

Investing in the North Korean People: Broadening Access to Information in North Korea

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I want you to imagine waking up tomorrow in a place without the internet, without access to outside information—only the news and stories the government permits. A place where people are executed for sharing foreign media, and where families risk their lives just to stay in touch across borders.

For 26 million people in North Korea, this is their reality. And 6 years ago, I was one of them.

I was born in Hoeryong, a city in the northernmost part of North Korea near the Tumen River. Winters were brutal and there were frequent shortages of fuel and electricity. My father was a high school physics teacher. He was quiet, loyal and diligent. But despite his hard work and loyalty to the regime, the monthly rations he received were not enough for our family.

So in order to survive, my mother began selling goods at the market. She wanted a better life for us. And that hope led her to the unthinkable—escaping North Korea.

Three times she tried. Three times she was caught. And each time she was imprisoned and sent to a labor camp.

The prison camp was a living hell. My mother saw women waste away from hunger and die from simple illnesses. I was just 13 when I visited her, carrying a bowl of rice. In North Korea, it falls to families to provide for their imprisoned relatives.

My mother made a choice to save her family, but North Korean society saw her as a criminal. My father, who had led a quiet life as a teacher, was denied opportunities at work. And our family was labeled as traitors. We were being punished, but I didn't understand why.

That was the reality we faced in North Korea.

In 2013, on her fourth attempt, my mother finally escaped and made it to South Korea. She worked tirelessly to send money back to North Korea to help our family. She also slowly opened a window into another world.

Using a smuggled Chinese cell phone I was unable to speak to my mother from time to time. And on our secret calls, she shared with me many things about the world outside North Korea. She also recognized similarities between North and South Korea and its people, and reminded me that despite decades of division, we are still one people.

I secretly began watching South Korean sitcoms. I'll never forget one called "High Kick 3." In one episode, there was a story about a man who fell into debt and was being chased by collectors. But what shocked me was that his family wasn't punished for it.

In North Korea, if one person "sins" the entire family is condemned. But this showed me that in South Korea, life could be different. And you were free to make your own choices.

This realization changed me. Information, even in the form of a sitcom, was hope. And it was worth risking everything for.

Meanwhile, I continued to face obstacles in my day to day life. I had learned how to code and use software like [P]hotoshop, and I dreamed of going to university after graduation.

But because my mother had defected, I was rejected. So I used my computer skills to find work as a photographer and photo editor. Hoping to advance my career, I volunteered for the “shock brigade,” a group sent to do manual labor at dangerous construction sites[,] thinking it could be my way to a promotion.

It wasn’t.

I was sent to the Samjiyon district, a place known for its harsh winters. I demolished buildings in minus 40-degree weather without protective gear. Dust filled my lungs, and sweat froze my clothes solid. My only relief was being able to sleep in a crumbling basement.

When I returned, expecting the promotion I had been promised, my supervisor simply said, “Let’s wait a little longer.”

That was the moment I understood my mother. She had risked her life to escape because she was after something more fundamental than a better life.

She wanted to live like a human being.

In 2019, I made the same choice and escaped. With the help of Liberty in North Korea, I made it safely to South Korea and reunited with my mom. But freedom wasn’t as easy as I thought it would be.

In North Korea, my tech and computer skills had helped me survive. I had always thought that “no matter where I go, as long as I have a computer, I’ll be fine.”

But in South Korea, I struggled with something as simple as a new keyboard layout. In school, subjects like social studies felt foreign because I had grown up in a completely different education system with distorted versions of history and philosophy.

But eventually I found my place in science. The formulas and equations in math and science were the constant, unchanging truths I could always count on. I decided to major in electrical engineering. It wasn’t easy but I was determined to stay ahead and not fall behind in our rapidly changing world.

Now my goal is to become an engineer who can help bridge North and South Korea’s science and technology industries when the two countries are one again. More than ever, I see that information isn’t just about knowledge and convenience—**it’s a lifeline.**

Without access to information, you can’t see a way forward, let alone build a future. And right now, the people I left behind are more cut off than ever before. During the pandemic, North Korea closed its borders to an unprecedented extent. Soldiers along the border had shoot-to-kill orders for anyone trying to escape. Around 90% of the markets were forced to shut down, leaving families to starve.

The UN reported that nearly half the population faced food insecurity, while the World Health Organization rated North Korea’s access to medical care as the lowest in the world.

A few years ago, when my father became very sick, I was able to send him money for medical care. But most North Koreans don’t have that chance.

Without someone on the outside, they are not only cut off from resources and information, but from hope itself. For many, their future depends on a lifeline from the outside world.

Last year marked the 20th anniversary of the North Korean Human Rights Act. But its reauthorization has since been halted, directly impacting the work of many NGOs who are working on this issue and sending critical information and resources into the country.

We have an opportunity to be a lifeline for people inside North Korea today. And to remind them that they have not been forgotten.

With your support we can rescue and support more North Korean refugees, and get more outside information and technology to people inside the country and to empower them to not only see a way forward, but to ultimately determine their own future.

Thank you.