped our contemporary understanding of democracy and democratization" in the West, Jones argues that a post-colonial technocratic elite of Asia's developmental polis "draws selectively upon traditional Asian understandings of balance and harmony, filial piety, *gotong royong* (cooperation) and non-contentious consensus building to establish order, growth and unity. This paradoxically conservative weave of tradition and national development" results in forms of illiberal democracy having "three distinctive features: first, a non-neutral understanding of the state; second, the evolution of a rationalistic and legalistic technocracy that manages the developing state as a corporate enterprise; finally, the development of a managed rather than a critical public space and civil society (Jones, 1995: 163-4)." This description of a rationalist and legalistic technocracy nested within a patrimonial political sphere is precisely the dual legitimacy structure discussed in the prior sub-chapter.

The social-traditional and developmental-rational aspects of this model of are not exclusive to Asia's developing democracies; indeed traditional values and the developmental rationale of late-industrialization were significant components of legitimate rule in Communist Asia as well. For those favoring analytical arguments to cultural ones, I would argue that while the values and traditions perhaps shape the specific form or mode of authoritarianism, autocratic political systems are certainly not unique to Asia or the East. The occurrence of charismatic leaders and patriarchal dictatorships throughout developing South America, Africa, as well as Asia, suggest that authoritarian systems tends to appear in cases where political or economic crises justify rapid, comprehensive, and relatively simple social mobilization. In Communist Asia, the popular desire to cast off the stigma of late industrialization and decades of colonial occupation was amenable to the rise of charismatic and authoritarian leadership.

While legitimating ideology may differ from case to case and over time, it is useful to consider how elites and non-elites interact within authoritarian systems in order to represent their respective interests and bring about institutional change. Legal rational systems tend to distinguish the position from the holder of the position whereas these two are confounded under patriarchal authority. Thus in a rational democracy, it is possible to simultaneously defame a president and still respect the presidency. With patriarchal authority, however, the system and those directing it are self-legitimizing. Thus either office and office holder are both legitimate, or neither are. Accordingly, changing administrations in legal-rational systems occur regularly and in an institutionalized way by simply shifting the administering team without radical change to the political system itself. The cost of instigating an administration change in authoritarian systems is much greater. Not only is there no institutionalized mechanism for masses to participate in leadership change, but the confounding of office with officer means that there is no simple way to remove a leader without doing significant harm to the system itself. Thus in the rare cases when leadership change is initiated from the bottom up, it will necessarily assume the form of a revolution, challenging both the person and the position.

But wholesale regime change is not the only form of institutional change possible in authoritarian systems. That top-down change in authoritarian systems must be sanctioned by elites often gives the impression to those familiar with legal rational systems that subjects in traditional systems are essentially mindless followers with no means of recourse or influence. Legal rational authority allows elites and masses alike to initiate legal procedures that would change laws and alter policies whereas authoritarian systems often lack such formal procedures. Where such procedures do exist, such as China's system of registering complaints, those procedures tend to be arbitrary, lack authority, and are only effective when elites care to take heed. The absence of systematic and legally enforceable procedures for direct petition, however, does not mean that non-elites are helpless victims of elite paternalism; rather non-elites instead resort to non-systematic and indirect strategies for evoking change.

Non-systematic petitioning to authorities is one approach. Depending on the state's tolerance of petitioning, a more common and safer strategy is to quietly engage

in civil disobedience, not as a political action aimed at criticizing the state or influencing policy, but merely as a coping mechanism. Though not necessarily political by design, as illegal coping mechanisms spread and become institutionalized in a given locale, the more likely they are to be recognized and sanctioned by local, regional, and even central governments. The economic transition literature on China and Vietnam is replete with cases of local models inspiring national policy (Zhou, 1996; Kerkvliet, 2005). Equally plentiful are examples where the state stepped in to correct or reverse local cases of institutionalized non-compliance. Such cases are examples of society indirectly negotiating, successfully or unsuccessfully, with the authoritarian state. While authoritarian regimes may lack formal institutions for redressing grievances and allowing grassroots participation in institutional change, informal grassroots coping mechanisms followed either by post-facto legalization or prohibition from the top-down constitutes a form of state-society interaction and an effort by the state to be responsive and relevant to conditions on the ground. In contrast to those political activities designed to undermine the regime and destabilize the existing political order, such quiet, commonplace coping mechanisms are not expressions of rebellion against an illegitimate political order. To the contrary, their very reserved nature and the tendency of these practices to eventually receive tacit or formal support by local governments indicates a desire by non-elite actors to work within and ultimately be recognized by the current political order.

A final attribute of authoritarian authority pertinent to our discussion of Communist regimes is society's view of the government's use of violence as a political tool. In a given context, ideologies of revolution, development, or social justice may be invoked to explain the use of political terror, or no reason may be offered at all. Underlying any reason or circumstance, however, the authority of an authoritarian bureaucracy to wield violence is derived from its position as guardian of the state. Just as authoritarian authority is self-legitimated, the use of violence in patrimonial regimes requires no public approval, no ratifying procedures, and no explanation. For those unfamiliar with life under an authoritarian state, a familiar example of patriarchal authority can be instructive. In the eyes of an outside observer, an abusive husband or derelict father may be viewed as unfit, even illegitimate. Within the bounds of

authoritarian domination, however, a husband and father, no matter how abusive or incompetent, will still be viewed as head of the household. That is not to say that wife and child will not adopt strategies to minimize their suffering; however, evidence of such self-preserving activities ought not to be confounded with waning belief in the patriarchal order nor the legitimacy of the patriarch within the home. Coping mechanisms and actions intended to protect one's self from political violence must be distinguished from political action aimed at crippling the state or its capacity to wage terror. The latter indicate an actor's belief that his state is illegitimate; the former do not.

3.3 Elite Pluralism and Strategic Advantage

While local coping mechanisms and grass-roots innovation have been cited by many as the impetus for post-socialist transition in East Asia, systematic change has only occurred when the state has responded to and provided institutional support for trends on the ground. Whether in China, Vietnam, or North Korea, centralized institutions have lagged local innovation by years, even decades. In order to better understand how Chinese and Vietnamese leadership were able to relinquish centralized control over the socialist economy far earlier and in greater degree than North Korea, we ought to consider 1) the structure of leadership and 2) the historical strategic context within which both legitimacy and leadership structures have operated.

Reform in China and Vietnam only occurred when both of these factors were favorably aligned. In China, the historical strategic context shifted in favor of reform as early as the late 50s, by which time China had successfully held off US forces in North Korea and overtaken Taiwan in terms of military and economic power. The 60s and 70s only saw China's strategic position improve vis-à-vis Taiwan and the United States. A second successful engagement against US forces in Vietnam and China's replacing Taiwan on the UN Security Council shored up China's strategic dominance vis-à-vis any legitimate contenders for Chinese sovereignty. Rather it is the first factor, the transition from totalitarian charismatic leadership to a more abstracted, patrimonial system that delayed reform in China. Indeed as early as the early 60s reform factions led by Deng and Liu attempted to dismantle Mao's disastrous economic policies but were promptly

censured and all future attempts at constructive reform were halted during Mao's lifetime thanks to the Cultural Revolution. Immediately following Mao's death, however, a factional battle ensued, Mao's designated successor was handily dethroned, and Deng's reformers leveraged China's favorable strategic environment and the overwhelmingly pro-reform public opinion to rise to power.

In Vietnam, the same two factors developed, but under different times and circumstances. For one, the VCP's protracted struggle against colonial occupiers-turned-Cold War crusaders required political coalition building over several decades, making Vietnam's Communist Party more pluralist than China's. Personality would also seem to play a factor here. Ho Chi Minh simply did not possess the same level of ruthlessness as Mao when it came to eliminating internal contenders and instead embraced a policy of collective leadership. This combination of factors enabled Le Duan to capitalize on the split between Ho Chi Minh and Truong Trinh as early as 1957 and eventually seize the top post of First Secretary of the Worker's Party, relegating Ho to the more or less symbolic position of President until his death in 1969. The end of the Vietnam War brought two significant changes to the structure of leadership and the strategic environment in which it operated. For one, at war's end, Hanoi was forced to incorporate Viet Cong elites, many of whom favored economic reform, into the upper ranks of the party. Additionally, the fall of Saigon effectively eliminated all external, legitimate threats to North Vietnamese sovereignty. Even still, Doi Moi would not be implemented until after a final, disastrous attempt to collectivize farming in the early 80s, which solidified domestic pro-reform sentiment, and Le Duan's death in 1986, which allowed the reformist Viet Cong faction to sweep into power and implement a host of post-socialist policies.

In spite of sharing similar legitimacy structures, the differences between North Korea's leadership structure and historical strategic environment and those of China and Vietnam can in large part account for the difference in pace and mode of economic reform in the three countries. For one, Kim Il Sung rose to power not through decades of coalition building like Mao and Ho, but through sudden promotion by Soviet occupation forces in the DPRK. Competing with three other factions for domestic hegemony, Kim only achieved a wide base of popular support after fifteen years of

political machinations and another decade of supplanting the core of North Korean cultural and political identities with his cult of personality. While Ho and Mao had no choice but to work within pluralist coalitions, Kim Il Sung attacked dissent, solidifying his totalitarian administration. The effects of these orientations towards or against pluralism bled into the following generation as well. While Ho was marginalized during his own lifetime and Mao's designated successor served little more as a place holder in the year after Mao's death, Kim Il Sung decided in the early 70s to immortalize his legacy by founding a dynastic system of succession, a system which is currently transitioning into its third generation despite the many recent indications of systemic dissonance and post-totalitarian transition.

The structure of leadership in North Korea is certainly one factor for the regime's reluctance to reform; however, that alone may not take all the credit for North Korea's inflexibility. The historical strategic context in which North Korea's leadership and legitimacy structures have operated have also severely limited its leadership's options for reform, relative to China and Vietnam. From the Chinese and Vietnamese cases, we observe that reformist factions only ever succeeded in elevating economic reform to the foremost priority after all significant, existential threats to the regime were neutralized. In other words, each state's leadership could only ever conceive of decoupling their utterly devastated economic sphere from the security mandate of the political sphere once their position vis-à-vis the very real threat posed by their Cold War alter ego had been eliminated or unquestionably superior. For China, this happened early on with its developing a nuclear arsenal, surpassing Taiwan in economic and military power in the 1950s, and eventually replacing Taiwan on the UN Security Council in 1974. For Vietnam, this occurred with North Vietnam's absorption of the South. In North Korea, this has yet to happen. North and South Korea contended for hegemony on the peninsula up through the late 1970s, but by the mid-1980s as South Korea's economy boomed and the North's stagnated, it became evident that the North had lost any chance of catching up, economically or militarily. Since that time, regime security has only become an increasingly dominant theme in North Korean politics, and the single-greatest factor standing in the way of sanctioned reform. The external threats to North Korea's sovereignty, and more to the point, its leadership, have not, however,

halted North Korean society from adopting extra-legal measures to survive extreme economic hardship. They have however prevented the regime from endorsing and implementing wide-spread economic changes that would, in its estimation, expose the nation's population to subversive outside forces. Thus until North Korea's security dilemma is resolved to the satisfaction of the regime, it is unlikely that they will willingly release the economic sphere in the fashion of China and Vietnam. On the other hand, as post-socialist institutions continue to develop from the bottom up, the regime may have little choice but to legalize post-facto a limited range of changes from the inside out.

Multiple legitimating criteria explain how the governments of socialist East Asia could retain their political legitimacy in spite of widespread and prolonged economic stagnation. Furthermore, the dominant form of legitimate authority may differ between layers. With respect to Weber's typologies, one could say that the political systems of China and Vietnam transitioned from charismatic to patrimonial authority, legitimized primarily by a historical mandate to preserve national sovereignty and restore unity. As the threat to national sovereignty lessened, the two Communist Parties, while still retaining their traditional authority in the political sphere, discarded socialist ideology and embraced a form of legal rationalism, in the economic sphere. Thus the tension observed in contemporary China and Vietnam today arise most often from incompatibilities between traditional, patrimonial politics and pragmatic, rational economics. As North Korean society gradually enlarges their claim on the domestic economy, essentially the same type of layering is occurring. The dual nature of legitimate authority has meant, at least to this point, that even while each center has negotiated a post-socialist transition with the entrepreneurial elements of its society to the point of tolerating extra-legal coping mechanisms in the economic sphere, these activities have rarely ventured into the realm of the political sphere. Thus the process of post-socialist transformation in socialist East Asia may be thought of as ongoing negotiations between the center and the margins over the boundaries between economic rationalism and political patrimonialism.

4. Reinterpreting North Korean Defector Studies

If we lack any information about North Korean society, it is not for lack of defector surveys. Since the influx of North Korean migrants entered the double digits and then the triple digits in the late 1990s and into the 2000s, South Korean agencies and NGOs have conducted countless surveys among this small but growing population. The chart below indicates those publications most cited in the North Korean studies literature such studies which focus specifically on the ongoing transformations in North Korea. There is surprising amount of consistency in the overlapping portions of these surveys, particularly with regard to the timeline and details of North Korea's transformation. Along with the similarities in the data, four of five studies conclude that the ongoing transformations in North Korea serve to delegitimize its government.

In this chapter we revisit the data presented in these studies, but rather than apply the paradigm of illegitimacy where the North Korean is center fraying amidst the backdrop of a failing totalitarian state and socialist economy, we instead employ the alternative features presented in Chapter 3. From this alternative perspective, the results of these studies may just as easily be cited as evidence for a transforming, relevant, and domestically legitimate North Korean government.

4.1 Study #1: Regime Durability between 1996 and 2005

The first study was conducted in 2006 among 314 North Korean migrants who had recently entered South Korea and were being housed in South Korea's re-education facility known as Hanawŏn, 2007: n. Items in this study were originally designed in 1996 by researchers at the Research Institute of National Unification, precursor to the Korea Institute for National Unification, as a measure of the durability of the North Korean system. Each answer is scored on a scale from 1 to 4 where a '1' means the North Korean systems is very stable and '4' indicates that the system is in a very dangerous position. Item scores are grouped and aggregated into one of five categories: ideology, elites, economy, regulation, and foreign relations. Subjects were asked to evaluate each item for the years between 1996 and 2005 (Chŏn, 2007: 1-7).

Table 1. Studies of North Korean defectors

| Sub-chapter | Year Published | Authors | Year of Study | N | Interview Location | General Topics of Study |
|--------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|----------------------|----------|---------------------------|--|
| 4.1 | 2007 | Chŏn (KINU) | 2006 | 314 | South Korea | Regime durability between 1996-2005 |
| 4.2 | 2007 | Bank of Korea | 2006 | 335 | South Korea | NK income, consumption & market activity |
| 4.3 | 2008 | Chang, Haggard & Noland | 2004-5 | 1346 | N East China | Factors contributing to PTSD |
| 4.3 | 2009 | Chang, Haggard & Noland | | | N East China | Refugee Assessments of NK Transition |
| 4.4 | 2008 | Kim & Song (SNU) | 2004-5 | 700 | South Korea | Participation of NK Households in Informal Economy |
| 4.3 | 2010 | Haggard & Noland | 2008 | 300 | South Korea | More detailed questions about arrest and detention |
| 4.3 | 2010 | Haggard & Noland | | | South Korea | Reform from below |
| 4.5 | 2012 | Nknet | 2011 | 300 | South Korea | Food aid survey |

Not surprisingly, attitudes about ideology were bleak. In response to the item *Observance of Kim Il Sung Ideology in Daily Life*, scores ranged from an average of 1.96 in 1996 to 3.05 in 2005, indicating that Kim Il Sung's ideology has suffered a major decline in the previous decade. What this question does not capture is the degree to which Songun, Kim Jong Il's ideology that was intended to supplant Juche in the post-Cold War era, has been internalized in place of Juche. However, other items in the ideology index, such as *Recognition on the Inheritance of Power from Kim Il Sung to Kim Jong Il*, scored even less favorably (3.41), suggesting that attitudes towards political idealism in general and the charisma of the Kim Family specifically are quite unfavorable. However at an average value of 3.74, *Observance of Collectivism* was rejected most strongly of all. Referring to a sense of nationalist collectivism, researchers interpreted this result to mean that for many, family and individual identities were becoming more dominant than political identities. These findings are consistent with the ground-breaking work of Hyŏn-sŏn Pak, who first wrote about the increasing predominance of family identity over political identity in the post-famine era, as families had acted as the primary economic unit upon which individuals relied to survive the times of greatest food insecurity (Pak, 2001). The composite picture rendered by these items is not one of active rebellion in the ideological sphere but rather a sense of apathy and retreat to the more practical realms of the economic sphere.

Indices in the economic category support this conjecture. With an average scores ranging from 3.27 in 1996 and 3.62 in 2005, *The Occupancy of Unofficial Area in North Korean Economy* indicates that dependence on the unofficial economy was already high at the peak of the famine and only increased in the period after. Interestingly enough, values appear to plateau in 2002. The authors claim this is likely due to the influx of foreign aid from South Korea and China (Chŏn, 2007: 53-54). The 7.1 Reforms of 2002 also coincide with this date, possibly suggesting that with the easing of domestic market restrictions, many sectors of the economy which had been unofficial were no longer viewed as such. This narrative is also consistent with the general consensus that 2002 Reforms did not actually implement any novel policies but rather formally legalized a range of economic activities, from the privatization of family farmland to the expansion of markets, which had occurred ad hoc during and after the

Table 2. The Occupancy of Unofficial Area in North Korean Economy

| | | | | | | | | | | |
|---------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Gender | 1996 | 1997 | 1998 | 1999 | 2000 | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 |
| Male | 3.44 | 3.43 | 3.53 | 3.49 | 3.58 | 3.61 | 3.63 | 3.62 | 3.60 | 3.61 |
| Female | 3.23 | 3.43 | 3.47 | 3.46 | 3.50 | 3.53 | 3.54 | 3.51 | 3.55 | 3.57 |
| Total | 3.28 | 3.43 | 3.48 | 3.46 | 3.52 | 3.55 | 3.57 | 3.56 | 3.57 | 3.59 |
| Place of Residence | 1996 | 1997 | 1998 | 1999 | 2000 | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 |
| Pyongyang | 3.00 | 3.00 | 2.50 | 2.00 | 2.00 | 2.00 | 2.00 | 2.00 | 2.00 | 2.00 |
| Haamkyungdo | 3.26 | 3.43 | 3.51 | 3.53 | 3.62 | 3.64 | 3.65 | 3.64 | 3.66 | 3.70 |
| Pyongahndo | 3.00 | 3.13 | 3.27 | 3.21 | 3.29 | 3.31 | 3.36 | 3.50 | 3.50 | 3.44 |
| Hwanghaedo | 3.50 | 3.40 | 3.00 | 2.50 | 2.50 | 2.50 | 2.50 | 2.50 | 2.50 | 1.00 |
| Yangjakangdo | 3.33 | 3.33 | 3.44 | 3.29 | 3.17 | 3.17 | 3.50 | 3.25 | 3.33 | 3.33 |
| Kangwondo | 3.67 | 3.67 | 3.63 | 3.75 | 3.75 | 4.00 | 4.00 | 4.00 | 4.00 | 4.00 |
| Total | 3.27 | 3.41 | 3.48 | 3.47 | 3.53 | 3.56 | 3.58 | 3.57 | 3.59 | 3.60 |
| Job | 1996 | 1997 | 1998 | 1999 | 2000 | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 |
| Worker | 3.29 | 3.46 | 3.55 | 3.49 | 3.54 | 3.58 | 3.57 | 3.61 | 3.60 | 3.62 |
| Farmer | 3.39 | 3.56 | 3.67 | 3.77 | 3.73 | 3.67 | 3.75 | 3.83 | 3.83 | 3.83 |
| Intelligent People | 2.88 | 2.94 | 2.94 | 2.85 | 3.17 | 3.25 | 3.36 | 3.13 | 3.25 | 3.25 |
| Student | 3.17 | 3.35 | 3.50 | 3.67 | 3.83 | 3.91 | 3.90 | 4.00 | 4.00 | 4.00 |
| Officer | 3.33 | 3.33 | 3.33 | 3.60 | 3.60 | 3.50 | 3.50 | 3.50 | 3.50 | 3.50 |
| Soldier (private Rank) | 3.25 | 3.25 | 3.25 | 3.25 | 3.33 | 3.50 | 4.00 | 4.00 | 4.00 | 4.00 |
| International Officer | 4.00 | 4.00 | 4.00 | 4.00 | 4.00 | 4.00 | 4.00 | 4.00 | 4.00 | 4.00 |
| Total | 3.27 | 3.42 | 3.50 | 3.48 | 3.55 | 3.58 | 3.61 | 3.63 | 3.63 | 3.64 |
| Classification of Social Strata | 1996 | 1997 | 1998 | 1999 | 2000 | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 |
| Core Class | 2.81 | 3.00 | 3.07 | 2.89 | 2.93 | 3.00 | 3.00 | 3.08 | 3.08 | 3.25 |
| Worker Class | 3.23 | 3.39 | 3.49 | 3.56 | 3.60 | 3.67 | 3.67 | 3.67 | 3.70 | 3.71 |
| Unstable Class | 3.48 | 3.61 | 3.65 | 3.60 | 3.66 | 3.65 | 3.69 | 3.69 | 3.71 | 3.74 |
| Hostile Class | 3.50 | 3.67 | 3.63 | 3.67 | 3.92 | 4.00 | 4.00 | 4.00 | 4.00 | 4.00 |
| Total | 3.26 | 3.41 | 3.49 | 3.49 | 3.56 | 3.60 | 3.63 | 3.62 | 3.63 | 3.66 |

(Table cited from Chŏn, 2007)

famine. As expected, measures of the food situation, household necessities and daily habitation circumstances all indicated steady improvements between 1996 and 2005 (Chŏn, 2007: 55-59).

While the antipathy of defectors towards ideology and the emergence of a post-socialist economy are often cited as evidence that North Koreans are likely to view their government as illegitimate, an interactive model of legitimacy requires that we first consider how the state has responded to these political and economic changes, and how the population views the state's responsiveness. Chŏn's category, *Assessment of Government Control*, approaches this question more directly than most instruments or studies available. Indicators of the first sub-category *Social Regulation*, as measured by *Regulation of People by the Public Security Office* (Chŏn, 2007: 67-68), *Regulation of Illegal Behavior by the Public Security Office* (Chŏn, 2007: 69-70), and *Restriction of Movement* (Chŏn, 2007: 72-73) all began low in 1996, slightly increased until 1999 as the famine ended and the state attempted to reassert some sense of control, but then tabled out after 1999 and did not increase during the 2002 Reforms or afterwards. This is consistent with the narrative that the state only experienced limited success reasserting control but ultimately was not able to reverse the increasing privatization and marketization. Rather than ignore the reality on the ground or rely solely on coercive force, the state instead opted for the reforms of 2002, conceding room in the social and economic spheres in exchange for continued control of the political sphere.

The items measuring *Political Opposition*, the second sub-category in *Assessment of Government Control*, also increased since 1996. *Expression of Political Dissatisfaction* increased steadily substantially over the decade (Chŏn, 2007: 75-76). *Possibility of the Existence of Critical Power* and *Acts Critical of the North Korean System*, both measures of material opposition to the regime, also increased over the ten years, but in far smaller increments and at much lower levels (Chŏn, 2007: 78-81). The difference in these indicators is tell-tale. Just as Tiananmen reasserted the boundary between the China's concession of the economic sphere but retention of the political, the contrast of rapid economic transformation in North Korea with the very moderate increases in political liberalization are reminders that while the North Korean state may

Table 3. Expression of Dissatisfaction in Daily Life

| | | | | | | | | | | |
|---------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Gender | 1996 | 1997 | 1998 | 1999 | 2000 | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 |
| Male | 2.49 | 2.45 | 2.53 | 2.50 | 2.62 | 2.63 | 2.71 | 2.72 | 2.74 | 2.74 |
| Female | 1.95 | 2.18 | 2.24 | 2.21 | 2.25 | 2.27 | 2.39 | 2.46 | 2.51 | 2.44 |
| Total | 2.07 | 2.24 | 2.31 | 2.29 | 2.36 | 2.39 | 2.51 | 2.57 | 2.61 | 2.56 |
| Place of Residence | 1996 | 1997 | 1998 | 1999 | 2000 | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 |
| Pyongyang | 2.00 | 2.00 | 1.50 | 1.50 | 2.00 | 2.00 | 3.00 | 3.00 | 4.00 | 4.00 |
| Haamkyungdo | 2.05 | 2.23 | 2.31 | 2.33 | 2.40 | 2.45 | 2.57 | 2.57 | 2.62 | 2.57 |
| Pyongahndo | 2.28 | 2.38 | 2.56 | 2.43 | 2.43 | 2.54 | 2.73 | 2.80 | 2.70 | 2.67 |
| Hwanghaedo | 2.86 | 3.17 | 3.25 | 3.00 | 2.00 | 2.00 | 2.00 | 2.00 | 2.00 | 2.00 |
| Yangjakangdo | 2.11 | 2.33 | 2.33 | 2.14 | 2.33 | 2.33 | 2.50 | 2.75 | 3.33 | 3.33 |
| Kangwondo | 1.78 | 1.89 | 2.00 | 1.50 | 1.75 | 1.67 | 1.00 | 2.50 | 2.50 | 2.50 |
| Total | 2.08 | 2.25 | 2.33 | 2.31 | 2.37 | 2.42 | 2.55 | 2.59 | 2.65 | 2.62 |
| Job | 1996 | 1997 | 1998 | 1999 | 2000 | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 |
| Worker | 2.17 | 2.33 | 2.40 | 2.43 | 2.41 | 2.51 | 2.69 | 2.73 | 2.78 | 2.70 |
| Farmer | 2.37 | 2.58 | 2.50 | 2.67 | 2.90 | 2.88 | 2.83 | 2.60 | 2.60 | 2.60 |
| Intelligent People | 1.81 | 1.94 | 2.13 | 2.25 | 2.36 | 2.36 | 2.70 | 2.50 | 2.88 | 2.88 |
| Student | 1.68 | 1.86 | 2.08 | 1.73 | 1.92 | 2.00 | 1.90 | 1.81 | 2.07 | 2.07 |
| Officer | 2.00 | 2.00 | 2.17 | 2.17 | 2.40 | 2.25 | 2.00 | 2.00 | 2.00 | 2.00 |
| Soldier (private Rank) | 1.50 | 1.75 | 1.75 | 1.75 | 2.33 | 2.50 | 2.50 | 2.50 | 2.50 | 2.50 |
| International Officer | 3.00 | 2.50 | 3.00 | 3.00 | 4.00 | 4.00 | 4.00 | 4.00 | 3.00 | 4.00 |
| Total | 2.10 | 2.25 | 2.34 | 2.34 | 2.41 | 2.48 | 2.60 | 2.59 | 2.68 | 2.63 |
| Classification of Social Strata | 1996 | 1997 | 1998 | 1999 | 2000 | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 |
| Core Class | 1.82 | 2.06 | 2.29 | 2.20 | 2.25 | 2.27 | 2.38 | 2.46 | 2.54 | 2.42 |
| Worker Class | 2.05 | 2.25 | 2.24 | 2.25 | 2.41 | 2.54 | 2.70 | 2.62 | 2.65 | 2.65 |
| Unstable Class | 2.19 | 2.32 | 2.32 | 2.27 | 2.29 | 2.27 | 2.29 | 2.56 | 2.74 | 2.72 |
| Hostile Class | 2.43 | 2.37 | 2.63 | 3.00 | 2.92 | 3.00 | 3.33 | 3.14 | 3.50 | 3.50 |
| Total | 2.09 | 2.25 | 2.30 | 2.32 | 2.41 | 2.46 | 2.59 | 2.62 | 2.72 | 2.68 |

(Table cited from Chŏn, 2007)

not view it politically advantageous to roll back grass root economic reforms, it will not hesitate to assert its authority in the political domain.

The third sub-category, *Counter Culture*, also manifests this clear distinction. Indicators for the *Existence of a Capitalist Culture* and *Existence of Shamanistic Customs* increased steadily and significantly between 1996 and 2005 whereas the indicator for *Existence of Religious Activity* was extremely low in 1996 and increased very little by 2005. Pertinent indicators from the Foreign Relations category, namely *Knowledge of South Korean Circumstance*, *Knowledge on China's Change*, and *Knowledge on Capitalist Countries* all increased substantially during the ten year period. Again, not unlike post-socialist China and Vietnam, North Korea too appears to be tolerating previously unimaginable transformations in secular culture as well as participation in indigenous customs. However, also like China and Vietnam, the state in North Korea has firmly retained religious activity (particularly of Western religions) within the realm of the political sphere and public sanctions for organized religious activity remain as strict as ever (e.g. public execution).² This data reflects a North Korean state that has been forced to negotiate with society and cede considerable ground in the domains germane to everyday life, but stakes a firm claim in others, namely political activity and the influx of certain types of cultural influences.

And what insights do we have into North Korean society's response to this new arrangement? I argue that defector attitudes reflected in this report are consistent with the putative transition of the political system from an authoritarian to a totalitarian regime. For one, the regime appears less insistent on participation in political life and generally content so long as its citizenry do not proactively resist. The report claims that in North Korea, "if [people] pretend to be following the rules, they do not face big problems in life (Chöhn, 2007: 77)." Two, rather than interpret the increase of political criticism as delegitimizing, one could view that change as an indicator of slight

² It is worth noting that, like in the United States, a large evangelical Christian constituency dominates much of the political right in South Korea. Hence much of South Korea's political discourse about human rights and liberalization of North Korean society, not unlike the West's assessment of China, may have a tendency to view religious freedom as the primary indicator of political liberalization at the expense of other possible indicators such as the liberalization of secular culture, tolerance of indigenous spiritualism, and the influx of foreign media.

liberalization in the political system, also consistent with the shift from an ideologically rooted totalitarian system to a pragmatic and slightly more tolerant authoritarian one. The perception that regulation by public security offices remained unchanged between 1999 and 2005 while public criticism of the regime has steadily increased further supports the notion that the regime has become more tolerant to limited amounts of opposition. Three, the influx of foreign media is unmistakable, as is the regime's increasing tolerance for it. Most homes have DVD players now and most defectors report having watched bootleg South Korean dramas and movies from the West. I can personally attest that viewing Chinese and American movies and television series was absolutely normative among my North Korean co-workers, most of whom were low-level bureaucrats. On the other hand, South Korean media of any kind was expressly forbidden, at least out in the open, demonstrating again both the eagerness and restraint exercised within the incrementally liberalizing public domain.

Lastly, it is worth returning to the measures of *Expression of Political Dissatisfaction*. While male defectors perceived the expression of political dissatisfaction to be much higher than women, the rate of men defecting from the country is significantly lower than that of women's by thirty to forty points at any given time. Certainly many factors are involved in a defector's decision to leave North Korea; however it is interesting that, at least with respect to gender, level of dissatisfaction is not positively correlated with defection rates. This is further evidence that out-migration is by no means synonymous with political dissatisfaction or the silent signs of protest manifest in exit-voice dynamics. It also raises the question of whether the credibility earned by condoning expressions of political dissatisfaction outweighs the impact of the criticism they express. No doubt the North Korean regime has contemplated this trade-off as well; but as negotiations on the border of the political sphere are tricky and have serious implications for the security of the regime, several periods of reform and retrenchment are likely to come and go before the current transition stabilizes.

Though looking at the same data, Chŏn arrives at very different conclusions. He argues that the liberalization of the economic sphere and increased criticism in the political sphere indicate an overall dissatisfaction with the state and constitute non-compliance and resistance. In particular, they note, the marked improvement in

economic circumstances “is very important and it implies that future changes to the North Korean system can be stirred by political rather [than] economic issues (Chŏn, 2007: 59).” The authors conclude that over time, public dissatisfaction with these political issues will further destabilize the North Korean state and that collapse will be imminent in five to ten years.

Chŏn’s interpretation captures the empowerment of society in the wake of the famine and the ad hoc coping mechanisms that came to fill the vacuum caused by the retreat of the weakened state. It fails to consider, however, the interaction between state and society in the post-famine era, namely the remarkable systemic transformations undertaken by the state, the unprecedented concessions it has made to society in the social and economic spheres, and North Koreans’ likely tendency to eagerly occupy and succeed in these newly opened social spaces rather than remain in the highly sensitive political sphere to petition for additional changes. It is true that political attitudes of the defectors are not especially positive, particularly towards the state’s official ideology; however in the course of its transition away from totalitarianism, ideology is precisely one of the elements the state is gradually doing away with. In this sense, basing the stability of the future regime on a criterion which the state is increasingly attempting to downplay may be misleading. Moreover, from the perspective of families and individuals, the data also show that political identity and political activity occupied less and less space in North Korean life during the same period. Taken altogether, one could just as easily conclude that while the state is setting aside socialist ideology in favor of economic pragmatism and leaving post-famine family and community life relatively de-politicized, the majority of families and individuals may be more satisfied with the regime in its receded position and content to occupy the private social and economic real estate they successfully repossessed from the state.

4.2 Study #2: Income, Consumption, and Market Activity

This study of North Korea’s economic transformation was conducted in 2006 by the Bank of Korea. Subjects included 335 North Korean defectors living in Seoul,

Gyeonggi Province, and Pusan. At the time, this sample comprised 17% of South Korea's total North Korean defector population. Of the 334, 70% of the sample originated from North Hamhung Province, 10% from South Hamhung Province, and the remaining 20% from other regions of the DPRK. As most respondents entered the South either during 1997-1999 or 2004-2006, statistics for these two periods were calculated and compared as a rough measure of economic change over time. Survey topics included the level and structure of income, level and structure of consumption, and market activity. All measures indicated that the standard of living for typical North Korean households had significantly improved between the periods of 1997-1999 and 2004-2006.

Lee found that the percentage of salary earnings and market earnings decreased slightly as a fraction of overall household income during the two periods while the level of help from relatives and income from breeding livestock and other activities made up the difference. However, monthly earnings during this period more than tripled, meaning that the relative decrease market earnings does not reflect an absolute decrease in market activity but rather a relative increase in the non-market circulation of earnings such as help to relatives.

This claim can be partly corroborated by consumption statistics. Findings showed that per capita monthly expenditures doubled in the second period from 6 to 12 USD. Comparing these figures to per capita monthly earnings, the bolder result is the difference in expendable income. Expenditures were shown to equal earnings during 1997-1999, suggesting that families saved nothing during this period. By 2004-2006, in the same time that expenditures doubled, earnings more than tripled, meaning that families enjoyed a per capita surplus of 8 USD per month. A portion of this per capita surplus could easily be the source of the miscellaneous expenditures reported by households.

In addition to overall expenditures, the study found that food expenditures as a percentage of household income decreased during the same time period from 80.2% to 70.6%. Furthermore, the composition of staples shifted significantly from the less-preferred staples of potatoes and corn in 1997-1999 to the more preferred staple of rice in 2004-2006. Where corn and potatoes exceeded 75% of average staple consumption

Table 4. Sources of Household Income (%)

| | Salary Earnings | Market Earnings | Other* |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|--------|
| 97-99 Defectors | 7.5 | 91.1 | 1.4 |
| 04-06 Defectors | 5.0 | 88.1 | 6.9 |

*Help from relatives, breeding and bartering livestock
(Table cited from Lee, 2007)

Table 5. Per Capita Monthly Earnings (Dollars)

| 1997 | 1998 | 1999 | 97-99 Average | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 04-06 Average |
|------|------|------|---------------|------|------|------|---------------|
| 5 | 6 | 5 | 6 | 22 | 20 | 19 | 20 |

(Table cited from Lee, 2007)

Table 6. Per Capita Monthly Expenditures (Dollars)

| 1997 | 1998 | 1999 | 97-99 Average | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 04-06 Average |
|------|------|------|---------------|------|------|------|---------------|
| 5 | 6 | 5 | 6 | 10 | 14 | 11 | 12 |

(Table cited from Lee, 2007)

during the 1997-1999 and rice only 19.1%, rice reached 45% of staple consumption in 2004-2006 mainly displacing potato consumption.

The authors conclude North Korea's transition to a market economy is responsible for the remarkable increases in the standard of living. The market economy has been able to expand, they argue, thanks to a loosening of centralized planning, administration, and monitoring systems. Inasmuch as household income overwhelmingly depends on market activities and not on centralized allocations, the authors claim that the state has failed to bear responsibility for survival of its citizens and is essentially ineffectual (Lee, 2007: 12).

The Bank of Korea neither collected information about defector attitudes toward the state or economy nor about the state's role in the ongoing transition. Nevertheless the authors forward the conclusion the state was ineffectual and had failed its obligation to provide for its citizens. This logic is an obvious extension of the systemic theory of North Korea as a socialist state wherein market activity is unsanctioned and illegal. Moving beyond this no longer relevant view point, we can just as easily reinterpret this data from a post-socialist perspective, where the party no longer views its own economy as socialist and the state supports, either actively or tacitly, the expansion of markets. At worst, the North Korean government may spared criticism for excessively impeding the economy between 1997-1999 and 2004-2006, and at best may actually be credited for contributing to the growth during that period.

4.3 Study #3: PTSD and Internal Transformation

Haggard and Noland's book, *Witness to Transformation: Refugee Insights into North Korea* represents the most comprehensive effort to survey North Korean defectors to date (Haggard & Noland, 2011). It summarizes results from two major surveys reported over four papers, one survey conducted during 2004 and 2005 along China's border with North Korea, and another in South Korea in 2008. In addition to having the largest sample size of any such study, this set of surveys is also the only one to have been conducted both in South Korea and out. Given that the content of the 2005 and 2008 surveys are more or less identical, the difference in their results may be

a function of time, environment, and other factors that reveal biases present in South Korea's population of North Korean immigrants.

Perhaps the single-most revealing contrast between the two populations sampled is their response to their main motive for leaving North Korea. As shown in the table below, 94.7% of respondents surveyed in China cite economic conditions as their main motive for leaving North Korea compared to 56.7% surveyed in South Korea. Alternatively, 27.0% of those surveyed in South Korea cite political freedom as their main reason for leaving. The authors propose three reasons for this interesting difference. First, those who left during the famine era may be more likely to claim economic motives compared to those who left during later periods when the economy had improved. Second, the authors note that subjects in the South Korean sample are disproportionately from Pyongyang or other privileged areas whereas the vast majority of those interviewed in China immigrated out of poorer, politically marginal regions. Third, the authors recognize that North Koreans' socialization into South Korea may influence their perspective as well as their propensity to offer politically correct answers (Haggard & Noland, 2011: 30-31).

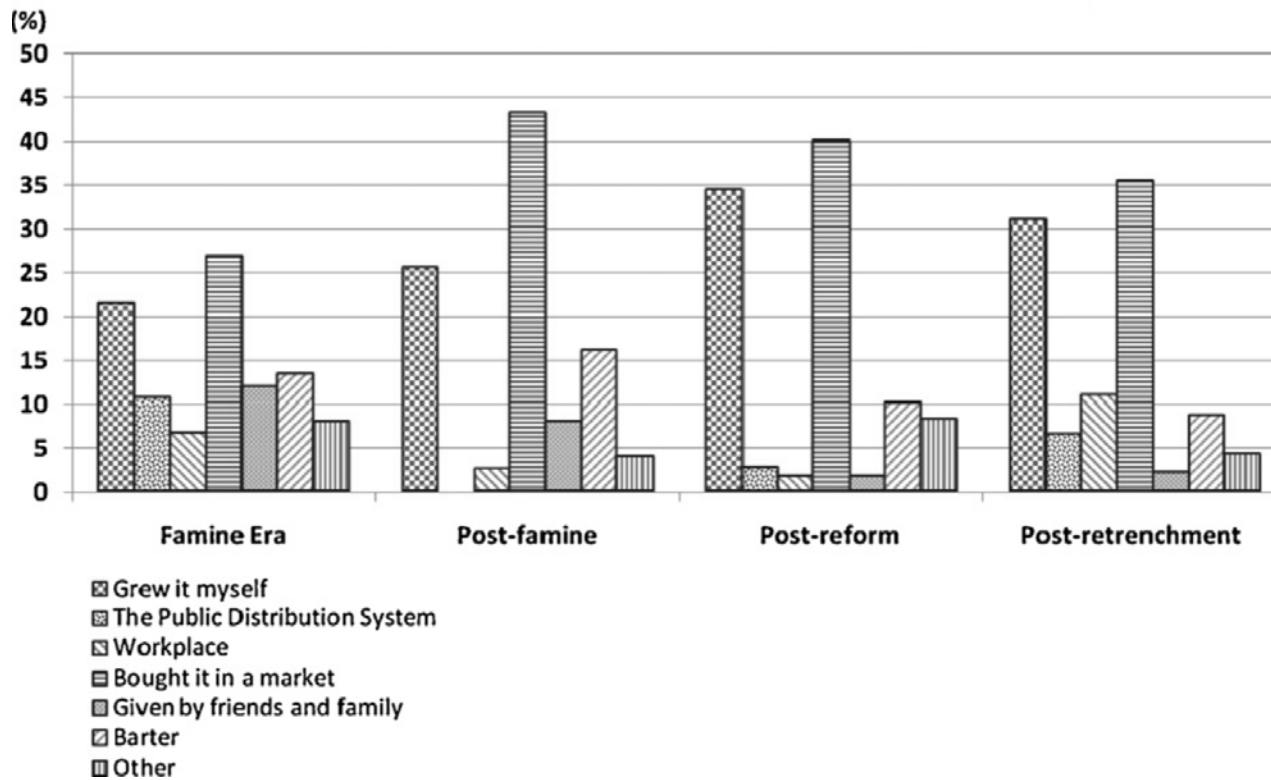
If the underlying explanation for this disparity is that North Koreans' economic outlooks are improving over time, then the results are consistent with our running counter-narrative that the state's retreat from centralized planning and gradual political liberalization has led to economic growth and a greater variety and liberalization of political attitudes. If, however, either the second or third explanation is at play, then the forty point difference may be interpreted as a rough measure of defector bias. The first type of bias would be determined by pre-immigration factors such as family background, profession, status, and social capital in North Korea which influences whether or not defectors ultimately settle in South Korea or China. The second type of bias comprises a set of post-immigration factors, political socialization in particular, which alter immigrants' attitudes and answers as they adapt to life in South Korea.

In all likelihood, the difference in reported motives is a combination of all three. Fortunately, this ambiguity does not pose an obstacle to our analysis as conceptual bias correction of the second and third explanations only strengthens support for our counter-narrative. Let us suppose, whether due to pre- or post-immigration factors,

Table 7. Main motive behind leaving North Korea

| Motive | China survey | South Korea survey |
|---------------------------------------|--------------|--------------------|
| Economic conditions | 94.7 | 56.7 |
| Political freedom | 1.8 | 27.0 |
| Religious freedom | 0.2 | 1.0 |
| Fear (afraid of doing anything wrong) | 1.8 | 8.0 |
| Other | 1.6 | 7.3 |
| Total | 100 | 100 |

(Table cited from Haggard & Noland, 2011)

Figure 1. Primary Source of Food at the Time Respondent Left North Korea

(Table cited from Haggard & Noland, 2011)

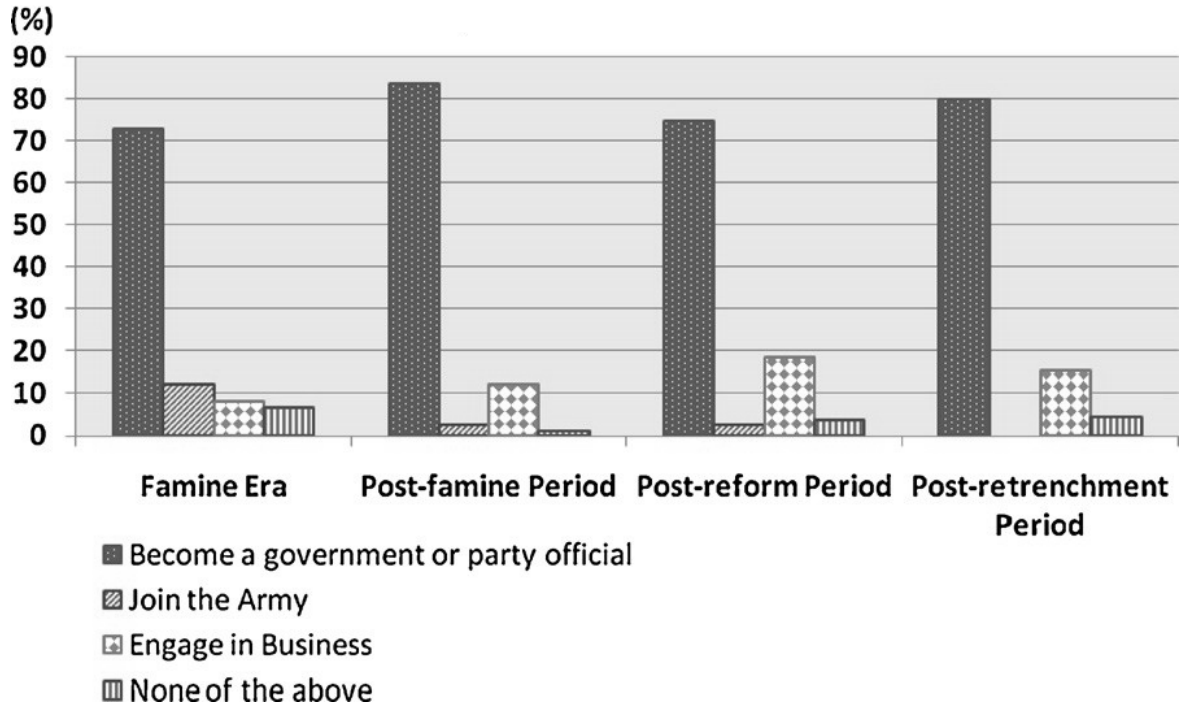
North Korean immigrants to the South are the most politically critical of any North Korean sub-population. In that case, we could think of the 27.0% who left for political freedom, 1.0% for religious freedom, and 8.0% for fear of doing anything wrong as an upper bound of anti-regime sentiment among North Korea's domestic population. And if we were to use this upper bound to quantify domestic sentiment, we could conservatively estimate that 64% or more of the North Korean population are primarily occupied with economic concerns. The remaining data presented by Haggard and Noland further document the unmistakable transformation underway in North Korea while similarly leaving the door open to a variety of interpretations regarding the domestic legitimacy of the state.

The graph below demonstrates the rising role of the market and home gardens in food acquisition. The Public Distribution System and workplace became slightly more important during the Retrenchment Period, but not to a degree that significantly dampened the role of markets and home gardens.

The following two graphs are of particular interest as they contrast the paths to success in the post-socialist economic sphere and the authoritarian political sphere. When asked the best way to get ahead in North Korea, respondents overwhelmingly selected "Become a government or party official". While "Engage in Business" rose steadily up through the Post-reform Period, it never exceeded 20% and the popularity of "Become a government or party official" never fell below 70%. While the path to success in North Korean society is through affiliation with the party, the path to economic success lies in the market. Never falling below 60%, respondents in all periods identified "Engage in market activities" as the easiest way to make money in North Korea. A rise in "Engage in corrupt or criminal activities" is also noticeable from the Famine Era through the Post-Reform Period although it attenuates slightly in the Post-Retrenchment Period. These two starkly different paths to getting ahead underscore the duality and relative independence of the economic and political spheres in contemporary North Korea.

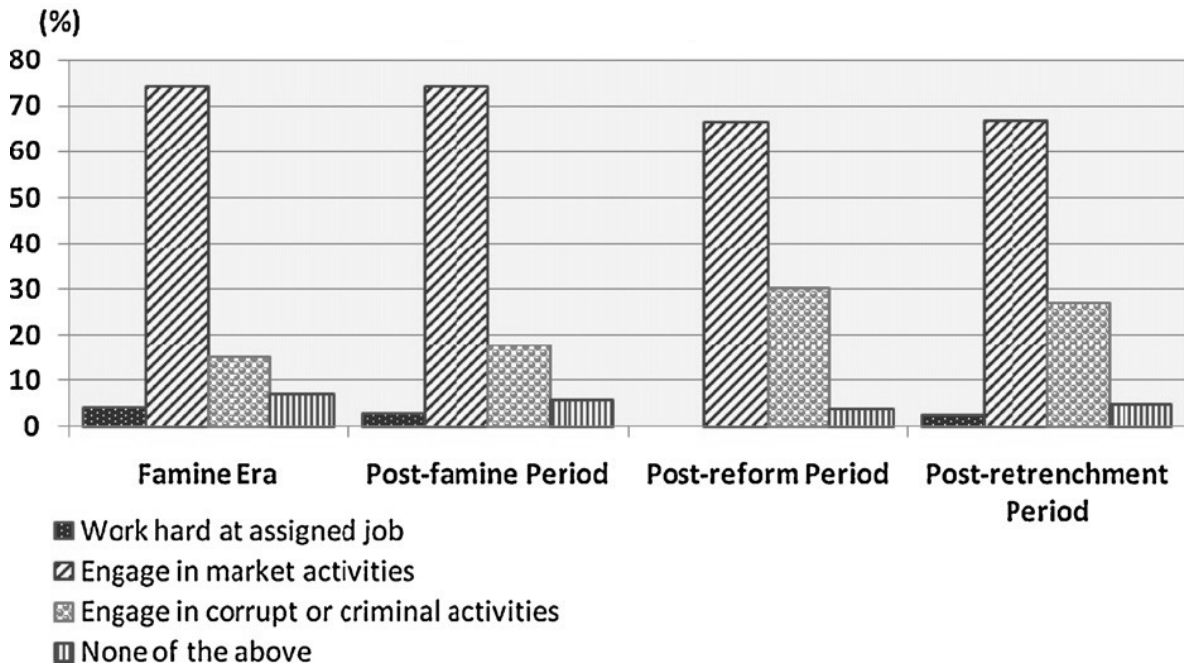
Another interesting pair of results to compare is respondents' perceptions of reforms and perceptions of the regime. The table below expresses relatively positive perceptions of reforms and North Korea's market transition both during the Reform Era

Figure 2. Best Way to Get Ahead in North Korea



(Table cited from Haggard & Noland, 2011)

Figure 3. Easiest way to make money in North Korea



(Table cited from Haggard & Noland, 2011)

and Retrenchment Era. In the more recent results of the Retrenchment Era, only 12.8% of respondents disagreed that reforms allowed more people to trade in the market, only 15.4% disagreed that reforms increased the amount of goods in the market, and only 20.5% disagreed that reforms increased the amount of food in the market. And for any ambiguity or disagreement about the material transition brought on by reforms, respondents' perceptions of attitudinal and social changes are nearly unanimous. Nearly all Retrenchment Era respondents concurred that after reforms, people started caring only about money. Assessments of the corruption and inequality accompanying marketization were strongly affirmative as well.

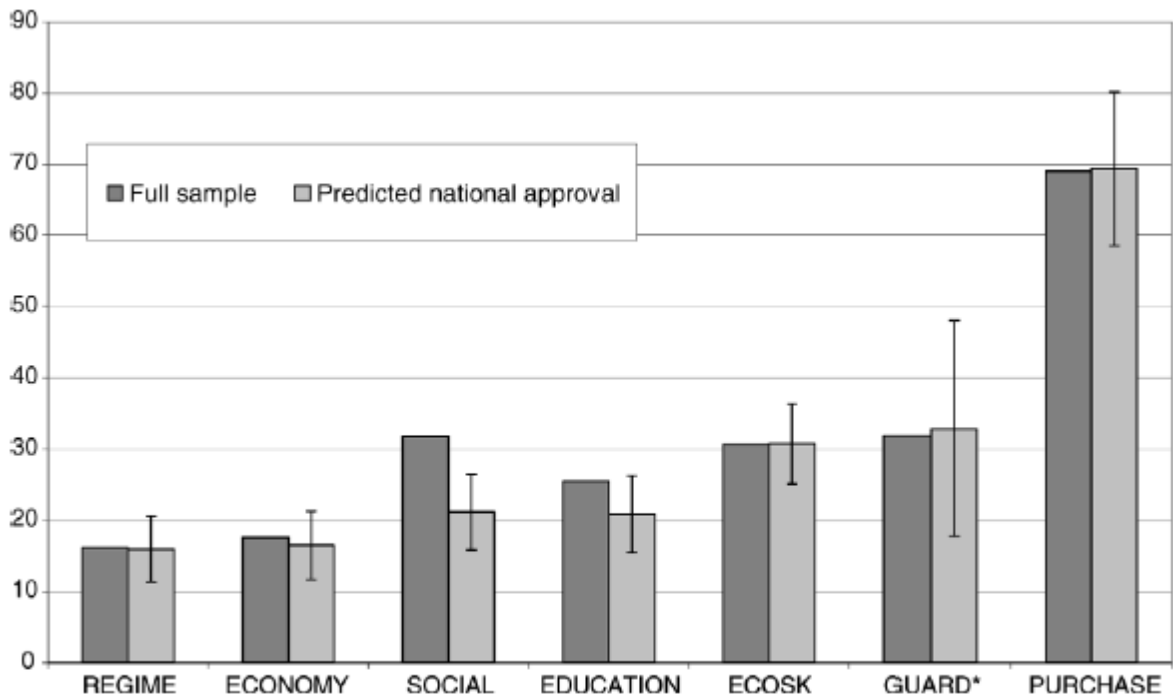
Paralleling these negative sentiments are respondent's responses to seven domains of social life. REGIME, ECONOMY, EDUCATION indicate that respondents believe the Kim Jong Il regime, economy, and education in North Korea are improving. SOCIAL indicates that the North Korean government is trying to improve social conditions. GUARD indicates a perception that restrictions on citizens are tightening, PURCHASE, that one can purchase any good with money, and ECOSK, that North Koreans believe that South Korea's economy is worse than North Korea's. At the same time that the majority of respondents agree that material conditions in the country are improving and that one could PURCHASE any good with money, less than 20% indicated that they believed the ECONOMY was improving. While over 30% expressed a belief that the North Korean government was trying to improve SOCIAL conditions, only half of that number believed the Kim Jong Il REGIME had improved.

Defector perspectives about the economy and about the regime and conditions overall are in a state of disagreement, reflecting that at least among the defector population, increases in the material standard of living have not yet sufficiently appeased popular expectations for change. The gap between positive economic growth and critical views of the government reveal that the margins are not merely satisfied with the government's passive acceptance of economic transition, but in fact expect proactive, institutional support from the center. This view is expressed as the respondents overwhelmingly identify the DPRK government as the single greatest influence for positive and negative change in the country. Whatever changes have taken place and whatever expectations have yet to be fulfilled, if the DPRK's most

Table 8. Perceptions of the reforms: South Korea survey

| Perception | Reform Era (2003-05) | | | | Retrenchment Era (post-2005) | | | |
|---|-------------------------|------|------|-----|---------------------------------|------|------|------|
| | TA/A | N | TD/D | ? | TA/A | N | TD/D | ? |
| The reforms allowed more people to trade in the market | 55.4 | 28.9 | 15.7 | 0 | 51.3 | 25.6 | 12.8 | 10.3 |
| The reforms increased amount of goods in the market | 57.8 | 21.7 | 18.1 | 2.4 | 59.0 | 15.4 | 15.4 | 10.3 |
| The reforms increased the amount of food in the market | 48.2 | 28.9 | 18.1 | 4.8 | 53.9 | 15.4 | 20.5 | 10.3 |
| After reforms, people started caring only about money | 89.2 | 7.2 | 2.4 | 1.2 | 97.4 | 0 | 0 | 2.6 |
| After reforms, corruption increased | 91.6 | 4.8 | 2.4 | 1.2 | 84.6 | 7.7 | 2.6 | 5.1 |
| As a result of the reforms, society became more unequal | 84.3 | 8.4 | 4.8 | 2.4 | 84.6 | 7.7 | 5.1 | 2.6 |

(Table cited from Haggard & Noland, 2011)

Figure 4. Approval Ratings

* GUARD is inverted such that a lower number equates to a more negative response in this figure for comparative purposes, whereas in the actual data a higher number equates to a more negative response.

Note: Brackets display confidence intervals at the 95 percent confidence level

(Table cited from Chang, Haggard & Noland, 2009)

politically marginalized and economically impoverished subpopulation believes that the state still has the potential to play the most constructive role in improving conditions in the country, then it is likely that majority of North Korea's non-defector population holds this view as well.

4.4 Study #4: Households in the Informal Economy

This study, conducted by faculty of Seoul National University's Department of Economics, surveyed 700 North Korean defectors residing in South Korea between 2004 and 2005 (Kim & Song, 2008). The survey was divided into two parts, the first measuring refugee's economic life while living in North Korea, and the second related to their adjustment to life in South Korea. More conservative than the 2007 Bank of Korea study, SNU researchers found that 78% of the total income of North Korean households derived from informal economic activities. While the Bank of Korea study found an increase in market activity between 1997 and 2004, this study found little evidence of deepening informalization during the similar period, 1996-2003, which could be explained by the state's increasing receptivity of once illicit market activities. The most novel findings of the SNU study are that 1) participation in informal economic activities is primarily motivated by survival and a desire to escape from poverty and 2) workers in the informal economy reduce their hours in the formal economy. The study objectively concludes that the challenge facing North Korean authorities is how to find a balance between supporting market activities, which assists those escaping from poverty, while mitigating the effects of market activities on the state's centrally-planned economy.

I included this study, not because of its results, which are similar to those found in other studies, but because of the subtle bias inherent in the very framing of the economic analysis. Informed by the systemic theory of North Korea as a socialist state, the authors define North Korea's centrally-planned economy as the formal economy and market activities as informal economic activities which negatively detract from the formal economy. However, the 2002 reforms and the state's acceptance of market-based activities formally sanctioned the notion of market activities and layered them alongside the state's centrally planned economy. In North Korea's current state of transition, the

scope of sanctioned market activity is constantly being negotiated by the center government and entrepreneurs on the margins, making it difficult to define at any given time which economic activities are formal and which are informal. Nonetheless, the 2002 reforms were a critical moment for the political legitimacy of the DPRK as it signaled the government's willingness to be pragmatic and relevant in the economic sphere over its desire to be ideologically pure and irrelevant.

The authors conclude that the state must decide how to balance market activities and centralized planning in ways that do not detract from the formal economy. However, if market activities are included alongside centralized distribution as a part of the formal economy, then the problem may be restated. The state must decide how to manage the transition from centralized planning to market activities while retaining a measure of control in the economic sphere and legitimacy in the political sphere.

4.5 Study #5: International Food Aid Survey

South Korea's political discourse on all topics related to North Korea is split down the middle with anti-engagement conservatives contesting pro-engagement liberals. As a part of their pro-engagement agenda, the liberal camp excludes criticism from North Korea in their otherwise active human rights platform. Conversely, South Korea's conservatives are deeply invested in documenting North Korean human rights violations, if not to improve conditions on the ground, then to use as a political weapon against their liberal counterparts. As a South Korean NGO, the Network for North Korean Democracy and Human Rights is one such recipient of that investment and has been documenting human rights violations in North Korea since 2000. Having officially condemned socialism and the North Korean regime, both economically and politically, the organization takes a decidedly subjective stance alongside South Korea's conservative party and in opposition to the government of the North (*History of NKnet*, 2012). NKnet's online news and publications are among the most frequently cited by South Korean and foreign press, and therefore contribute significantly to forming global public opinion about the DPRK. Conducted in March, 2001, this study is significant

because it offers the most recent glimpse into North Korea; furthermore NKnet's prominence makes it all the more likely that the study's contents will be widely circulated.

During March, 2011 NKnet surveyed 500 North Koreans residing in South Korea to examine the "distribution reality of foreign food aid (NKnet, 2012)". Similar to other defector surveys, respondents were overwhelmingly women (87.6%) and prior to defection lived in the DPRK's northeastern most provinces (North Hamkyung, 55.5%; South Hamkyung, 12.0%; Yangang, 22.8%). 274 of the 500 subjects (58.8%) defected from North Korea after 2010 and less than 30% defected prior to 2005. The study is prefaced with the explanation that while North Korean may be in need of foreign food aid, reliable distribution to those in need is problematic. By surveying recently defected North Koreans, this survey hopes to reflect North Koreans' assessments of the reality of the North Korean food problem, efficacy of current efforts to distribute foreign aid, and the need for and stance on South Korean food aid. Interestingly enough, while approximately 90% of respondents lived in the least developed northeastern region prior to defection, less than 15% reported being farmers. Thus the vast majority of subjects were urban residents of the northeastern provinces, the subpopulation known to have suffered the worst during the famine and to whom foreign aid access was most greatly restricted. With this sampling bias in mind, we may not infer that these results are representative of all North Korean society; rather we may infer that the perspectives of these respondents constitute an upper bound for the level of suffering and the degree of criticism expressed by an average North Korean.

Respondents conveyed a complicated picture of North Korea's transition where market activities are increasingly replacing centralized distribution and state jobs but where the increase in marketization has not necessarily translated to an increase in food security. More than 90% of respondents reported that the food situation in North Korea was comparatively serious or very serious. Nearly 50% reported receiving no food distribution immediately prior to defection. 57% of respondents responded to the lack of purchased food in markets while 38% resorted to farming small home gardens or receiving food from family.

Opinions about when the food situation was the worst are difficult to interpret. The table below clearly shows that the era of the famine and the years immediately

following were the most terrible. However when asked to compare the present situation with that of the late-90s, only 16.9% reported that the food situation had improved in the decade since and 42.5% reported that the food situation had actually gotten worse. NKnet's report acknowledges that, "by any objective analysis the real situation across North Korean society is better than it was in the late 1990s," and posits the discrepancy between respondent answers and objective measures, "may be because chronic food shortages and the collapse of the state food distribution system make them feel the food situation is still direr than or similar to that period (NKnet, 2012: 16)." This gross discrepancy in objective judgment greatly discredits the reliability of defector testimony for assessing actual need; on the other hand, respondent subjectivity may yet be interpreted as an accurate measure of political attitudes of urbanites in the northeast provinces.

The most revealing indicators of defector political attitudes in this survey are their opinions about the fundamental causes of the food crisis. Respondents were asked to select the two causes they felt were most responsible for the food crisis from among the following list: excessive military expenditures, deteriorating production due to agricultural policy, collapse of the food distribution system, natural disasters, irresponsibility and incompetence of the leadership, lack of agricultural inputs, lack of effort by the North Korean people, and lack of effort by the North Korean people. 441 respondents (88.2%) indicated excessive military expenditure as one of their two fundamental causes. Approximately a quarter, 26.6%, blamed the irresponsibility and incompetence of the leadership and slightly more, 27.4%, pointed to the lack of agricultural inputs. Another 14.0% identified deteriorating production due to agricultural policy and 15.2% chose the collapse of the food distribution system.

It is difficult to assess from these responses precisely what respondents felt or their underlying feelings about the legitimacy of North Korea's government; however these causes provide some interesting insights. "Excessive military expenditure" reflects a clear disagreement with regime economic policy but does not clearly express a belief that the regime is incapable or illegitimate. "Deteriorating production due to agricultural policy" reflects a lack of confidence in the regime's ability but does not extend a moral judgment. "Irresponsibility and incompetence of the leadership"

Table 9. Time of the most terrible food situation

| <i>Year</i> | <i>Number of Respondents</i> | <i>Percentage of Total</i> |
|-------------|------------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1995-1997 | 370 | 74.3 |
| 1998-2000 | 68 | 13.7 |
| 2001-2003 | 8 | 1.6 |
| 2004-2006 | 6 | 1.2 |
| 2007-2009 | 17 | 3.4 |
| 2010-2011 | 29 | 5.8 |
| Total | 498 | 100.0 |

(Table cited from NKnet, 2012)

**Table 10. Comparing present food situation with that of the late-90s
(March of Tribulation)**

| <i>Sort</i> | <i>Number of Respondents</i> | <i>Percentage of Total</i> |
|----------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Better than the late-1990s | 84 | 16.9 |
| Similar to the late-90s | 202 | 40.6 |
| Worse than the late-90s | 212 | 42.5 |
| Total | 498 | 100.0 |

(Table cited from NKnet, 2012)

Table 11. Fundamental Causes of the Food Crisis (Respondents Picked Two)

| <i>Cause</i> | <i>Number of Respondents</i> | <i>Percentage of Total</i> |
|---|------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Excessive military expenditure | 441 | 88.2 |
| Lack of agricultural inputs including fertilizer | 137 | 27.4 |
| Irresponsibility and incompetence of the leadership | 133 | 26.6 |
| Collapse of the food distribution system | 76 | 15.2 |
| Deteriorating production due to agricultural policy | 70 | 14.0 |
| Natural disasters, including flooding | 37 | 7.4 |
| Lack of effort by North Korean people | 24 | 4.8 |
| Other | 2 | 0.4 |

(Table cited from NKnet, 2012)

expresses both a clear loss of confidence in the regime's ability and is a moral condemnation of the regime's failing to fulfill its responsibility to the people. For items "Lack of agricultural inputs" and "Collapse of the food distribution system", the regime's culpability in the minds of the respondents is less clear. If questions were indeed interpreted in this way, then the overwhelming majority of respondents disagree with the regime's military first policy. A much smaller minority of respondents, 26.6% + 14.0% (or less, accounting for those respondents who selected both), believed that the regime was incompetent and/or morally culpable for the food crisis. Applying the logic that the negative political attitudes of this population of respondents, defectors from North Korea's most politically marginalized provinces, constitute an upper bound for negative political attitudes nationwide, then we may infer that a great many North Koreans, (<88.8%), may disagree with the state's economic priorities; however, the number who feel the regime lacks competency (<40.6%) and is morally culpable (<26.6%) are considerably less. Interestingly enough, the 26.6% figure is nearly identical to the 27% of respondents in Haggard and Noland's South Korea survey who cited political freedom as their primary motive for leaving North Korea. If we recall that this 27% figure rose from a mere 1.8% of respondents surveyed in China, this upper bound may well be a highly inflated estimate of anti-regime sentiment within North Korea.

5. Conclusion

Defector accounts leave no doubt that North Korea's economy is in transition, nor that political attitudes and social values shifting away from Cold War ideologies and towards economic realism. Less visible from the outside, however, is the states' actual and perceived roles in this transition. Over the last decade, familiar voices in the North Korean studies community decry an outmoded socialist, totalitarian regime for failing to keep pace with the country's post-socialist transformation. As a result, the prevailing narrative outside North Korea is that the regime has effectively lost its domestic legitimacy and owes the longevity of its rule to material force and dumb luck.

While quality data is in short supply, we do have sufficient evidence to cast doubt on this narrative, in particular, claims that the North Korean state is a socialist and totalitarian system. The collapse of the public distribution system and rise of market activity and family farming are strong evidence that socialism is no longer the dominant economic mode on the ground. The 2009 amendment to the constitution, removing all references to Communism, represents the state's acknowledgment and acceptance of this reality. Likewise, evidence of increasing political pluralism and systemic dissonance that arose after the death of Kim Il Sung, calls into question the labeling of North Korea as a totalitarian state. The increasing tolerance of market activities, spread of foreign media by DVD, and limited forms of criticism would seem to confirm the transition from ideologically centered totalitarianism to a more pragmatic, authoritarian system. General disillusionment with revolutionary development, the settling in of a siege mentality, and the rediscovery of hope not in system-level solutions but rather grassroots entrepreneurial activity casts doubt on the developmental assumptions at the heart of both socialist and totalitarian theories of legitimacy.

With the relevance of these classical systems called into question for the North Korean case, an objective model of North Korean domestic political legitimacy is needed. Contrasting Asian to European socialism illuminated the pertinent historical circumstances in the Asian cases, namely late modernization nested within the experiences of prolonged colonial occupation, national division, and civil war, which gave rise to multiple legitimating criteria, and therefore multiple spheres of legitimacy.

Alongside post-socialist marketization within the economic spheres of China, Vietnam, and now North Korea, in every case the state has simultaneously retained a strong degree of authoritarian control over the political sphere. Furthermore, among the Asian socialist states of socialist China, Vietnam, and North Korea, the timing of each state's endorsement of economic transition has coincided with favorable political factors, namely an increase of pluralism among elites and a decrease in the strategic advantage of foreign contenders for domestic sovereignty.

Application of these theoretical tools to several high-profile studies of defectors in China and South Korea revealed ample room for reinterpretation. Overall, defectors were not happy with the current state of affairs in North Korea, but they overwhelmingly confirmed the positive growth of markets, improvement in food security, and shifts in the state's economic and political policies. More to the point of political legitimacy, defector testimonies describe families and communities working to improve their lives and elicit change from within and alongside existing systems rather than in opposition to the status quo. That is not to say that no anti-regime attitudes or activities exist within North Korea; however none of the data presented in these studies nor the informal interviews I conducted in North and South Korea support any claims of resistance greater than the reform-oriented civil disobedience of local communities. The state's flexibility and responsiveness, albeit measured and painfully slow, is nonetheless a departure from its prior ideological absolutism and leaves open the possibility already modeled by China and Vietnam, that regime change may not be a necessary condition for opening and reform.

A valid critique of this thesis is that while current data is sufficiently open to alternative interpretations, we have yet to see any evidence that directly refutes the predominant narrative and proves the alternative. Unfortunately, when dealing with North Korea, both quality data and objective analysis are in short supply. The limitations of defector surveys and the impossibility of in-country surveys on topics of a political nature are well known. Less explored than the bias inherent in the data are the biases inherent in the data collection and analysis. South Korea's progressive parties have long been pro-engagement with the North. As part of their pro-engagement stance, they occasionally condemn, but more often ignore the defector population as

though it does not exist. Although more anti-progressive than pro-defector, this has left data collection among the defector population exclusively to the conservative party and the organizations they support. KINU and Bank of Korea are two such government organizations whose work was represented in Chapter 4. NKnet is a right-leaning NGO that has also received government funding and accolades and openly condemns the North Korean regime. To this point, none of these or other organizations have attempted to collect data on the topic of political legitimacy, presumably because of preconceived notions that the regime has already lost all legitimacy and that nothing would be gained by its study. An equally likely possibility could be that the question of North Korea's political legitimacy has major ramifications for most forms of intervention or engagement. A study of legitimacy would open the door to further inquiry and interpretation; not opening the topic for discussion makes it easier to forward a one-sided opinion as though it were an unassailable fact.

More information is needed about North Korea. But antecedent to additional data collection is the need for a dispassionate, non-partisan attitude toward North Korean scholarship that is able to set aside Cold War paradigms, axes of good and evil, and the antiquated "isms" of a former era. In the meantime, it is sufficient to simply raise the question, "Is North Korea's government legitimate?" This simple admission that we do not yet possess compelling evidence to adjudicate in favor of one conclusion or another should give sufficient pause for policy-makers who otherwise assume the question was settled. Recent US embroilment in Iraq and Afghanistan should serve as ample warning against political intervention based on the premise that North Korea's local population is eagerly awaiting emancipation by a foreign power.

Even beyond the prevention of ill-fated conflict on the Korean peninsula, in many ways, our reconciliation with North Korea not only holds a key to peace and stability in East Asia, but also to the resolution of our lingering Cold War sensibilities. Removing North Korea long enough from the realms of the grotesque and bizarre to redress anything as rational as legitimacy, would hopefully have a sobering and de-Orientalizing effect on the inquirer. By embracing the seemingly impossible contradictions and searching for the words to explain the inexplicable, our efforts to understand the new

and contemporary North Korea may yet prove to be the antidote to our residual bipolar myopia and the idle animosities of a bygone feud.

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