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Bellarmino University

The Impacts of Foreign Media on Perceptions of North Korea:
A Textual Analysis of Defector Testimonies and Experiences

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24 April 2019

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Introduction

In the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (hereafter North Korea), citizens risk their lives everyday to consume outside information and media illegally. From the beginning of its history, the North Korean government has worked to restrict access to outside information in nearly all forms. Despite North Korea's isolation from the outside world, North Koreans still manage to access foreign movies, music, television shows, and radio, in addition to other word of mouth forms of communication. This thesis will explore why North Koreans consume this media, at great risk to themselves, and how consumption of foreign media impacts their perceptions of the state, based on firsthand accounts from North Korean defectors.

North Korea works to prevent its citizens from sharing information with each other at all levels, and the scrutiny on information entering from outside the country is even more intense. Despite its proximity to some of the world's wealthiest and most densely populated countries, such as the Democratic People's Republic of China (hereafter China), the Republic of Korea (hereafter South Korea), and Japan, North Korea is considered one of the most isolated nation states on the planet ("Freedom of the Press 2017"). In North Korea, it is illegal to consume any media (radio, books, television, films, or music) that is not sanctioned by the state. As a result, the only legal sources of information are those produced by the all powerful Korean Workers' Party. Initially, North Korea permitted books and films from other communist countries, mainly the Soviet Union and the newly declared People's Republic of China, but over time, even outside communist media was banned as well (Lankov 43-4.). Today, North Koreans caught possessing foreign DVDs, listening to foreign radio stations, or watching foreign movies or television shows risk a range of punishment by the state, from a few months in a political prison camp to public

execution. News publications from as recently as 2015 and 2017 report North Koreans who have been sentenced to death for the crime of listening to music and watching movies produced in South Korea (Choe, C. Kim). To understand why the North Korean regime considers foreign information so dangerous and subversive, it is necessary to review the history of its origins.

On September 9, 1948, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea was declared in Pyongyang by Kim Il-Sung, a famed guerilla fighter from the Second World War notorious for his attacks against the Japanese empire in China and Korea (Lankov 4). Kim, in an effort to bolster his own legitimacy as a leader, created a cult of personality for himself and his family, crafting North Korean society in a way that placed the state at the center of each citizen's life. Early on in his reign, private trade was totally banned and the state was positioned as the sole provider for food and other daily necessities. All able bodied men were required to work for the state, and free movement between cities was outlawed, requiring a permit to travel even to the nearest village (Lankov 38). The results of these restrictions were twofold. First, it made North Koreans wholly dependent on the state for all of its basic necessities, legitimizing the power of the socialist state and fostering support for Kim Il-Sung. Second, by ensuring that North Koreans only needed the state for their survival, the Kim regime effectively isolated generations of its citizens. There were no marketplaces in which citizens could meet each other to share personal stories and discuss the events of the day; food only came through the ration system. One did not have to network to look for jobs; each person was only an employee of the state. And finally, even if one had family in another village, they were strictly limited on when they were able to leave their town for another. These policies, which began under the leadership of Kim Il-Sung,

have remained mostly static throughout the subsequent rule of his son, Kim Jong-Il, and his grandson, Kim Jong-Un.

Additionally, North Koreans are forbidden from being in a house that is not their own after a certain time of night without prior approval. Each night, the local police will perform checks on randomly selected houses to make sure no one is inside that is not assigned to the property. Often, this is framed as a way to prevent people from gathering to secretly plot resistance to the state, but it also prevents citizens who are not related to each other from spending extended periods of time together and developing feelings of kinship for each other. Any sense of comradery would limit the effectiveness of the *inminban* system, in which citizens within a village are placed into groups that are expected to spy on each other and keep each other in line. An *inminban* might be an entire neighborhood block or an entire floor of an apartment building. Each *inminban* is headed up by a local leader who reports directly to the local police (Lankov 38-9). Citizens also attend weekly criticism meetings with their entire *inminban*, in which people offer criticism about themselves and their neighbors regarding how they could have better served the socialist state. Criticism meetings are also an occasion for propaganda sessions and continuing education about the victories of the Kim family and the evils of the United States (Lankov 41).

Another way in which North Koreans are separated from each other is through their *songbun* status, a strict class system based on one's family's loyalties during World War II and the Korean War (Baek 7-9). Everyone alive in the 21st century, which increasingly includes people with no memory of these wars and their aftermath, have had their economic opportunities already assigned to them based on whom their grandparents or great-grandparents supported

during the conflicts. There are 51 categories in total, but the three major classes are the core class, the wavering class, and the hostile class. If a citizen's family members fought against the Japanese during World War II, they and all of their descendents will occupy the core class. Additionally, if one's parent or grandparent was killed during the Korean War, that person would also be in the core class. The wavering class is made up of citizens whose family members may have defected and those who have spent time in political prison camps but were released (Baek 8). The hostile class consists of the children and grandchildren of former Japanese colonial administrators, landlords, priests, and entrepreneurs. *Songbun* status is almost entirely unchangeable, and when one's class ranking changes, it is almost always a downward movement (Lankov 41-2).

A 2014 report from the United Nations General Assembly referred to the *songbun* system as "state sponsored discrimination." Throughout North Korea's history, *songbun* has been used to determine housing, occupation, university entrance, food rations, and marriage opportunities for all citizens (United Nations, General Assembly). The influence of *songbun* has begun to gradually wane in North Korea due to marketization, because now wealth and the ability to bribe supervisors, teachers, and police also factor into access to these privileges. However, the goal of *songbun* is still clear: divide citizens, and limit interactions between groups of people who may have differing life experiences, especially those who are well off in society and those who are barely surviving. *Songbun* restricts interactions between the rich and the poor, barring citizens from gaining information about the increasingly wide wealth gap in North Korea.

The goal of the North Korean state is to create an environment in which citizens cannot trust anyone. By preventing citizens from gathering in each other's homes or public spaces, the

state limits the opportunities for citizens to commiserate with each other and compare their standards of living. By creating a system in which citizens are expected to spy on each other, the state guarantees that even when citizens interact with each other outside the home, those interactions will be shallow and will not reveal anyone's true attitudes toward the regime. Even if a person thought there was a chance that someone might share in their frustrations or confirm their suspicions that life is better on the outside, that someone might also be an undercover police officer, and to say something might mean risking their life or years in a political prison camp. Moreover, to say something might mean your family members are arrested as well, or at the very least blacklisted for life (Baek 33). International public hearings conducted by the United Nations Human Rights Council, in addition to individual interviews and memoirs of North Korean defectors, reveal the hellish conditions inside these prison complexes, in which the use of forced labor, torture, forced abortions, and random public executions are widespread (United Nations, General Assembly). Repeatedly expressing discontent to a fellow citizen can be punishable by months in a prison camp, but North Korea's fear-based regime hinges upon the fact that the state does not need a reason to arrest and sentence citizens without a trial.

Yet despite threats of imprisonment, torture, or death, North Korea is undergoing what the research firm Intermedia calls a "quiet opening" (Kretchun). Since the late 1990s, North Korea's borders, while remaining closed on paper, have gradually begun to open up in practice. North Koreans today have access to foreign media that is smuggled over the country's border with China, which they purchase illegally in now legal market settings. North Koreans have learned to tune their state-issued radios to pick up illegal frequencies and purchase small laptop computers on the black market with USB drives filled with entire movies or seasons of a

television series, mostly from South Korea and the United States. They trade DVDs and USB drives with their neighbors, and they gather in houses late at night to watch these programs together (Baek). According to an Intermedia study from 2012, based on interviews with North Korean defectors, 39% of respondents admitted to watching foreign DVDs while in North Korea (Kretchun 11), and 24% had watched a foreign television show (Kretchun 13).

Why are North Koreans willing to risk their lives to consume foreign media? What are the methods of consumption, and what have North Koreans themselves stated about what they are willing to put on the line in order to watch a South Korean television drama or listen to an American radio broadcast? The goal of this thesis is to uncover the motivations of North Korean defectors to consume foreign media in spite of its risks. This will be accomplished by cataloguing interviews conducted by researchers with North Korean defectors regarding their lives within North Korea and their interactions with foreign media sources. This project will conclude with a discussion of common themes through defector testimonies and speculation on what foreign media flows within North Korea mean for the future of the authoritarian Kim family regime.

Literature Review

North Korean Defectors and Their Testimonies

North Korea and its people are inherently difficult subjects to research, due to strict, state-enforced isolation. Even though outside information now flows into the country through a variety of conduits, it is impossible to hear about it from anyone currently living inside North Korea. Reporters and tourists are permitted entrance into the country on a limited basis, but every aspect of their visit is staged. Foreigners are constantly accompanied by handlers from the North Korean government who monitor every moment of their visit and prevent them from freely interacting with North Korean citizens. When foreigners are permitted to speak with “average citizens,” these conversations remain at a surface level and never venture into criticism of the regime or the daily challenges faced by North Koreans (Hassig and Oh 6). Thus, the only way to gather firsthand knowledge about the experiences of North Koreans is from those who have defected and illegally left the country.

According to data from the South Korean Ministry of Unification, 33,523 defectors have entered South Korea since the year 1998. Provisional data from 2019 reported 1,047 defectors resettled in South Korea that year. 202 of these defectors were men, whereas 845 defectors were women (“Policy on North Korean Defectors”). In fact, since 2006, women have made up 75% or more of defectors resettled in South Korea every single year. This is generally because North Korean women, unlike men, do not have state assigned jobs, so they are not always “missed” once they leave North Korea. Many women make numerous trips between China and North Korea in order to work in China and bring money back home to their families (Fahy 110-14). Inevitably, some of those women leave North Korea permanently.

North Korean defectors usually exit the country via its northern border with China, although rarely a North Korean soldier will miraculously cross over the Demilitarized Zone, heavily guarded by both sides and riddled with land mines, into South Korea. Often, a former family member who has already defected, or a professional smuggler, will assist with the defection (Baek xxi). Once in China, defectors face a constant risk of deportation back to North Korea if they are detained by Chinese authorities, until they either leave China or arrive at a South Korean embassy in China. The dangers faced by North Korean defectors outside of South Korea means it is difficult to calculate the number of defectors not officially resettled through the Ministry of Unification. Since Kim Jong-Un took power in 2011, the number of North Korean defectors resettled has dropped sharply, due to a reinforcement of the northern border by both North Korea and China. Since then, North Korea has increased both legal penalties for those caught attempting to escape and the incentives for citizens who provide the police with tips about attempted escapes by neighbors or family members (Gyupchanova).

Once North Koreans arrive on South Korean soil, they are immediately granted citizenship, per the South Korean constitution. Before they are released into South Korean society - and after they have been vetted and confirmed to not be spies - all North Koreans undergo a three-month entry program at a facility run by the Ministry of Unification called Hanawon. At Hanawon, North Koreans are taught life skills to help them to cope with their new environment and to learn to live in a free and open society. Hanawon also offers instruction on themes such as democracy, free market capitalism, human rights, and civic duties (Baek xxii). The South Korean government spends nearly \$70 million per year on the resettlement of North Korean refugees, but the program has received criticism for what some claim is its failure to

adequately provide for North Koreans after the three month period has passed, and to prepare them for the discrimination they will face from South Koreans (Kang). Additionally, there are some questions surrounding the impact of the initial Hanawon interview process on the accuracy of defector testimonies. According to one anonymous university professor based in Seoul, in an interview with Jieun Baek, “Every North Korean defector’s story is contaminated by the National Intelligence Services’ interrogation process before they even enter Hanawon. They naturally gain a bias of whatever to say to future interviewers” (195). Questions regarding the effectiveness of Hanawon arose again in September 2019, when a North Korean mother and her three year old son were found dead in their Seoul apartment among speculation that the pair had starved to death (V. Kim).

The alleged priming of defectors that takes place at Hanawon is just one reason why skepticism, if not outright dismissal, of the memoirs and testimonies of North Korean defectors pervades the field of North Korea studies. While many North Koreans face discrimination in South Korea, there has been a recent trend of North Korea defector celebrities, who gain fame through publishing memoirs about their harrowing escapes and are eventually granted television interviews, TED talks, and upwards of tens of thousands of dollars in speaking fees. Reality television shows featuring North Korean defectors, such as *Now On My Way to Meet You* and *Let’s Go Together*, have experienced some popularity in South Korea (Cussen 143). Because of the fame rewarded to some defectors, who share tales of human trafficking, rape, starvation, and torture, academics studying North Korea have dismissed them as propaganda tools of the South Korean government. Condemnations of defector memoirs and testimonies have been strengthened by the discovery in recent years of factual inaccuracies in two of the most famous

defector memoirs, Yeonmi Park and Maryanne Vollers's *In Order to Live: A North Korean Girl's Journey to Freedom* and Shin Dong-hyuk and Blaine Harden's *Escape From Camp 14* (Jolley, Fifield 2015).

There are several prongs to the case for disregarding firsthand accounts from defectors about life inside North Korea. First, critics on the left of South Korea's political spectrum claim that conservatives in the government manipulate the testimonies of North Korean defectors to continually agitate anti-North sentiments. Indeed, there is a historical basis for this argument, given that the government of right-wing military dictators in the 1960s and 70s actively recruited defectors to serve in its "war of public opinion" against North Korea (Martin). Critics of defector accounts believe that the government feeds ideas to North Koreans regarding how they should talk about their experiences, through programs like Hanawon. Similarly, many experts discredit these accounts because they believe defectors are fed narratives from the publishing companies that produce popular defector memoirs, in order to produce headlines and create a buzz around their releases. Feminist academics argue that these accounts are grounded in sexist tropes about helpless, innocent, and damaged women, especially because the majority of defectors are female. Finally, another common argument is that North Korean defectors have been brought up in a society of brainwashing in which lying is a necessary survival technique. Thus, we cannot be surprised when these same people show inconsistencies in their accounts, if not outrightly lie to the media (Cussen 143-6).

In the pursuit of studying North Korea, it is impossible to find a "pure" defector testimony free of bias. This is true when relying on primary sources for any research project, and should not be attributed to any particular deceptiveness on the part of the defectors themselves.

For this project, I have elected to rely on testimonies from defectors through interviews conducted in academic or journalistic settings. I will avoid using memoirs that have been published for mainstream audiences, many of which have been accused of inconsistencies or fabrications. I have chosen these sources knowing the inherent limitations of them, because I believe that in spite of the potential for minor inconsistencies in the details, these accounts are useful to understand life in North Korea and to educate the public on the seriousness of human rights abuses. I do not intend to pass negative judgment on the genre of North Korean defector memoirs as a whole, but I avoid them for this project because nearly all of them are co-written or partially ghost written by journalists. I trust that these journalists have good intentions, but they inevitably distort the messages of their interlocutors.

The Origins of Foreign Media in North Korea

Regardless of the challenges in relying on first hand defector testimonies, these accounts have helped North Korea analysts and historians to understand how foreign media enters and diffuses through North Korea. The rise in access to outside information can be traced back to the early 1990s, during North Korea's famine, euphemistically branded by the Kim government as the "Arduous March." The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the end of the Cold War was disastrous for the North Korean economy, which was almost wholly dependent on foreign aid from the Moscow government (Lankov 75). During the first decades after the ceasefire of the Korean War, the North Korean economy, which was reliant on heavy industry, was stronger than the economy in South Korea. Soviet leaders guided Kim Il-Sung through the development of North Korea's command socialist economy, which provided for all citizens through a highly centralized ration system (Hassig and Oh 69). However, the 1970s marked a shift from focusing

on overall postwar development to military technology, weakening the North Korean economy and increasing its reliance on patronage from the Soviet Union and from the Chinese communist government.

The first signs of famine came in the late 1980s, when economic reforms between 1987 and 1993 failed to strengthen the economy. These failures were immediately followed by the death of Kim Il-sung, which triggered a nationwide period of mourning in which the government essentially shut down for three years. After a series of catastrophic floods in 1995, the “Arduous March” was in full swing, which would last the rest of the decade and take more than 500,000 North Korean lives. During the three year shut down, the ration system that citizens had relied on for food, clothing, and other staples of daily life completely collapsed (Hassig and Oh 70). At the time, there was no organized market system, and private enterprise was illegal, so North Koreans had to develop their own market infrastructure to exchange goods and services in order to stay alive. Eventually, what was available in the markets evolved from basic necessities, like food and medicine, to foreign radios, DVD players, and even smart phones.

In 2001, North Korea’s new leader, Kim Jong-Il, declared a new economic reform plan called the July 1 Economic Management Improvement Measures, which allowed the establishment of markets for local goods, with prices still pre-determined by the state (Hassig and Oh 71-2). All citizens were still required to work for the state, but they could now use their small income to purchase daily necessities at price-controlled, state-sanctioned markets. North Korea experts have come to a general consensus that the years during and following the famine marked the beginning of outside information regularly entering North Korea, capped off by the 2001 reforms that allowed the market exchange of goods. At this point, citizens struggled to eat

more than once a day, let alone purchase access to foreign media. Even if they could afford it, the technology that facilitated easy pirating and transfer of movies, television shows, and music, did not exist yet. However, thousands of North Koreans migrated back and forth across the border in order to work in China and bring money or food home to their families.

While abroad, North Koreans bore witness to the gradually increasing prosperity available to Chinese citizens as the Chinese Communist Party began to enact its own market-oriented reforms, in response to the end of the Cold War. North Koreans left for China in pursuit of money to bring back to their families, but they also returned with information about the world outside of North Korea. The realizations these trips to China brought about are perhaps best summed up by Park Se-joon, a North Korean doctor who traveled to China several times before eventually defecting permanently: “Why do people in my country have to starve so much?” (Baek 53).

Over time, as North Koreans turned to the markets to survive, the selection of what could be purchased through the markets increased in variety. Today, North Koreans can purchase radios, televisions, small laptop computers, DVDs and USB drives with American and South Korean television shows, music, and movies, and even smart phones through the markets in their cities and villages. According to North Korea expert Lee Soo-jung, “The market has brought with it a decrease in control and an increase in mobility and has spurred the creation of human and information networks” (Kretchun and Kim 9). The farther north a town is, and therefore closer to China, the more accessible these materials are, and the stronger that information network is. A mass survey of North Korean defectors in 2012 conducted by Intermedia shows that 50% of defectors watched a foreign DVD while they were living in North Korea, and one

third had watched a non-North Korean television program (Kretchun and Kim). Although there exists a heavy police presence in all markets to try to prevent the exchange of illegal items, in reality, this flow takes place mostly unimpeded.

Border guards and police officers have always patrolled these public gathering spaces and borders, and this was the case even during the worst years of famine. Today, these authorities are still a large part of North Korean society, but foreign information flows openly through North Korea despite their presence due to the increased effectiveness of bribes. When a security officer discovers a North Korean in possession of illicit media, or attempting to cross the border illegally (or both), the markets have created a greater incentive for that officer to accept a small bribe to look the other way rather than detain that person (Kretchen, Lee, and Tuohy 25). Monetary bribes are much more effective than they were in the years leading up to the famine, because now officers can take that money to the markets themselves in exchange for goods and services. In a 2015 study of 350 North Korean defectors, 184 people reported having bribed someone to avoid punishment for some offense, often foreign media possession, and 82% of those defectors had bribed a state security officer (Kretchen, Lee, and Tuohy 26-7). Media flows in North Korea are so facilitated both by local entrepreneurs and security officers that consuming foreign media is seen as completely ordinary by many North Koreans, in spite of their country's status as one of the most isolated places in the world.

The marketization of North Korea - albeit highly limited - since the late 1990s has played a critical role in increasing citizens' access to information about the outside world. North Koreans travel between North Korea and China for work and return with information about living conditions and wages outside of North Korea. Even more notably, North Koreans return

with DVDs, CDs, USB drives filled with entire seasons of television shows, personal computers, radios tuned to foreign signals, and smartphones. Although there is a risk associated with possessing or consuming this media, marketization fuels the effectiveness of bribes, lowering the likelihood of punishment. These developments could not have taken place without the gradual scaling-back of the socialist command economy that North Korea was founded upon, caused by the devastating famine of the 1990s.

Cross-cultural Comparisons

Despite its gradual opening, North Korea is still an extremely isolated and repressive state. What is known about the media environment in North Korea comes from defectors, and it is impossible to speak to someone living in North Korea about their actual lived experiences. As demonstrated above, with the appropriate caveats, defector testimonies can provide a useful framework for understanding North Korea, and some scholars have advanced this framework through the use of historical comparisons.

Anguelov draws a comparison between the current situation in North Korea and the liberalization of the Soviet Union in the 1980s (67). Like North Korea, a hallmark of communist rule in the Soviet Union was strict media censorship and the monopoly held by the state government over all forms of media. Additionally, beginning in the 1980s, a sort of “shadow economy” developed in Eastern Bloc countries where citizens could purchase mostly American movies, albums, and televisions. The most popular media formats were VHS tapes of American music videos ripped from the newly debuted MTV, and tapes of American sitcoms and cartoons (69). These media products often served as their audience’s first exposure to concepts like sexual freedom, gender equity, and other taboo subjects in their own countries, in addition to being of

significantly higher quality than domestic media programming. Anguelov argues that this phenomenon contributed to the “cultural convergence” of the Eastern and Western blocs, eventually a factor in the end of the Cold War and the connection of “two cultures of the formerly economically separated blocs. . .to a new globalizing marketplace. The connection was not simply through products but also through information exchange” (71). Similarly, North Korea’s economic ties to China have led to its own covert cultural convergence with the West. For an idea about what impact this convergence may have, we can look to the Soviet example, although the “shared language, cultural legacy, history, and values” of North Koreans and the South Koreans whose movies, television, and music they consume may have an even more meaningful impact on the future of North Korea (76). The end of the Cold War and the collapse or transition of major communist states provides other comparisons for the North Korean example as well.

Given North Korea’s connection to China, another parallel that has been drawn to understand North Korean media flows is the liberalization of Chinese media in the 1970s (Zhang and Lee). Under the Mao Zedong regime, China was completely shut off from foreign media, and the state was the sole producer of all news and entertainment. In the 1970s, Deng Xiaoping commenced an era of economic liberalization, which allowed for the wealth and standard of living for citizens to rise significantly, but access to foreign media was still tightly restricted by the government. The newfound wealth of the average Chinese citizen contributed to the development of a black market for pirated foreign media (83). Eventually, China would slowly begin to liberalize different media industries, beginning with the publishing industry in 1982 and followed by the press and television industries in 1992 and 2003, due in part to the commonplace

nature of foreign media piracy. However, a black market for pirated foreign media, not entirely dissimilar to the markets in North Korea, persists to this day (86). Zhang and Lee argue that if widespread, state sanctioned economic liberalization takes place in North Korea, the sociopolitical impacts could be similar to those in China in the past three decades.

While the China and Soviet Union examples make strong comparisons, the media environment in North Korea ultimately stands unparalleled, mostly due to the state's sheer ability to maintain tight control on information flows for more than seven decades. Nonetheless, these examples, from states that North Korea originally sought to model, can provide insight into the long term impact that outside media and word of mouth information can have on North Korea.

The Korean Wave in North Korea

The current state of foreign media flows in North Korea cannot be understood without placing these circumstances within the context of *hallyu*, or the "Korean Wave." *Hallyu* is the global popularity of South Korean popular culture all across the world, from North America to Southeast Asia. There is a wide body of literature about the Korean Wave, but only a small portion of it refers to the Korean Wave as a phenomenon in North Korea. North Korea is an obvious target for South Korean movies, television dramas, and music, given that the two countries speak a nearly identical language and are culturally still similar. Obviously though, these media products are completely illegal in North Korea, leading to a smaller amount of work on this subject. The context of the Korean Wave is essential for a deeper understanding of foreign media flows in North Korea, which I provide in the following section.

The term "Korean Wave" was first coined by a Chinese newspaper in 1998 in reference to the sudden popularity of South Korean television dramas among teenagers and young adults

(Y. Kim). Although the Chinese media often portrayed this as a sudden new craze, South Korea's newfound popularity in the Asian entertainment industry was the result of an intentional modernization process. Up until the early 1990s, South Korea had been a poor, developing country, struggling to modernize after being cut off from the industry of the North and plagued by a series of authoritarian rulers. Beginning in the early 1990s, when liberal democracy was brought to South Korea, the country began to modernize, but the Asian financial crisis in 1997 presented a series of new challenges. As a result, the South Korean government turned to a number of economic initiatives to revive the economy, and one of the identified areas of growth was the export of popular media (Y. Kim 3). Neighboring countries, which were also impacted by the recession, readily purchased South Korean television programs to air on domestic channels, a low-cost alternative to expensive and more prestigious Japanese dramas (Chua and Iwabuchi 4). Thus, the Korean Wave quickly began to overtake countries like China, Singapore, and eventually, Japan.

Today, Korean Wave cultural products have swelled past television to include films, pop music (K-pop), beauty products, video games, fashion, and street food. The reach of South Korea's cultural influence has expanded outside of East Asia and all across the world to include the United States, Western Europe, and South America. In 2018, the Korea Foundation put out a report estimating that there are nearly 90 million Korean Wave fans globally, up from 73 million in 2017 (Kelley). The continued popularity of Korean Wave media products stems from a continued effort by the South Korean government to export popular culture products. Since the late 1990s, the South Korean Ministry of Culture, Tourism, and Sports has overseen the development of the cultural industry, directly subsidizing entertainment agencies and

coordinating the resources of other federal agencies to advance the development and export of South Korean cultural products (Kwan and Kim). North Koreans, alongside Americans, Chinese, French, and Brazillians have developed a taste for South Korean cultural exports, and the popularity of these products within North Korea could not exist without the intentionally curated Korean Wave phenomenon.

There are several major schools of thought for why South Korean popular culture has had such strong and lasting popularity in East Asia, including in North Korea. Many early Korean Wave scholars, beginning in the 1990s, attributed South Korea's cultural capital to a sense of "cultural proximity" (Yoon and Kang 11). This theory purports that there is something essentially "Asian" about the themes and styles of Korean Wave media products. Japanese, Chinese, and even North Korean viewers may identify with shared Asian values in South Korean media products that cause them to develop an affinity toward South Korean culture and a sense of familiarity (Iwabuchi, Lin and Tong, Siriyuvasak and Shin). Cultures "proximate" to South Korea sense a sort of innate "Asianness" throughout Korean films and television shows, what Chen refers to as a "cultural odor" (Chen 30).

However, as the Korean Wave spread outside East Asia and began to encapsulate more than just the visual medium, many in the field began to view cultural proximity as a limiting and insufficient explanation. Later *hallyu* commentary has instead centered itself around "cultural hybridity," which better explains why South Korean media products have mass appeal inside and outside of Asia (Yoon and Kang 12). The cultural hybridity school of thought identifies "Asianness" in these media products while adding two important factors into the discussion. First, that there are also more universally appealing themes in Korean media products, such as

romance, cosmopolitanism, and modernization. Second, the transnational appeal of Korean media is affected by that media's interactions with outside cultures. Essentially, the Korean Wave is an example of "glocalization," and the driving forces behind the Korean cultural industry take into account both its local and global audiences.

Today, the cultural hybridity thesis is still widely accepted but has been modified to account for the transnational impacts of the internet and social media (Yoon and Kang 14). All of these factors impact why South Korean popular culture has appeal to localized East Asian audiences and to audiences as far reaching as the United States, France, Iraq, and Egypt (Kim and Nye 34). As summarized above, the media and cultural industry in South Korea has been intentionally cultivated by the federal government, and any nods to either Asian or more "universal" themes have been carefully coordinated. Although most of the field of Korean Wave studies has moved on from the cultural proximity hypothesis, this project will consider it as a factor in motivation for illegal media consumption in North Korea, especially given the shared language and customs between the two Koreas.

Soft Power Potential in North Korea

Another angle taken by scholars when discussing the Korean Wave is that of "soft power," a term coined by political scientist Joseph Nye. Nye defines soft power as "the ability to shape the preferences of others," or essentially when one country influences the desired outcomes of other states through persuasion, education, public opinion, and appeal of cultural ideals and customs (5). Nye contrasts this with "hard power," which states harness when they use military force or economic pressure to force certain outcomes on the world stage. South Korean popular culture is a prime example of soft power at work, and one Nye himself has explored in

depth. Nye and Kim compare South Korea to countries like Canada, the Netherlands, Sweden, Norway, and Finland, which like South Korea have relatively small militaries and populations but great amounts of “political clout” that make these countries attractive to foreigners (32). The South Korean government’s purposeful development of its cultural industries is a driving force for soft power, which has led to an increase in tourism, international students enrolling in Korean universities, and an overall greater global awareness of South Korea. They place a particular emphasis on the soft power potential of South Korean media products in North Korea, allowing North Koreans to “get a taste of freedom, modernity and free-market fantasies spun by the illegal, smuggled dramas and movies” (37). Critics of the soft power framework have pointed out that it is difficult to qualitatively measure the ways in which a nation’s clout can influence the behavior of other states, which is just one obstacle faced by a project of this nature. Still, the notion that the Korean conflict may be addressed through non-military force is a reality acknowledged by some of the highest profile defectors.

One of those high profile defectors, Thae Yong-ho, the former North Korean deputy ambassador to the United Kingdom, defected from North Korea in 2016 while stationed in London (Thae 54). His move to South Korea made him the highest ranking official to ever defect from North Korea. Throughout popular and academic sources, Thae has made the case for the role of foreign popular media in many North Koreans’ decisions to eventually defect from North Korea. Although his media consumption was not the ultimate reason he chose to leave North Korea, citing instead the execution of Kim Jong-un’s uncle in December 2013 and a desire to protect his family from Kim’s wrath, Thae argues that the flow of foreign media into North Korea is impossible for the regime to stop and has opened the minds of thousands of North

Koreans to consider defection (56). Citing the soft power potential of South Korean popular culture smuggled into North Korea, Thae encourages major players like the United States and South Korea to move beyond economic sanctions and explore the possibility of expanding its use of soft power in its foreign policy with North Korea.

Suk-Young Kim analyzes the role of one specific South Korean drama that has been particularly popular in North Korea, *Boys Over Flowers*, and its soft power potential in North Korea. The soap opera follows the romance between Junpyo, the heir of a wealthy South Korean conglomerate (known as a *chaebol*) and Jandi, the daughter of two poor custodians who is given the chance to attend one of South Korea's most elite private schools. Jandi, through her romance with Junpyo, undergoes a "conversion to plutocracy," an example of the show's glorification of conspicuous consumption and materialism that has, in some ways "converted" North Koreans as well (98). In 2011, Radio Free Asia reported that *Boys Over Flowers* was one of the most popular pirated South Korean television shows. According to other reports, in Cheongjin, male students began to cut and style their hair like the two male protagonists of the show, requesting for the "Gu Junpyo" or the "Yun Jihu" haircut (S Y. Kim 94). The popularity of *Boys Over Flowers* among North Koreans demonstrates the mass appeal of media that glorifies capitalism, materialism, and other ideals in direct opposition to the purported values of the North Korean regime.

Some states may exercise this sort of soft power in a way that promotes their own cultural hegemony, a sort of domination which places that state's culture as the preferred worldview of all under its control. Gramsci first articulated his theory of hegemony while imprisoned by the Italian fascist state in the 1930s, which Bates summarizes as the concept that "man is not ruled

by force alone, but also by ideas” (351). That the world is ruled by a small group of elites is an age old concept, but the idea that cultural beliefs, and even culture itself, is predetermined by a small group of ruling elites was articulated by Marx in the 19th century and further extrapolated upon by Gramsci. In the later half of the 20th century, theorists began to apply the theory of hegemony to mass media, mostly citing the media hegemony of regions like Western Europe and the United States, defined as “the dominance of a certain way of life and thought and. . .the way in which the dominant concept of reality is diffused throughout public as well as private dimensions of social life” (Altheide 476-7). In foreign policy circles, there is much emphasis on the hegemonic power balance between China and the United States. In East Asia though, South Korea has established itself as a media hegemon in the region through its cultural policies and promotion of the Korean Wave, with its influences reaching even into the isolationist North Korean state.

In the age of internet-dominated globalization, hegemony takes on a different meaning because information and ideas flow across borders more freely, and individuals are able to access media from all parts of the world from nearly any place on earth. Globalization and the internet have made these media flows less likely to be dominated by one single hegemonic power, but they are nonetheless uneven. Appadurai outlines five dimensions of global cultural flow, which embody the “tension between cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization” (71). These dimensions, which he calls “scapes,” are the ethnoscape, the technoscape, the mediascape, the finanscape, and the ideoscape. Global media flows allow humans all across the world to have access to the same mass of information. However, while global media can serve as an equalizer in this sense, disjunctures between these five “scapes” also highlight human divisions, such as

ethnicity, national identity, and ideology. While there are still countries who exert more soft power than others, such as the United States in the West, or South Korea in Northeast Asia, globalization upended the traditional hegemonic world order in numerous ways, including through the disjuncture of global media flows.

In North Korea, the ideoscape, or the conglomerations of political and ideological images which promote the power of the state, is disconnected from the mediascapes which citizens encounter through illicit consumption of foreign media, what Appadurai defines as “image-centered, narrative-based accounts of strips of reality” (73). The North Korean ideoscape, which portrays North Korea as superior to all other states and the sole provider of stability to the North Korean people, conflicts with foreign mediascapes that portray countries like the United States and South Korea as hyper-developed and wealthy and North Korea as poor, incompetent, and a threat to global security. This disjuncture highlights the divisions between North Korea and the rest of the world.

The media landscape in North Korea encompasses far more than just state propagated television, films, and radio, and the presence of foreign media in North Korea has provided thousands of North Koreans with access to information about the outside world and exposure to capitalist, democratic messages. This background regarding why and how these materials are spread across North Korea will provide the necessary context for this project’s exploration of North Korean motivation for consumption of foreign media and its impacts on perceptions of the state.

Methods

The goal of this project is to determine potential themes in the experiences of North Korean defectors and their relationship to foreign media. This project will use textual analysis as the method for identifying common themes in experiences among North Korean defectors. Textual analysis hinges upon the notion that texts do not exist as fixed, isolated entities, but are themselves sources of content and cultural meaning (Barthes). In this instance, the texts are the firsthand accounts of defectors, which I will analyze for similarities in content. The aim of this method, and of this project in particular, is to “explain the variety of possible meanings of texts,” recognizing that there is no singular, all encompassing meaning of any given text (Fürsich). The texts of defector testimonies that I will analyze in this project represent varying experiences inside and outside of North Korea. Through a textual analytical approach, I seek to locate commonalities within these experiences. The current body of textual analysis on North Korean defectors often focuses on economic hardships and experiences of torture and imprisonment (Yoon). While some of the texts I will analyze inevitably touch on these subjects, my method will specifically focus on experiences with and reactions to foreign information and media.

It is impossible to make any broad generalizations about a population of more than 25 million people, but my aim is to center the voices of North Koreans, many of whom have endured great suffering, and most of whom have been excluded from political conversations about North Korea. I have chosen to focus on accounts drawn from academic and journalistic sources rather than memoirs written (or, more accurately, co-written) by defectors for a mainstream literary audience. The first reason for this choice is the issues of consistency and bias outlined in the previous chapter. The second reason is that many literary memoirs focus on

experiences in North Korean gulags and the author's subsequent escape from imprisonment. These stories should not be discounted, and those who live to tell them are deeply courageous and resilient. Nonetheless, intense focus on these issues mostly lies outside the scope of this project. The sources I have selected do not all have the same relationship to media, but all acknowledge foreign media to some extent and have appeared in edited and/or fact checked formats.

While the term "foreign" often carries many negative connotations, in this project, I use this term as neutrally as possible. "Foreign" can create an "us versus them" mentality, used to make those on the outside feel inferior, but in the context of this study, "foreign" simply means "non-North Korean." Typically, when I use the term "foreign," I am specifically referring to media products from South Korea and the United States, but "foreign media" in this project refers to any cultural product produced outside of North Korea, typically with a non-North Korean audience in mind.

This thesis will analyze the English language testimonies of 14 voices from four different sources. These four sources are: Jieun Baek's *North Korea's Hidden Revolution*, Anna Fifield's *The Great Successor: The Divinely Perfect Destiny of Brilliant Comrade Kim Jong Un*, Sunny Yoon's article "Forbidden audience: Media reception and social change in North Korea," and a firsthand account from former North Korean ambassador Thae Yong-Ho, as published in the collection *South Korean Popular Media and North Korea*, edited by Youna Kim. The defectors whose stories have been shared in these collections represent a variety of backgrounds and life experiences, varying in age, location, profession, *songbun* caste, and party membership. They include the testimony of a young man who grew up in North Korea with a physical disability,

marking him with one of the lowest possible statuses, and the testimony of one of the highest ranking North Koreans to defect.¹

With this in mind, I have developed a seven question framework for analysis to be applied to each defector account, with the goal of identifying whether or not there are any common experiences or patterns among defectors who engaged with foreign media while living in North Korea. These guidelines will be useful for surface level comparisons, like age and gender, but will also explore what forms of foreign media a defector interacted with, how they came into contact with foreign media, and what attitudes they held toward the regime before and after this contact. I will also look at the descriptive language used to describe their reactions to the media they consume. Some defectors, for example, may be drawn to the “elegant” aspects of South Korean films, while others report fixating on the “romantic” depictions of young love, which are nonexistent within North Korean culture. Each question may not be applicable to each story, and the answers to some of these questions may be unknown.

The questions I will use to analyze each testimony are as follows.

- 1.) What personal information is available about the defector? Name, age, gender, place of birth, high or low *songbun* caste, etc.²
- 2.) What forms of outside media did they interact with?
- 3.) How did they come into contact with foreign media?

¹ Coincidentally, both of these defectors, Ji Seong-Ho and Thae Yong-Ho, respectively, have both been elected to the South Korean National Assembly.

² In some instances, a testimony may come from an anonymous source, or a person using a pseudonym to protect family members and friends still living in North Korea. One way that the North Korean state deters defection is by imprisoning or executing families members of those who do successfully defect (Baek 119). Therefore, even after defectors have successfully resettled, they will request anonymity when speaking with the press. When a defector is referred to by a pseudonym or an incomplete name, I will use quotation marks around that name. When defectors are referred to anonymously, I will use the naming convention used by the original author.

- 4.) How old were they when they first encountered foreign media?
- 5.) What words do they use to describe their reactions to foreign media?
- 6.) How much, if any, do they claim to have believed in North Korean state propaganda?
- 7.) Do they attribute their decision to defect to foreign media consumption?

The defectors whose testimony I am analyzing is as follows.

	Age (at the time of interview)	Province (if known)	Source
“Girl 3”	19	North Hamgyong	Yoon
“Girl 2”	21	Rygang	Yoon
Kim Ha-Young	23	North Hamgyong	Baek
Lee Joon-Hee	26	Rygang	Baek
Ahn Yu-Mi	27	North Hamgyong	Baek
Jeong Gwang-Seong	27	North Hamgyong	Baek
Ji Seong-Ho	34	North Hamgyong	Baek
Nehemiah Park	35	North Hamgyong	Baek
Park Se-Joon	Approximately 46	North or South Hwanghae (concealed for security reasons)	Baek
Kim Seong-Min	54	Pyongyang (born in Jagang)	Baek
Kim Heung-Kwang	56	South Hamgyong	Baek
Thae Yong-Ho	57	Pyongyang (directly administered city)	Y. Kim
“Mrs. Kwon”	Not given	North Hamgyong	Fifield
Cho Jung-A	Not given	“On the border”	Fifield

I have selected these questions with two main goals in mind. First, by gathering as much demographic information about defectors as available, I will search for comparisons and differences in experiences with foreign media. I will explore if there exists anything resembling a common age that defectors encounter foreign media, or if people of lower *songbun* status are more likely to engage with illegal foreign media. This is the aim of questions one through four. Second, I will explore the discourse of North Korean defectors surrounding foreign media, with the goal of understanding why North Koreans are interested at all in foreign media, and what lessons or insights North Koreans may gain from foreign media. This is the purpose of questions five through seven.

Based on the English-language materials that I had access to as an undergraduate researcher, I have chosen this method in order to allow North Korean defectors to speak for themselves and their own experiences, and to look for common themes throughout these experiences, if there are any commonalities at all. As has been discussed, North Korea is by design a difficult part of the world to study, although the testimonies of defectors shed great light on day to day realities for the North Korean people. These challenges are exacerbated by my own personal language barrier; the majority of work on this subject has been done in Korean, a language that I am not proficient in at an academic level. There is an English language body of research and defector interviews, but I still lack access to the full body of work on the relationship between foreign media and North Korean defectors. Furthermore, this project relies on testimonies from interviews that I neither conducted myself nor translated myself. I must trust in the reliability of both the researchers who have done this work before me, and the interpreters and translators used to relate these stories in English.

In spite of these limitations, this project will make an important contribution to understanding the phenomenon of foreign media dissemination in North Korea. Much of the research on this subject published to date has been focused on the process of how media enters North Korea. The testimonies of North Korean defectors serve to explain these media flows and the dangers associated with them, but rarely are these testimonies centered as sources of meaning in and of themselves. This project examines why North Koreans are willing to risk their lives in order to purchase, sell, and consume media from outside North Korea. My research will center the direct experiences of the North Korean people, with the goal of highlighting their agency and speculating on the role the average citizen might play in the future of their country. There is much about North Korea that is unknown to the outside world, but this study proves that there is much to be learned about and from North Korea, so long as one takes the time to ask the people who have lived there.

Findings and Analysis

My analysis of defector interviews relating to foreign media reveals that North Koreans of varying ages, locations, and socioeconomic classes consumed and were influenced by this media prior to their defection. The extent of this influence varies among individuals, but it can generally be said that consumption of foreign media can either cause disillusionment with state propaganda or contribute to already held doubts about the ability of the state to provide for its citizens and protect them from threats. High ranking party officials and members of the lowest *songbun* castes alike have access to foreign media, but the means through which individuals are introduced to foreign media and the impact it has on their perceptions of the state tends to vary based on class. The descriptive language used by individuals to describe their reactions to foreign media varies, but in general, individuals report that foreign media provided them with something unbelievable and frightening but also new and exciting. Most commonly, foreign media provided individuals with insights about their own relative wealth when compared to the world outside North Korea, especially countries like South Korea, where according to propaganda, all citizens live in poverty.

Overall, there is no quintessential narrative accounting for why North Koreans consume foreign media, or what observations about the outside world they glean from it. Media consumption is ultimately a deeply personal, individual experience, but there are perhaps some uniquely North Korean takeaways from aspects of foreign media that seem innocuous to a democratic, capitalist society but are revelatory to a North Korean. Media consumption and meaning making vary among individuals and societies, but the insights gleaned from defector testimonies can help those outside North Korea better understand this phenomenon as a whole.

“Given my job, I’d face grand punishment”: Personal Information

“Of course I knew that if I were caught, especially given my job, I’d face grand punishment. But you know, despite all that, a curiosity, a desire for the new and an opposition to things being hidden, is inherent in people. . .” -*Kim Heung-Kwang*

The first question of my textual analysis dealt with extracting personal information from each defector narrative, such as age, location, caste, and profession. The majority of defectors studied in this project are under the age of 35, but several of the voices were in their 40s or 50s at the time they were interviewed. Other researchers of North Korea have noted that consumption of foreign media in North Korea is generally a youth phenomenon, given that the younger a North Korean is, the more likely they are to have only lived in a world where individuals rely on the markets, not state rations, to survive. *Jangmadang* is the Korean word for “market,” and the generation of young people born during or after the Great Famine of the 1990s are referred to as the “*jangmadang* generation” for this precise reason (Baek 183). Movies, television shows, and music burned onto USB drives or DVDs are a common fixture in the average North Korean market, and these under-35 defectors were more likely to encounter this media because a family member or a close friend purchased it on the market and shared it with them. The younger defectors in this analysis are from varying *songbun* castes, and their interactions with foreign media were generally less tied to class.

The four defectors over the age of 35 did not encounter media through the markets the first time. Three of the four defectors, Thae Yong-Ho, Kim Seong-Min, and Kim Heung-Kwang, were involved in the Korean Workers Party or the Korea People’s Army. Thae Yong-Ho worked

as a diplomat in London prior to his defection, and Kim Heung-Kwang, a professor of computer science at Kim Chaek University, also worked for the government policing “data crimes,” such as the possession of foreign media. When Kim Seong-Min served in the Korean People’s Army, one of his duties was to collect propaganda leaflets with pictures of and information about the world dropped over North Korea by South Korean organizations, his first interaction with foreign information (Baek 103). Park Se-Joon’s father was a senior intelligence official, implying high *songbun* status. He worked as a dentist in North Korea, but during the famine, he turned an illegal trading business to supplement his paltry income, which included travelling between China and North Korea (Baek 29). Eventually, what he saw outside North Korea spurred him to turn to foreign radio. These four older defectors were all of a high *songbun* caste and prior to their engagement with foreign media, they each lived relatively privileged lifestyles. In this study, younger defectors of all castes had experiences with foreign media due to the prevalence of the marketplaces, but older defectors were all of higher castes and encountered foreign media and information through their work, rather than randomly through the markets.

The majority of defectors studied in this project are from North Korea’s mountainous northern region, specifically North Hamgyong and Ryanggang provinces. North Korea’s northern region is the least populated area in the country and farthest away from the imposing regime in Pyongyang (The World Factbook). The vast majority lived outside of Pyongyang, which reflects statistics from larger studies of defector experiences with foreign media (Kretchun and Kim 68-9). Outside of Pyongyang, the carefully monitored and controlled capitol, North Koreans are more likely to be able to engage in small acts of civil disobedience without detection and to escape punishment via bribery when they are caught in the act.

“What’s the one with the elephants?”: Contact with Foreign Media

“When we watched South Korean media through DVDs, more than ten people gathered together, men and women, children and adults. In the [black] market, there are stores that rent foreign programs secretly. It was not expensive.” - *“Girl 3”*

“I watched a lot of Hollywood movies, Korean movies, and Korean TV shows at home. I watched all the Bond movies-both the American and the British series-and all the Disney movies. . .OK so I watched *Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella, Snow White, Tarzan, Prince of Egypt*, and what’s the one with the elephants?” -*Kim Ha-Young*

Question two asked what forms of media the defectors engaged with during their time in North Korea. The defectors in this study refer to movies, television shows, radio shows, and music consumed via DVDs or USB drives. Several of the defectors also listened to foreign radio stations, and for several, this was their initial interaction with outside media. These testimonies reflect the growing number of North Koreans with access to foreign media within their country and existing data about media in North Korea. As previously cited, in a 2017 Intermedia survey of defectors about foreign media, nearly half of defectors interviewed reported watching a foreign DVD while living in North Korea. Additionally, 27% claimed to have listened to foreign radio, and 24% watched foreign television programs (Kretchun and Kim 13). Likewise, all of the defectors in this project watched foreign movies and television, mostly via DVDs and USB drives, and many others cited listening to foreign music as well.

While USB drives have become an increasingly popular format for storing foreign media, due to their small size and ability to easily be hidden from North Korea authorities, the defectors in this study mostly discussed watching movies and television on DVDs. This is likely because while the testimonies analyzed for this project were recent, the interviewees had defected several years earlier at the time of their interviews. Thus, their experiences represent an earlier period in the history of foreign media in North Korea. DVDs and DVD players were first introduced to the North Korean black market economy in the early 2000s, but USB drives have steadily gained in popularity throughout the 2010s (Kretchun and Kim 12). Foreign media has even been brought in to North Korea on tiny micro SD cards, dubbed “nose cards” by some North Koreans because smugglers can hide them in their noses while they cross the border (Thae 59). The small portable media players that many of the defectors in this study used to watch DVDs have been legal in North Korea since 2014, with the requirement that they only be used to watch state-sanctioned media. Nonetheless, foreign DVDs and USB drives alike have become more commonplace over time.

Some defectors cite listening to foreign radio programs as their gateway to broader foreign media consumption. Nearly all North Koreans own radios, but all North Korean radios have been manipulated so that they are untunable. Each radio can only be set to a handful of party-approved stations and is sealed to guarantee that North Koreans do not open them up and make them tunable again (Lankov 43). Nonetheless, North Koreans have manipulated existing radios, purchased Chinese radios sold illegally in the marketplace, and even created homemade radios to listen in on the outside world (Baek 98). There are a number of South Korean and American organizations that broadcast into North Korea, such as Free Radio North Korea, Voice

of Freedom, and Voice of America, to share news about the outside world and contradict state propaganda, and these stations reach thousands of North Koreans despite the government's attempt to jam the channels (Baek 96). Several defectors discussed listening to mainstream South Korean radio stations like KBS and MBC as well, which did not intentionally broadcast into North Korea but could be picked up by radios close to the border.

The Intermedia report emphasizes the power of word-of-mouth transmission of outside information, which is a more powerful medium than DVDs, radios, or USB drives. 39% of survey respondents cited DVDs as an important source of outside information, putting it in second place, but the most common and reliable form of outside information for North Koreans is word-of-mouth information, identified by 79% of respondents (Kretchun and Kim 10). While word-of-mouth transmission of information was not the focus of this project, it is worth noting that several defectors discussed the importance of this oral information network in North Korea.

Question three asks how defectors reported first coming into contact with foreign media. My analysis shows two basic categories for this initial experience. First, as mentioned in the previous section, there are those who come into contact with foreign media as part of their job. Some police foreign media as part of their job for the party or the military and inadvertently are drawn to the very media they are supposed to withhold from other North Koreans. Others, like Thae Yong-Ho with his diplomatic post in London, may be so privileged that the general restrictions on media simply do not apply to them. As already discussed, encountering foreign media through one's profession generally correlates with a high caste.

The second category is those who encounter media privately, outside of their work, either intentionally or unintentionally. Nine defectors in this study fit into this category. Some may

have intentionally sought out information, and others reported consuming media with friends or family members who served as their point of first contact. Cho Jung-A discussed purchasing USB drives with her mother in the marketplace (Fifield 119). Ahn Yu-Mi reported that she started to watch films and dramas on her own to fill gaps in her free time after she graduated from school and started working (Baek 201). Additionally, some defectors did not recall any particular moment of their first encounter with foreign media. As mentioned, for an increasing number of North Koreans, foreign media and the markets have always been part of their lives. Lee Joon-Hee and “Mrs. Kwon” said that foreign media was just a normal part of living life around the markets (Baek 174, Fifield 118). While they encountered foreign media privately, there was not one specific moment that led them to this media.

Question four asked what age defectors were when they first encountered foreign media. Very few of the defectors in this study named the specific age they were when they first encountered foreign media, so I will make the distinction between those who first consumed this media as a youth (as a child or adolescent) and those who were adults when they first engaged with foreign media. Among the defectors in this study, there was an exact even split between initial encounters as a youth and as an adult. If I expanded the youth category to include young adults under 35, then a majority of defectors encountered media as youths. This reflects the fact that the majority of defectors cited in this study were under the age of 35 at the time of their interview.

“They live that well?”: Reactions to Foreign Media

“We’d say, ‘Wow, over there in the South, is that how they live? They live that well?’” -Ahn Yu-Mi

“It was frightening, but also more fun. . .I couldn’t believe everything I saw, but there seemed to be credibility to most of [it]. I could see the changes in the outside world.” -Ji Seong-Ho

“You keep listening because it’s so...different from anything you’ve been exposed to. But one day, you think, ‘that sounds right. . .’” -Kim Heung-Kwang

Question five dealt with the descriptive language used by defectors to explain their reactions to foreign movies, television shows, and music, and what takeaways they had, if any. I have analyzed the adjectives, adverbs, and other descriptors given by defectors of their reactions to foreign media and ranked these descriptors based on how many defectors used them. Nearly all defectors, with one exception, used multiple descriptors for their reactions. The descriptors “new,” “fun,” “emotional,” “funny,” “overwhelming,” and “addictive” were used by one defector each. One defector, Cho Jung-A mentioned that foreign media made her realize how much North Koreans and South Koreans have in common, and another, Jeong Gwang-Seong, was struck by how much freedom characters in South Korean media have compared to North Koreans.

	Number of defectors who used the description	Which defectors used the description
Reference to wealth in other countries	8	“Girl 2,” Ahn Yu-Mi, Kim Ha-Young, Kim Heung-Kwang, Kim Seong-Min, “Mrs. Kwon,” Lee Joon-Hee, Park Se-Joon
Unbelievable/shocking/surprising	5	Ji Seong-Ho, Kim Ha-Young, Kim Heung-Kwang, “Mrs. Kwon,” Nehemiah Park
Scary/frightening/upsetting	5	Jeong Gwang-Seong, Ji

		Seong-Ho, Kim Heung-Kwang, Kim Seong-Min, Nehemiah Park
Interesting	4	“Girl 2,” Jeong Gwang-Seong, Kim Seong-Min, Nehemiah Park
Beautiful	3	Ahn Yu-Mi, Jeong Gwang-Seong, Kim Seong-Min
Different	3	Cho Jung-A, Kim Heung-Kwang, Thae Yong-Ho
Elegant	3	Ahn Yu-Mi, Jeong Gwang-Seong, Kim Seong-Min
Romantic	3	Jeong Gwang-Seong, Kim Ha-Young, Lee Joon-Hee
Amazing	2	Jeong Gwang-Seong, Kim Ha-Young

The most common descriptor was some kind of reference to the great wealth and consumerism displayed in foreign media. This includes surprise at the size of the houses people live in, the clothing, accessories, and makeup they wear, the fact that people own cars, and the ability of people to travel freely. Through the media they consume, North Koreans learn that in the countries that border their own, the quality of life is significantly better, and citizens have daily access to goods that are considered luxuries in North Korea. The depictions of wealth in foreign media confirm what many have already deduced through purchasing foreign goods in the marketplaces or through their own illegal travels to North Korea (Baek 204). Still, understanding that home goods or medicines produced outside North Korea are of a higher quality is different

from turning on one's television and seeing beautiful men and women dressed in elegant clothing, driving expensive cars, and travelling wherever they please without permission from their government. As one of Yoon's interviewees summed up, "By watching South Korean TV, I dreamed of how to decorate a big two-story house with a handsome guy" (179).

The wealth and consumerism often portrayed in South Korean media is not a uniquely Korean phenomenon, and many scholars have argued that it is the transnational, cosmopolitan nature of materialism that has made Korean Wave media products a global phenomenon, including within North Korea (Y. Kim 2013, S.Y. Kim). However, while conspicuous consumption is certainly a theme of some South Korean movies and television shows, several of the defectors in this study expressed wonder at displays of wealth generally not associated with rabid consumerism in the developed world. Park Se-Joon cited his amazement that some people outside North Korea have air conditioning in their homes, and Kim Ha-Young marvelled at the fact that the cities shown in movies and television shows are lit up at night, because unlike in North Korea, the electrical grid is not shut down at night (Baek 100, 180). Foreign media exposes North Koreans both to the sheer amount of material wealth in the world outside North Korea and the less opulent amenities often taken for granted in the developed world.

Alongside this development gap between North Korea and the countries that surround it is another gap, one between reality and the fantasy world depicted in the media. While depictions of wealth in foreign media, especially South Korean media, are based in reality, the pervasiveness of these themes in media can give North Koreans an exaggerated idea of what life is like in the outside world. Kim Heung-Kwang remarked that after pilfering through discarded European cassettes and CDs as part of his job as a media monitor, he thought that "Europeans

must not do any work. All they must do is just play” (Baek 77). Yoon’s “Girl 3” admitted that she “thought that all people in South Korea were living in big houses. Since TV showed rich people, there’s a gap between fantasy and reality that I discovered after I came to North Korea” (179). Depictions of wealth in foreign media can leave defectors with an overblown image of what life outside North Korea is like, which can complicate post-defection adjustment.

The second most common descriptor of foreign media was “shocking” or “unbelievable.” In this category, I have included defectors who use words like “shock,” “surprise,” “unbelievable,” “unreal,” “unimaginable,” or “fantasy.” Basically, there was some aspect of the stories, characters, or themes portrayed in foreign media that was shocking and difficult for a defector to comprehend. Most commonly, this shock was felt over depictions of romance and sexuality in foreign media, especially North Korean media. Kim Ha-Young recalled sneakily viewing a South Korean film her parents were watching called *Birdcage Inn* while she was supposed to be sleeping, about a young woman who must prostitute herself for money (Baek 179). She expressed shock over the adult themes in the film, themes which would never be discussed, let alone portrayed in films, in North Korea. Fifield’s “Mrs. Kwon” remembered a South Korean “rom-com” series titled *My Name Is Kim Sam-soon* about a portly woman who falls in love with a handsome doctor, calling the story a “fantasy” (118).

North Korea is a patriarchal society with traditional gender roles and numerous taboos against romantic relationships and public displays of affection. Therefore, North Koreans are often surprised to see dating and falling in love as common themes in South Korean media. Fahy uses wedding cultures in North and South Korea as an example, citing the jealousy North Korean couples may feel toward the lavish wedding ceremonies depicted in South Korea media,

meanwhile North Korean couples must marry before portraits of the Kim family (115).

Furthermore, sexual abuse and other forms of violence against women are pervasive in North Korean culture. According to a 2018 report from Human Rights Watch, women in North Korea often face sex discrimination and are completely bound to the reputation of their fathers or the men they marry (Adams et al). The agency of North Korean women as a whole has grown in the decades since the famine, since women, who go undetected by the state because of their lower social status, are often the ones able to travel to China to earn additional income for the family (Fahy 110). Still, these women face great risk of sexual abuse by officials at the border and in the marketplace, and those who are detained and sent to prison camps are even more likely to endure rape and other forms of abuse (Adams et al). In a sexually repressed society, where women are frequently diminished and abused, depictions of women as objects, and even agents, of romantic affection is indeed quite shocking. Although countries like South Korea and China still have much room for development in terms of women's rights, the ways in which their media depicts romance and womanhood is shocking and revolutionary for some North Koreans.

Tied for second place with "shocking" is descriptions of foreign media as "scary," "frightening," or "upsetting." Several defectors expressed alarm or frustration over just how radical some of the portrayals of life outside North Korea were. What was scary or upsetting differed among the defectors. Nehemiah Park discussed the first time listening to South Korean rock music, and how he found it "loud" and "scary" compared to "calm North Korean music" (Baek 91). Jeong Gwang-Seong recalled how the first time he watched a foreign movie with a friend from school was "scary, but amazing," perhaps referring to both the contents of the movie and the experience itself of illicitly watching a foreign film (Baek 59).

Other defectors explained how their initial encounters with foreign media angered them, often to a point where they would avoid these forms of media for a period of time before their curiosity eventually drew them back toward them. Kim Seong-Min remembered serving in the Korean People's Army and being tasked with picking up thousands of leaflets of propaganda materials dropped over North Korea by the South Koreans each day. Some of the leaflets increased his opinion of South Korea, but one leaflet he recalled depicted Kim Il-Sung and Kim Jong-Un as overweight and hoarding food from the North Korean people. He explained, "I remember getting furious, thinking, 'These South Korean bastards. Even if it's propaganda, how dare they defame our leaders like this?' I got so hot in the head I was angry" (Baek 103). Yet in spite of his disgust at the negative depiction of his leaders by South Korea, he eventually found himself listening to South Korean radio stations and reading South Korean magazines. Kim Heung-Kwang, the former media enforcer, explained a similar process that took place within himself:

"You may hear someone bashing the North Korean leader. It's too harsh, so you get pissed that someone outside the country is denigrating your mother country and then think all this foreign media is a hoax. After cooling down for a few days, you secretly turn the radio back on and hear something more reasonable and interesting. Through this back and forth process, your mind opens up without you even realizing at first" (Baek 80).

North Koreans do not immediately take depictions of the outside world and negative messages about their leaders at face value. Many North Koreans think critically about the media they consume and are challenged by the contradictory messages they hear from their government and from the media outside of North Korea. What North Koreans learn about the outside world when they consume foreign media may be deeply troubling or frustrating, and a conversion

against North Korean propaganda, if it is not already taken place, does not instantly occur because an individual watches one South Korean movie or listens to one foreign radio broadcast. The impact of foreign media on North Koreans' relationship to state propaganda will be further analyzed in the next subsection.

Overall, individual North Koreans have varying takeaways from the foreign media they consume. For some, media portrayals of the outside world may be fun and exciting, and for others, they may be deeply disconcerting. While North Koreans use a wide variety of descriptors to describe their reactions to foreign media and what drew them to foreign media in the first place, it is common for defectors to highlight depictions of wealth and romance in foreign media, especially South Korean media. Many defectors may have found this media shocking or upsetting at first, but some aspects of the media drew them back to it and kept their curiosity about the outside world engaged.

"I was afraid that the slave life would continue": Impact on Perceptions of North Korea and the Choice to Defect

"We were taught that South Koreans don't go to school because they can't pay tuition, and they die on the streets because they can't pay for hospitals. But as I watched Korean movies and shows, I thought to myself, 'What kind of bullshit are the textbooks talking about?'" -Kim Ha-Young

"I am the father of two children and I am worried about their future. I was afraid that the slave life would continue until the time of my grandchildren's children. . . My life in North Korea was nothing but the life of a slave, so I did not want to hand over the same destiny and the same life to my sons' generation."

-Thae Yong-Ho

Questions six and seven asked how much defectors claimed to have bought into North Korean state propaganda, if at all, and whether or not each individual attributed their defection to foreign media. In this case, propaganda refers to the intentional doctoring of history by the North Korean state, exaggerating the accomplishments of the Kim family and the Korean Workers' Party, and threats from "enemy" states like the United States, South Korea, and Japan. North Korean propagandists frequently portray the rest of the developed world as lagging far behind North Korea in human progress, depicting places like South Korea as essentially third world countries (Lankov 56). These stories are built upon a detailed mythology surrounding the Kim family, who are essentially viewed as gods by official North Korean teaching. All private homes and public buildings must have framed photos of Kim Il-Sung and Kim Jong-Il, and in schools, North Korean children are required to memorize facts about the superhuman abilities of their rulers (Fifield 113). All of this propaganda is rooted in the North Korean *juche* ideology, created by Kim Il-Sung himself. Roughly translated as "self-importance," *juche* was developed from Leninist and Maoist principles and asserts Korean superiority across the world and reliance on oneself and the North Korean state (Lankov 67).

For the purposes of this analysis, propaganda refers to any messaging about the superiority of North Korea to the rest of the world and legendary tales about the accomplishments of the Kim rulers, as rooted in *juche* ideology. While the amount of belief in North Korean propaganda varied among the defectors featured in this study, generally none of the defectors attributed their defection directly to the impact of foreign media on their lives. Still,

it can lead to defection when North Korean defectors escape punishment for having contraband media, and media can potentially inspire defection in less direct ways as well.

Several defectors claimed to have been deeply entrenched in North Korean ideology for a period of time before they began to see through the cracks in their system, and others reported that they never believed in it. Like we have seen with several other questions in this analysis, the divide tended to be based on age group. Older defectors claim to have believed the propaganda more than younger North Koreans, who are part of the *jangmadang* generation. As previously mentioned, these older defectors also tended to have a high ranking class status and career, often working for the Korean Workers' Party. Thus, it makes sense that higher ranking individuals with closer ties to the state, and older individuals who remember a time when the government ration system worked, before the famine of the 1990s, would be more likely to believe North Korean propaganda. Younger North Koreans, on the other hand, have always lived in a country where marketplaces are filled with higher quality foreign goods and where it is common for family members and neighbors to travel to China for work and return with stories about the higher quality of life outside North Korea.

Additionally, some defectors said that they never truly believed in North Korean propaganda, but they also did not actively dispute it in their heads. These North Koreans claimed that they were mostly indifferent outlandish stories about North Korea's high status on the world stage and larger than life stories about the exploits of the Kim family. They simply repeated whatever they were required to learn to avoid any trouble with the state, but they did not think critically about it while in North Korea. Again, these defectors tended to be under the age of 35. Kim Ha-Young, for example, noticed inconsistencies between what she learned about South

Korea in school and the depictions of South Korea in television shows and movies, but these details did not lead her to develop any specific political ideology. She was insistent that while living in North Korea, she did not think much about politics or the Kims at all, stating “They didn’t take care of us, so why should we care about them? . . . We simply didn’t care” (Baek 189). Another defector, Cho Jung-A, was taught in school that in South Korea, everybody is poor, children run around without clothing because their families could not afford any, and people often go hungry (Fifield 119). However, this propaganda did not affect her or her family that deeply, because when their economic situation in North Korea worsened, she defected to South Korea with her mother anyway, despite the negative stories she had heard about the country. These younger defectors grew up studying North Korea’s fabrications, but they neither questioned them nor accepted them outright.

While the defectors in this study each had varying attitudes toward North Korean propaganda, no one suggested that consuming foreign media alone led them to change their minds about North Korea and decide to defect. First, as mentioned above, several of the defectors in this study never claimed to have believed the propaganda. The fact that someone stays in North Korea does not mean that they are brainwashed and must be deprogrammed from the North Korean propaganda machine. Some defectors doubted the messages they heard from their schools and from state media, and foreign media confirmed their suspicions. Others lived close enough to the border with China that they already knew intuitively that life is better, not worse outside North Korea. Foreign movies and television shows’ depictions of the outside world did not need to change their minds, because they had already realized the dissonance on their own.

Second, the consequences for North Koreans who are captured attempting to cross the border with China, or for those who are detained and deported from China before making it to South Korea, are simply too high. Defectors risk imprisonment, torture, forced labor, and death to escape North Korea, and even if they make it safely to South Korea or another safe country, the family members they leave behind often face similar risks (Baek xx). Furthermore, defection has become increasingly expensive, with family members paying Chinese and South Korean brokers thousands of dollars to smuggle their loved ones out of North Korea, with no guarantee that they will arrive safely (Perlez and Lee). Even if a defector believed wholeheartedly in the North Korean state and was suddenly scandalized to learn that none of it is true, the barriers to exit North Korea are too high for the average person to take the risk. There is a reason why North Korea, a country of 25 million people, has only had approximately 30,000 defectors successfully resettle in South Korea since 1998 (“Policy on North Korean Defectors”). Because of these risks, there is usually some other factor besides a change in perception caused by foreign media that factors into an individual’s decision to defect.

Of the defectors analyzed in this study, there were two individuals whose decision to defect was impacted by foreign media, but this was because they were caught in possession of foreign media and in communication with the outside world and were forced to escape to avoid punishment by the state. Kim Heung-Kwang was caught watching illegal foreign materials and was sent to a labor reeducation camp after being questioned and tortured in a North Korean jail for a week (Baek 84). Throughout his year in the camp working as a farmhand, he plotted his eventual escape with his family. Kim Seong-Min, the former soldier who would discard South Korean propaganda leaflets, was caught communicating with the South Korean publication

Chosun Monthly, which worked to reunite North Koreans with family members in the outside world. When he learned that he had been discovered by the authorities, he escaped through China, but he was captured and deported back to North Korea. Upon his return to North Korea, he was sentenced to a prison camp, but he successfully escaped to China a second time, hiding there for three years before he resettled in South Korea (Baek 107). In the case of these two defectors, it can be said that foreign media did lead to defection, but it is not because watching movies and television shows so radicalized these men that they decided to defect. Rather, these defectors left North Korea in order to escape the punishment and lifetime stigma associated with the crime of foreign media possession and consumption.

Foreign media can lead to defection when citizens are caught with illegal materials and forced to escape to avoid punishment by the state. In general though, consumption of foreign media does not appear to correlate with an immediate change in attitudes or behavior. Foreign media can open individuals to the idea of defection by revealing the hypocrisy and falsehoods of the North Korean state and by demonstrating to individuals that there is a better life outside of North Korea to escape to in the first place. However, this process is gradual. Sometimes, a person might find their perceptions of North Korea slowly shifting due to the foreign media they consume, but this may take place parallel to other circumstances, like poverty (in the case of Cho Jung-A) or persecution (like the disabled Ji Seong-Ho). These sorts of circumstances lead more directly to defection.

For defectors who reported having a high opinion of North Korea at one period in their lives, foreign media played a significant role in changing their perceptions and revealing falsehoods in North Korean propaganda. For defectors who never believed in propaganda in the

first place, foreign media was still useful in confirming their doubts and suspicions about the outside world. Based on the testimonies of the defectors in this study, foreign media does not lead to defection in a direct way, but foreign media consumption can lay the groundwork for a decision to defect. In some cases, foreign media can be a direct cause when individuals defect to escape punishment for foreign media possession and consumption.

Conclusion

The dissemination of illicit foreign media is changing the North Korean social landscape. Foreign movies, television shows, music, and radio shows allow North Koreans to view the outside world and bear witness to the great economic, social, and technological advances of other countries. The increasing number of North Koreans who already are distrustful of their government can have their suspicions confirmed by positive depictions of “enemy” states and negative images of the Kim family and other North Korean leaders. While experiences with foreign media vary among generations, the phenomenon of foreign media consumption takes place with all age groups, from young children to older adults. North Koreans today have more access to the outside world than any generation before them, changing their society irrevocably.

This work has confirmed that there are no broad statements that can be made about the experiences of North Korean defectors and their interactions with foreign media. The ways in which North Koreans first encounter foreign media, what they learn from it, and how it changes their perceptions of their country, if at all, vary greatly depending on an individual’s age, location, class, profession, or numerous personality factors that could never be quantified in a study such as this. Furthermore, based on the limited number of perspectives included in this study and the numerous ways in which their accounts differed from each other, no wide sweeping generalizations can be made about why North Koreans consume foreign media and what meaning they make from it.

The defectors in this study drew dozens of conclusions and insights from the media they consumed while living in North Korea, and this fact alone signals just how great of an impact foreign media has on the perceptions of North Koreans. Foreign media products give North

Koreans a view of the outside world that they would normally be unable to see, and these depictions of neighboring countries help to confirm suspicions that many North Koreans already hold about their country and its leaders. While foreign media does not exclusively contribute to decisions to defect from North Korea, it can be one stepping stone on the journey toward rejection of life in North Korea. Through this process, I have worked to center the voices of North Korean defectors, and the key finding is the sheer amount of agency that North Koreans demonstrate over their own lives through the consumption of foreign media within an oppressive, totalitarian regime.

When I first began this project nearly two years ago, my goal was to close this research with some sort of prediction about what I believe the consumption of foreign media by North Koreans means about the stability of North Korea as a whole. I wanted to tell a story about how subversive foreign media would radicalize North Koreans and lead to a massive, grassroots uprising. I wanted the story of foreign media in North Korea to be the beginning of the end of the tyrannical Kim family dynasty, and I still think that in many ways it could be. However, when North Koreans speak for themselves, they reveal that in general, their decision to consume movies, television shows, and music from foreign countries is not politically motivated, nor does it embolden the average person to become a capitalist revolutionary. My research contradicts the Western notion that North Koreans are brainwashed slaves to their regime, but it also disputes the immediate likelihood of a Berlin Wall-esque collapse of the Demilitarized Zone.

Perhaps my desire to comment on the stability of North Korea stemmed from an inability to remove myself from what Sonia Ryang calls “securitization” discourse, or the emphasis on North Korea as a global security threat rather than a nation with a culture and social fabric (2).

Throughout its history, political rhetoric and academic commentary on North Korea has been dominated by security studies, a phenomenon that Ryang sources back to American intelligence research on Japan in order to better understand the behavior of the Japanese military, especially *kamikaze* suicide pilots (3). As a result of this approach, focusing on studying the enemy in terms of the security threat they pose, only recently has a more holistic view of North Korea gained traction in mainstream research. I hope that this project may be a contribution to that more holistic image of North Korea, a country with more than 25 million unique individuals with complex emotions and lives.

In 1978, postcolonial theorist Edward Said first coined the term “orientalism” in reference to the binary stereotypes of the Arab world by Western colonialists (Said). These simplistic depictions of Arab people have been used to justify imperialist interference in the Middle East throughout modern history, interference which continues to this day. Similarly orientalist depictions of North Korea dominate Western media, dualistically pitting the entire world order against the ultimate “Other,” North Korea (S. Kim 483). Throughout this thesis, I have acknowledged that North Korea is both a country that arbitrarily detains, tortures, and executes its citizens for petty crimes and one where families pursue meaningful lives and think little of political issues. This project rejects orientalist depictions of North Korea while acknowledging the ordinary people and extraordinary injustices that define it.

An important theme to analyze in future studies on this subject is the gradual emergence of a middle class in North Korea and rapid developments being made for North Korea’s wealthiest elites under Kim Jong-Un. Anna Fifield’s 2019 chronicle of life in North Korea under the third Kim ruler, *The Great Successor*, details the lives of who she calls the “elites of

Pyonghattan,” the affluent young people who travel the world at their leisure, drink expensive \$9 lattes, and dine with their friends in European-style food halls. In one particularly striking example, Fifield describes the modern Kum Rung leisure complex in the heart of Pyongyang, where young people exercise in fashionable athleisure wear and watch Disney cartoons as they run on treadmills (159). The legal codes regarding outside products and information do not apply to these elite millennial and generation-z consumers, and the growing freedom of the wealthy to access the outside world will shift future discussions on the subject of foreign media in North Korea.

This increase in quality of life under Kim Jong-Un is not unique to North Korea’s wealthiest citizens though. Unlike his father, Kim Jong-Il, who took power in North Korea later in life and during a time of crisis, Kim Jong-Un became the Supreme Leader of North Korea during a time of relative stability, and at the young age of 27 (Fifield 98). Kim Jong-Un is both one of the world’s youngest heads of state and the third ruler of the longest running family dynasty in modern history. According to Fifield, the precariousness of his situation as a world leader has created an environment where the markets are more tolerated than ever before, with an estimated 40% of the population earning income through their own market-based economic pursuits (101-2). While North Korea continues to be one of the most restrictive and oppressive countries on earth, limited economic development is nonetheless taking place. Further studies on this subject should take into account this general increase in prosperity, no matter how gradual it may be, because it could impact the amount of North Koreans who are able to afford access to outside information, and potentially even to travel to the outside world.

Increased interactions between North Korea and some of its greatest enemies, such as South Korea and the United States, could also determine the future impact of foreign media in North Korea. In June 2018, President Donald Trump and Kim Jong-Un met at a historic diplomatic summit in Singapore, marking the first time that heads of state met from the two countries since the end of the Korean War in 1953 (“Timeline”). However, a subsequent meeting between the two leaders in Hanoi, Vietnam in 2019 ended early after rising tensions surrounding North Korean sanctions relief and American demands for denuclearization. Since then, the relationship between Trump and Kim has continued to waver, with the future looking increasingly uncertain. Relief in economic sanctions could further improve the quality of life for the average North Korean, contributing to the factors mentioned above, or it could lead to a greater hoarding of resources by the government and strengthen the hold of the Kim family dynasty across North Korea. Either outcome would have an impact on foreign media and North Korean perceptions of the state.

Another further line of study will be how the global pandemic of COVID-19, a new strain of coronavirus, will impact North Korea. As of March 9, 2020, North Korea had placed approximately 10,000 of its citizens and foreign nationals under mandatory quarantine. An estimated 4,000 individuals were released from quarantine after they failed to show symptoms of the virus, and official numbers from North Korean state media show the number of COVID-19 cases as zero (Koh). However, many experts believe that the government could be engaging in a massive cover-up to hide its outbreak from the rest of the world, with some reports suggesting that 200 North Korean soldiers have already died from the virus (Mahbubani).

Despite North Korea's attempts to downplay the virus and erase its impact, North Koreans will understand that something major is interrupting their daily lives when their loved ones and friends begin to die. Meanwhile, North Korea has already taken steps such as shutting its borders, closing schools and many public sites, and banning all tourism, but despite these measures, North Korea's weak healthcare system may not be able to cope with the impacts of the virus. Furthermore, an estimated 11 million North Koreans are malnourished, inhibiting the ability of North Koreans of all ages to recover from the virus (Terry). The COVID-19 pandemic will be Kim Jong-Un's greatest challenge of his rule so far, and if the outbreak has a similar effect on the country as the great famine of the 1990s, the impacts it has on foreign information dissemination and North Korean perceptions of the state and outside world could be extraordinary.

North Korea has simultaneously maintained its tight control on its population for three generations and changed more in the past decade than it has throughout its entire history. There are a number of social, political, economic, and medical factors currently in play that will require North Korea to continue this rapid adaptation to the 21st century world, or risk complete collapse. These massive global and national issues, however, do not detract from the ability of the North Korean people to demonstrate agency over their own lives and the future of their country. Illicit consumption of foreign media is just one way in which North Koreans gain information about the world outside their country and practice small, daily acts of civil disobedience to the state. The future of North Korea continues to be as uncertain and uncharted as ever before, but the impacts of foreign media are clear and cannot be undone, no matter the actions of the supreme leader.

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