

The Particular Challenges of Reconstructing North Korean Society

The Rev. Ben Torrey

First North Korea Study School, North East

Cream Ridge, NJ

January 10-13, 2005

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Slide 2 - Introduction

Anecdotal evidence gives us ideas about a situation, hints at the reality *and* raises questions calling for more research. Because it is limited in scope, it is dangerous to extrapolate from a few anecdotes. They can also be misunderstood, leading to erroneous conclusions. However, when evaluated in the light of prior knowledge they can contribute to overall understanding.

Some of the most critically needed knowledge, from our point of view, is in areas that are the most difficult to research—the very nature of society, family and real beliefs—every day life of the ordinary person in North Korea.

The populations that are most convenient for study are the several thousand North Korea refugees now in SK and the Chongryun population in Japan; however, both populations provide significant challenges in terms of applying results to the main population in North Korea. There is new experience to be gained in Kaesong. As commercial opportunities related to North Korea open up for South Korean firms, there will be opportunity for South Korean Christians to work in North Korea side by side with North Koreans. They will have opportunities to learn more about North Korea. There will be new opportunities for research. We need to be ready to take advantage of such possibilities.

There is a growing body of research both in Korea and in the US; however, it tends to remain isolated to the specific circles in which it is developed as well as linguistically. A much greater effort to consolidate this research and build on it across disciplines is needed. For this to be truly successful and comprehensive, it is necessary to translate from Korean to English and English to Korean. While some of the strongest interest is, naturally, in South Korea, there is a growing interest among English speakers, not only from a geo-political perspective but from the point of view of missions and nation building—our focus. Korean speaking and English speaking researchers will also have different cultural perspectives on the work that they do and the conclusions they draw. Seeing the research in the light of a different cultural perspective would be extremely valuable to both groups. One of the most important aspects of this work is “cross pollination” — multidisciplinary *and* multi-cultural. As one researcher in one discipline or specialty shares with those who are in other disciplines or have differing points of view, the resulting interaction can generate new insights and richer knowledge.

Slide 3 - Introduction (Continued)

Some research has already been done in comparing Korea to Germany in terms of reunification issues. This is valuable. The place of faith in the process of German reunification is extremely important. Questions come to mind regarding the persistence of faith following reunification and in the faith of rampant consumerism.

The Soviet and Eastern European experience also needs to be examined from the point of view of the impacts of generations of central planning and Communist ideology on society and culture. Also, we need to look at the experience of Christian missions in these areas, learning from mistakes made, opportunities lost and successes attained. It is also worthwhile to look at other non-Christian missions: Muslim, the Unification Church, Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, others.

Christian perspectives have been sought and applied in a number of countries of Eastern Europe and states of the former Soviet Union, especially in the areas of legal structures and jurisprudence. What have been the results – successes, failures, etc.?

The Japanese experience is worth studying from the perspective of missions and opportunities taken or lost in the period right after World War II. There are also lessons to be learned from the earlier 19th Century experience in the opening of Japan to the West as well as the same for Korea. In both countries, Christianity was associated with Western prosperity and modernism leading to a great deal of enthusiasm followed by a reaction against it with the rise of nationalism followed by consumerism. This was especially true for Japan from 1872 to 1888. There also followed a period of fascination with anything new leading to a lot of aberrant beliefs.

The Middle East experience includes both Kuwait right after the First Gulf War and the present situation in Iraq and Afghanistan. What are the lessons to learn of opportunities taken or lost, poor cultural understanding, etc.?

One area worth considerable research is the whole interaction of political/governmental, commercial and evangelistic efforts and intentions. This needs to be done by unbiased researchers. Christian missions have for over two centuries been intimately linked with Western commercial and political expansion from British India and the Chinese Opium Wars right down to Kim Sun-Il was martyred for his faith on 6/22/2004 in Iraq. He was supporting the American military as a translator yet his intent was to be there as a missionary.

Enough about the limitations of our knowledge...

As we look at the particular challenges related to NK, we need to look at the fundamental factors affecting current North Korea society then at how these factors would impact the work of reconstructing the nation – on Biblical foundations – and the proclamation/reception of the life-giving truth of the Gospel.

One of the most far-reaching factors is the ideological commitment in North Korea to centralized planning. Central planning is the theory that a nation's economy is best maintained by the scientific application of economic knowledge by a central authority.

This is fundamental to all Communist state experiments in the Twentieth Century. For various reasons particular to NK, it has been taken to an extreme not found elsewhere in that all planning for everything devolves ultimately and personally on the omnipotent "Dear Leader", Kim Jong-Il and his father Kim Il-Sung, the "Suryong", before him. What the Leader decrees becomes official truth overriding reality. After all, Heaven proclaimed his birth with a double rainbow.

However, even as we explore the requirements, consequences and impact of central planning – the main topic of the rest of this talk – keep in mind that it is not the *only* factor affecting the situation in North Korea. It is one of several.

Slide 4 – Central Planning

In order to plan all aspects of an economy, the planners must have total knowledge of the present state of the economy and of what will work best in improving it. One of the central fallacies is that such “scientific” understanding is even possible. Any economy is vastly complex and even the best computer models will never be able to take into account the unforeseen – weather! – or unintended consequences. Henry Ford had a dream to put an inexpensive automobile into the hands of every American family. Little did this very conservative Christian man think that the realization of his dream would be one of the primary factors contributing to the rise of extra-marital sex among American teenagers as they were able to take the family car and escape their parents’ supervision – an unintended consequence.

Central planning also requires absolute control over all components of economy. The basic component of an economy is the unit of activity, the part of the economic machine where effort is actually applied to material to bring about economic change. This basic component cannot be so controlled. It is the individual person. Central planning sees individuals as either well-functioning cogs or malfunctioning units to be eliminated.

The best, most reliable, unit of information for providing knowledge about any aspect of an economy is utterly rejected or perverted. This is the free-market price. An unfettered price mechanism takes into account quite naturally all changes in conditions that affect supply and demand. Natural rise in price indicates increased demand or reduced supply (really two ways of looking at same thing), which generally promotes increased production of specific item. Drop in price will tend to curtail production. These responses are natural, organic, not planned. The free-market price system (no price controls, subsidies or other deviations) will, over time, advance overall economic health.

Because central planning views individuals only as units of the production system it takes the fundamentally optimistic viewpoint that individuals are malleable and can be, through training, shaped into whatever is needed by society as a whole. This opposes the “pessimistic” Biblical perspective that sees individuals as free agents who are fallen in nature and bound to sin, most likely to seek their own personal advantage but yet are capable of regeneration through the grace of God, not by human attempts toward perfection. It also opposes any concept of a divine force beyond the effect of the economy having any impact on it. This is seen as “superstitious” and “unscientific.”

Contrarily, the American economic system and the legal system that supports it are predicated on this Biblical perspective with a solid concept of fallen human nature that can yet be regenerated. This pessimistic perspective leads, paradoxically, to ever greater human freedom. As these fundamental concepts are lost – as in the West today – the socialistic state arises with ever increasing restrictions on human freedom.

Slide 5 – Central Planning – Effects

Lack of free market price structures means poor comprehension of real, current economic conditions. This is aggravated by distance; i.e. the planners are not on the scene, they are off in the capital somewhere and need to get their information through the eyes and ears of others. Local, informed response is abrogated in favor of direction from the central authority. As conditions change, responses are theoretical, not practical; ideological, not real; not based on local conditions, oblivious to consequences.

E.g, in North Korea agricultural production fell for lack of incentives and lack of fertilizer. The central response was to call for deforestation in order to put more, unsuitable mountain land under production. This led to erosion, flooding, the destruction of both crops and land, famine.

Resource allocation is divorced from reality.

Rewards and punishments are based on ideology and have no relationship to economic, agricultural reality. Quota systems, especially with no consequent economic (financial) reward, require abusive punishments to be effective. These are counter productive leading to weakness of the workforce and reduced production, etc. In these situations, quota requirements tend to spiral to ever wilder and more impossible levels leading to ever poorer production.

This leads to alternate economies (black markets) where rewards are direct yet illegal, which leads to disregard for laws, destruction of any sense of conscience and ever increasing corruption, strong-arm tactics, bullying, gang activity, etc. Alternate economies are also not protected by legal structures leading to greater self-protection and disregard of service to others. Healthy, free-market economies, with proper legal protections, lead to ever increasing concern for others as the greatest economic reward comes to those with the best response to the needs of others. However, this only happens in stable environments. The move to alternate economies also draws what ability/resource there is away from official economy. The resulting impact on individual conscience and social structures is long-term making it very difficult to change.

Psychological: lack of internal, non-ideological moral base leads to ever greater dependence on external controls; less and less self-discipline. There is no basis for self-discipline. "Only a self-governing people is free." This also increases fear with all its attendant consequences.

This, with viewing of individuals as units in machine, undermines the sense of self, which can only have adverse effects on all relationships – mutual respect, love, etc. All human bonds are weakened which is further aggravated by the deteriorating economy. Again, these are long-term effects, not amenable merely to political or ideological changes.

What about abstract thought and future orientation, ability to plan? We need much greater understanding of the psychological consequences.

Slide 6 – Central Planning – Effects

A society is made up of individual members. To the extent that their psyches damaged, all aspects of the society become twisted.

Viewing individuals as units of production and consumption, economic cogs, to be trained towards state imperatives undermines any sense of the value of family. The family is simply a cultural artifact that remains as a convenient unit of control for individuals that pits generations against each other.

The Biblical view sees the family as the fundamental unit of society from which all others grow. The family is the image of God. *God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.* Gen. 1:27 ... *a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh.* Gen. 2:24. The bond between husband and wife is intended by God to be the strongest bond between individuals – stronger even than that between parents and children. It is the family, the image of the Holy Trinity, that extends the image of God throughout the earth.

Healthy families mean healthy society and economy.

CP perspectives leads to the perversion of neighborhoods (they are not protective and nurturing but oppressive, paranoid) and extended families, which are very important to the economy.

The Biblical view of education is that it is to bless individual, family and community through instruction in truth and knowledge of God. The responsibility belongs to the parents. Educational institutions are only extension of parents so as to take advantage of expertise, resources. The central planning view sees education in ideological terms, a way to shape cogs and lubricate the machine, to train rather than to educate in the classical Greek (and, for that matter, Confucian) sense. Education is for free men to enable them to remain free. Training is for slaves to enable them to serve better.

The responsibility for education is the central authority's—further undermining family. Again, Confucian ideas closer to Biblical than to central planning.

To the extent that deeply ingrained Confucian concepts of family and familial responsibility for education persist in North Korea there may be glimmers of hope for a countervailing trend; yet, the perversion of Confucian concepts of submission and paternalistic imperial authority support the current North Korea status quo.

New research on the persistence and impact of Confucian thought on the situation in NK—family, political, educational, legal structures, etc. is needed.

Slide 7 - Central Planning—Effects

One definition for culture, given by the Dutch researcher, Geert Hofstede is “the collective mental programming which distinguishes one group or category of people from another. This programming influences patterns of thinking which are reflected in the meaning people attach to various aspects of life and which become crystallized in the institutions of a society.” (ITIM 5-D Pocket Guide) As patterns of thinking are changed through application of ideology and central planning to life in general, over generations, surviving cultural institutions take on new meanings and others cease to exist while still others come into being for first time.

Fundamental assumptions change over time, even the meaning of words change as new meanings are forced on them. We can see that in English in such words as “gay”, which used to mean happy or light-hearted but now means homosexual; or “cult”, which used to mean any organize religion but is now generally used to refer to a particularly oppressive type of religion. This transformation of the meaning of words becomes more extreme when centrally controlled and directed (George Orwell's “newspeak”). We need to understand changes in the language better.

Slide 8 - Police State

We have stated that central planning requires total control of the unit of production—the individual. This leads to the police state, the only possible way to exert such control. The police state is the only vehicle, the only mechanism that can attempt to exert the type of total control necessary.

By its very nature, the police state leads to general paranoia, undermining mutual support and trust whether in family, work group, voluntary associations (formal and informal), etc. Mutual support and trust are fundamental for healthy economic and social life.

Anyone can be an agent of the police state – all are suspicious, all are under suspicion – the watchers are, in turn, watched by others. How can a person growing up in such an environment learn to trust and even to love? The fact that such virtues do persist at all in North Korea is a miracle.

In addition to psychological and social effects, the police state places major strains of its own on the economy. It requires a vast network of watchers who are taken away from other productive pursuits and that needs to be supported by the watched even as they interfere with the ability of the watched to do their jobs. And, of course, there is the unproductive drain on the economy of the vast sums spent to train all these people, provide them places to work and the latest technology, not to mention the cost of all the prisons needed.

In terms of rebuilding the economy, what do you do with this army of agents when they become unemployed and try to do work for which they have never been trained and that might even be contrary to their training?

Slide 9 – Ideology

Central planning and the police state that seeks to enable it are predicated on an ideology. We now turn to what an ideology is and what is required to give it force. We will then look briefly at the particular ideology of North Korea, Juche.

An ideology is a system of ideas serving as guide and explaining reality. To the extent that it is just a system of ideas, it lacks motivating power.

In order to motivate, something more is needed, something to carry it into people's lives and behavior. Enforcement of the ideology is purely external. It forces the individual conform to the idea.

Indoctrination is the attempt to carry the enforcement into individual generating self-enforcement and setting up a logical structure through which the individual views all things.

Ultimately, for an ideology to take hold, it requires faith, a belief in the ideology that carries commitment and a willingness to sacrifice for something greater. It must take on qualities of a religion.

Slide 10 – Juche

Juche or, as it is called in North Korea, “the thought of Kim Il Sung” or Kim Il Sungism, claims to be an ideology – a scientific construct, a system of ideas that explains reality and provides formulas for shaping that reality.

It is, however, religious in nature in that it has an object of worship – the Suryong – and requires ultimate commitment even in the face of apparent contradictions; it has an ultimate objective, national self-reliance and engenders self-sacrifice.

Reality is redefined to conform to theory. It is not scientific but really anti-scientific.

Juche has such a hold on the people of North Korea that it leads them to be willing to accept great suffering for the Suryong. The people think of themselves as bullets to be spent to defend the Suryong.

One of the major issues facing the modern world, especially the West, is the struggle with the nature of ideology as faith and faith-based ideologies.

The secular mindset has a great deal of difficulty grasping the fact that mankind's religious nature leads men and women to lay down their lives for all sorts of endeavors, even in the face of apparent futility and contradiction of reality. We, who are devout believers, raised on tales of the martyrs, both ancient and modern, have some understanding of the power of faith. Yet, how well do we carry this understanding into geo-political calculations? I would hope that someone as personally devout as President Bush or Attorney General Ashcroft would understand the nature of the struggle with terrorism and in Iraq as something other than geo-political and secular.

The same holds for North Korea. For years, the West has been waiting for North Korea to implode or for its starving masses to rise up in revolt. This expectation is based on a secular, non-religious world view. While the police state system of North Korea has been an important factor in maintaining control, I think that greater power actually lies with the state religion of Juche and the religious hold it has over the people. When Kim Il Sung died, many in the West were astounded by the general outpouring of grief and ascribed it to coercion – crocodile tears. It was not. It was a genuine outpouring of grief for the loss of the Great Sun, the death of God, if you will. (Kim Il Sung's birthday, 4/15, is celebrated in North Korea as Taeyangjul.)

Slide 11 – The End of Juche

At this point, we step squarely into the realm of speculation although a fair amount is known about the psychology of disillusionment. This is an area that requires considerable research and thought applied to the specifics of our situation.

Assuming at some point that disillusionment with Juche becomes widespread, we will be faced with enormous challenges in providing foundations to replace those that have collapsed that will be both intelligible and accepted.

Experience in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union shows that with all foundations of morality missing – old ones gone, new ones not provided – crime, selfishness and corruption increase. Romanian orphans, Russian Mafia, etc.

Lack of purpose leads to self-loathing and depression.

Cynicism would likely increase to a great extent.

The cracks in the structure seen through the alt eco and official corruption would multiply until the structures collapse completely. This may well be the most likely scenario – not revolution, not coup de tat, not popular uprising, just a steady increase in selfishness and corruption until it all falls apart for lack of overriding purpose.

“Where there is no vision, the people perish: but he that keepeth the law, happy is he.” Proverbs 29:18

Or, as it is in the NAS,

“Where there is no vision, the people are unrestrained, But happy is he who keeps the law.”

Purpose leads to self-restraint, which establishes freedom and promotes life; lack of purpose leads to unrestraint, which leads to death. The “slippery slope.”

Slide 12 – Healing Needed

North Korea is a nation and society that has become thoroughly pathological. Every aspect from the lowliest individual to greatest institutions needs transformation, needs healing. This is not something that can happen overnight. In fact, it may take generations.

Of course, the fundamental medicine is Truth—"you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." John 8:32; "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" John 14:6—and Love—"love covers a multitude of sins" 1Pe 4:8, "love covers all transgressions" Prov. 10:12, and "God is love." 1 Jn 4:8, 16

From these foundations, this Foundation (the Corner Stone—Eph 2:20, 1Pe 2:6), we can begin to rebuild both on a micro level (individuals) and a macro level starting with a sound, Biblical legal system that undergirds a free economy and provides societal safeguards. We can then begin to establish new physical infrastructures and social institutions.

Slide 13 - How Do We Begin?

"On your walls, O Jerusalem, I have appointed watchmen; All day and all night they will never keep silent. You who remind the LORD, take no rest for yourselves; And give Him no rest until He establishes and makes Jerusalem a praise in the earth." Isaiah 62:6-7

Preparation includes research and study. It also includes setting up teams, organizations, and provisional institutions. But this must be done in humility and patience. We cannot thrust ourselves forward but must wait until invited.

Words have become worse than meaningless. The only thing that can break through the barriers of disillusionment and cynicism is love and this love must be shown in consistent emptying of self, taking up the cross daily.

"I saw Jesus Christ, then I believed. I saw Him in that man there who suffered with me." Yoo Soon-Eum, Assoc. of North Korea Defectors, Evangelism Dept. Chief, Catacombs prayer meeting, 7/13/04

New teaching will be vitally important, but is of no use until after faith has come and that by responding to love and experiencing healing.

However, as the bankruptcy of the old structures is acknowledged, there will be a rush to embrace new. This could lead to snapping up anything that looks interesting. We need to be ready for this as well with structures to offer that address the needs, are built on solid foundations and quick to prove their value. If we are not prepared, others will be quick to step into the gap. Even here, love will open doors and confirm truth. While others may come with flash and cash, without love, they will quickly lose their luster but unfortunately not before even more harm is done—so we cannot sit back and wait.

Slide 14 - Who Will Do It?

No notes.

Slide 15 - Who Will Be In It?

No notes.