

North Korea Confidential

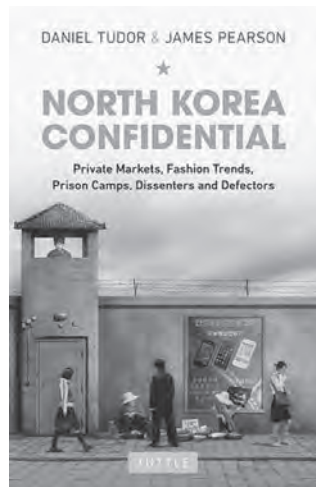
Private Markets, Fashion Trends, Prison Camps, Dissenters, and Defectors

BY DANIEL TUDOR AND JAMES PEARSON

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Reviewed by Peter K. Frost



As its title suggests, *North Korea Confidential* is written by two highly knowledgeable British journalists whose main aim is to counter the usual view that all North Koreans are either “brainwashed worshipers” of North Korea’s founding father, Kim Il-sung, or “helpless victims” of his grandson, Kim Jong-un, the third leader of this unusual semi-Marxist dynasty. Their work has the normal chapters on the strength of the current regime, the horrific prison system, and the prospects for the regime’s survival. Yet these chapters on what we historians call the “high history” of politics and war are

deliberately surrounded by the popular, or “low history,” chapters on how North Koreans shop, dress, play, and generally lead their lives. Do not regard these chapters as trivial, the authors warn, for they are, in fact, signs of resistance and change.

Indeed, the authors’ main point seems to be that after a relatively fast recovery from the Korean War (1950–1953), North Korea’s state-run “command economy” is in trouble. The end of Soviet aid, the natural disasters of the late 1990s, and the heavy expenses associated with a “military-first” policy have hurt. So has an unpopular currency reform in 2009 and the difficulties inherent in trying to regulate an increasingly complex economy. Now that the state’s public distribution system (PDS) has proved unable to supply food to all but the elite, the so-called “gray markets”—illegal black market activities condoned by the state—have sprung up. Now, the authors contend, many workers either barely show up for work or loot the state factories for things they can sell. Various underfunded bureaucracies foster illegal money raising activities needed to meet their budgets. Corruption is appallingly widespread.

What are the effects of all this? Under the *songbun*, or social hierarchy system, the authors report, North Koreans have been divided into “loyal” (28 percent), “neutral” (45 percent), and “hostile” (27 percent) groups based, in fine Confucian form, on the previous history of the male line of the traditional family. Those who are considered loyal tend to live rather well in the Pyongyang capital; the picture section of the book, for example, contrasts an expensive Hummer with simpler means of transport. They actually condone the gray market because they profit from their own investments in it. Even if arrested, their “cash and connections” usually allow them to be lightly punished. Included among the privileged, it should be noted, are some 8,000 to 10,000 ethnic Chinese whose Chinese passports and ability to trade with China also make them rich.

While the “neutral” and “hostile” families obviously do less well, even here, the authors claim, some are doing better. First off, those far from the capital and near the China border tend to have more freedom to enrich

themselves by illegal smuggling activities or by helping their fellow citizens escape to China. Despite a family system that still remains patriarchal, older married women particularly are improving their statuses by selling goods on the gray market and thus bringing home more money than their beleaguered husbands. The authors also provide extensive information about those who, despite strict regulations, have access to Western-style cosmetics and fashion, foreign radio and TV programs, DVDs, and cell-phones. In one telling story, a man arrested for having an illegal phone was let off after giving both the phone and a bribe to a policeman. The two men later cemented the deal when the guilty man bought a new illegal phone from the same official.

So will the regime survive this mix of internal corruption and information about other cultures? In a relatively complex chapter, the authors show how the present “Great Successor” Kim Jong-un (sometimes rather nastily called Kim Jong-oh-oh by Westerners) must contend with a highly factionalized government in which he is not, in fact, as powerful as the stereotype suggests. To explain this, the authors deal at some length with the quite startling televised arrest of Kim’s uncle Jang Song Thaek, and the subsequent execution of Jang and members of his family. What Americans saw as a horrific and arbitrary punishment is explained as a factional struggle in which Kim Jong-un and his chief competitors agreed for once to send a grisly warning to any other faction that sought too much power. These factional struggles, the authors suggest, may explain why North Korean politics sometimes seem to be “erratic.”

Despite these problems, the authors “remain doubtful about the possibility of regime collapse.” Fear of the inhumanely harsh prison camps helps keep dissidents in line. Although better information has made it increasingly obvious that South Koreans are far richer, many North Koreans seem to accept the government’s caricature of the South as a puppet of the American Imperialists. The fact that the Chinese live better than the North Koreans may cause North Koreans to ask why their country can’t also be Marxist *and* rich; yet the newly rich, the authors claim, want to join the elite, not overthrow it. Therefore, the authors predict, North Korea will probably only slowly change.

As the authors admit, much of their information comes from defectors who are not always reliable. Many of the most interesting comments are in the footnotes. A glossary of names and terms would be helpful, as would discussion of how all this fits into the periodic nuclear threats and clashes with the South. Yet the book is wonderfully written and hence ideal both for those *EAA* readers who need a “quick fix” and teachers who want interesting material for honors high school or college students. My worry that the chapter on fashion was too frivolous, for example, evaporated when I had a fine discussion with a college freshman about who could both dare and afford to buy tight jeans, cosmetics, and even ear studs in silent rebellion against the Kim Dynasty’s strict dress code. I thus agree with *The Economist’s* nomination of *North Korea Confidential* as one of the best books published in 2015. It strikes me as “low history” at its best. ■

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