

# Daily NK Wave

Sounding Change in North Korea



Hardly a story about North Korea appears in *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, or *The Washington Post* that hasn't either originated in, or been confirmed by, outlets like the *Daily NK*.

–“North Korea’s Digital Underground,” *The Atlantic Magazine*, 2011



Thanks to *The Daily NK* and the other services, it is also possible now for outsiders to read a dizzying array of ‘heard-in-North Korea’ reports, many on topics off limits for public discussion in the North.

–“Nimble Agencies Sneak News Outside North Korea,” *The New York Times*, 2010



Bravo to the *Daily NK* for turning up an internal propaganda memo on the efforts to groom Kim Jong-il’s son for succession. The memo, mentioned in the *Times*, includes much praise from the Dear Leader of his son Kim Jong-un.

- “Letters from China,” *The New Yorker*, 2010



Meanwhile economists have studied defectors, making remarkable discoveries about the huge role private income now plays in people’s lives...Defector-led news sources, such as the Seoul-based *Daily NK*, amplify the information flow. They have built up contacts with clandestine sources inside North Korea, who use illegal mobile phones to provide news ranging from gossip about Mr Kim’s new wife to evidence of galloping inflation and currency turmoil.

– “North Korea: Rumbblings from below,” *The Economist*, 2012

# Daily NK

Applying a Universal Method to an International Problem

## Question:

How do you 1) circumvent a state-sanctioned firewall preventing North Koreans and the rest of the world from connecting in digital space; and 2) ensure that connection promotes positive change to a status quo characterized by oppression, ignorance, and distrust?

## Hypothesis:

Establish an online media organization that supports the free flow of information while also providing the general public access to fair reporting and educational resources about North Korea.



**Formal definition:** Rooted in the historicity of the Korean Peninsula, *Daily NK* is an independent, civil society-based media organization and bellwether for democracy in East Asia published in Korean, Japanese, Chinese, and English.

**Informal definition:** *Daily NK* is a proven source for breaking news a la popular news sites Nikki Finke's *Deadline Hollywood* and *The Drudge Report*. Our contacts operate inside a reclusive state renowned for its brutal suppression of civil liberties — North Korea — while reporting exclusively to *Daily NK* staffers — comprised of North Korean defectors, South Korean democracy activists, and international researchers — working towards free, open, and democratic societies.



# Daily NK

Plugged into Modern Korean History, Empowered by IT, and Connected to the World

“Struggle” is a word that resonates with modern Korean history. A brief overview of events since the Second World War 1) sets the stage for the establishment of *Daily NK* in 2004 and its development into a valued online source for breaking news and previously undisclosed information about North Korean society, culture, and politics; and 2) explains *Daily NK*'s rising importance in the struggle against North Korea's information blockade.

## I. Division in the Nuclear Age

The detonation of two atom bombs ended thirty years of Japanese colonialism; however, Korean civil society-based institutions designed to promote rule of law, national reconciliation, and political participation crumbled under pressure from competing political ideologies. A brief period of Korean unity ended in the schism of nationalists into anti-Communist and anti-imperialist groups vying for legitimate authority over the peninsula.

The U.S. and U.S.S.R hastily divided the peninsula at the 38th parallel to assume temporary trusteeship. Aware of the peninsula's strategic importance, Stalin reneged on his earlier promise of free and fair elections in the North despite the U.N. crying foul. Now Cold War rivals, the U.S. and U.S.S.R. propped up different authoritarian leaders claiming sovereignty over all Korea.

In 1950, North Korea invaded the South and a 3-year war between the Republic of Korea (South Korea), supported by the United Nations, and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea), supported by the People's Republic of China ended in armistice. This internecine conflict devastated both countries.



## In the “Democratic” South

Foreign investment spurred miraculous development yet coincided with U.S.-tolerated authoritarianism. A row of political strongmen — Syngman Rhee, Park Chung Hee, and Chun Doo Hwan — instituted a series of measures — ex. the *National Security Law*, *Yushin Constitution*, and *Samchung Re-education Camp* — that infringed on human rights and civil liberties in the name of national security. While the threat posed by North Korea was (and remains) real, innocent people deemed pro-Communist suffered persecution, torture, and even death. Democracy arrived in the form of student protests harkening back to pre-colonial social movements; however, these demonstrations oftentimes escalated into violent confrontations with government security forces. Ultimately, social movements empowered by middle class participation led to the resignation of one president, Rhee, and forced another, Chun, to institute constitutional reforms.

Anti-U.S. sentiment flared dramatically in the 1980s among a new generation of Koreans (dubbed the “386 Generation”) whom neither experienced the Korean War nor abject poverty and felt disillusioned by America’s non-intervention during one such horrifying occurrence, the Gwangju Massacre. Inspired by Kim Il Sung’s revolutionary ideology and independence campaigns the world over, the student leftist groups defined themselves in opposition to U.S. hegemony. Unaware of the reality inside North Korea, they embraced Kim Il Sung’s Juche philosophy and a vision of Korean utopianism based on strongly-felt ethnic nationalism.

Contrasting America’s anti-war movement and Gandhi’s principle of non-violence, the *Korean Student Movement* (KSM) initially condoned use of violence before eventually moderating. The tragic death of students mobilized the middle class to fight for democracy in the 1980s. In the 1990s, this same middle class would demand the deradicalization of leftists militants serving as North Korean proxies. South Korea earned its democracy, but its ongoing, oftentimes painful consolidation reveals many unhealed wounds.

## In the “Communist” North

A cult of personality was (and remains) propagated around Kim Il Sung, a former anti-Japanese guerilla fighter who eschewed traditional Communism in favor of race-based, quasi-religious nationalist autocracy and xenophobic political ideology. With more bombs dropped on North Korea than all of Europe during WWII and the capital city, Pyongyang, incinerated by firebombs, the North Korean regime closed borders and esteemed Kim as the virtuous “Dear Leader” able to defend the race against foreign onslaught comprised of imperialists, capitalists, and warmongers. North Korea’s military and economy initially dwarfed the South’s post-war due to Soviet support while a steady campaign of terrorism, deal-breaking, and subterfuge by political leaders in the North and South made peaceful reunification impossible. To this day, many defectors look back upon this period as a Golden Age when their families still had food to eat and the pride felt for their nation’s autonomy was real.

The 1990s witnessed the death of Kim Il Sung and the fall of North Korea’s main trading partner, the Soviet Union, in addition to a wave of natural disasters. Kim’s heir, Kim Jong Il, responded to this perfect storm by instituting the “Military-First Policy,” whereby resources, including food, were allocated to the nation’s army. Millions of citizens perished as a result of starvation, oppression, and misgovernment; faith in the regime shattered, tens of thousands of refugees risked imprisonment, torture, and death crossing the border to escape hunger.



## II. Collision in the Digital Age

As this tragedy unfolded, the dawn of the digital age beyond North Korea's borders yielded unprecedented access to information and human interconnectivity via the internet. South Korea established itself as a global leader in the development of IT, creating the infrastructure necessary to become the planet's most "wired" country.

### David vs. Goliath



Opening in 2000, a free domestic-only network known as *Kwangmyong* (광명) began providing online services for North Korean individuals and institutions while access to the global Internet remained limited to a much smaller group of elites. Kwangmyong is accessible by web browsers, incorporates e-mail services, news groups, and an internal web search engine. However, this "walled garden" intranet system is not directly connected to the Internet for two principal reasons: 1) to prevent domestic users from consuming foreign sources of information; and 2) to prevent the leak of classified data. It functions as a form of information censorship, stopping undesirable information from being accessed. Given that there is no direct connection to the outside Internet, unwanted information cannot enter the country in this way.

While non-elite North Korean citizens remain forbidden from connecting with the larger world as a result of the regime's ongoing information blockade, social caste system, and isolationist policies, the common North Korean's knowledge of the outside world is growing.

### Prediction

Based on shared struggle against government oppression and mutual desire to disclose the reality inside North Korea, democratization activists from the 386 Generation working in tandem with defectors based in Seoul can build trust with North Korea-based reporters in a way larger multinational news agencies — *CNN*, *BBC*, *FOX*, and others — cannot. This cohesion of human capital will generate a wave of information in the digital space that may, in turn, help foster positive change to the status quo on both sides of the firewall.



Since its establishment in 2004, *Daily NK's* reports have been cited in major international news media, including: *The New York Times*, *CNN*, and *BBC*. Scholars, journalists, and policy makers across the globe refer to the site for up-to-date news and information. The path to international recognition, however, has been rocky. Professionals, politicians, and activists operating in the highly politicized North Korea field smeared *Daily NK's* staff, which includes former pro-NK loyalists, while limited support inside South Korea stymied development. Yet despite these unresolved challenges, *Daily NK's* cache among major news agencies has grown and grown thanks to big story after big story.

From 5.7.2010 - 5.20.2013, the site received 9,667,887 visits and 4,384,882 unique visitors, with traffic spikes occurring during periods of heightened interest in North Korea and publication of exclusive reports, such as *NK People Speak 2012*. South Koreans lead the pack with 3,702,681 site visits, followed by 1,591,631 visitors from Japan, 1,459,809 visitors from China, and 1,327,950 visitors from the United States. Of those, 718,270 visitors used mobile devices; in fact, site visits by smart phones/tablets have doubled in 2012-2013.

Success, however, has also created controversy with very real consequences. Hackers based in Northeast Asia regularly attack the website, countries disinclined to value press freedom persecute field reporters, and pro-NK organizations fueled by feelings of betrayal target *Daily NK* editors for harassment. Equally troublesome are the divisive politics and widespread apathy that generally frame discussion about North Korea in South Korea. *Daily NK* is seeking to break the mold in a society weakened by political insularity, materialism, and status anxiety by rising above the domestic fray in order to present fair reporting and informed analysis to the international community.

(Screen grap from the cyber attack on Daily NK, 3.26.13)



*Daily NK* wholeheartedly welcomes the world's rising interest in Northeast Asia and desire to realize positive change on the peninsula. As a domestic media organization, *Daily NK* is proof positive of the positive work done by South Koreans, North Koreans, and non-Koreans at the sub-state level despite the continued stalemate between North and South at the international level.



# Daily NK

## 2013 Crowdfunding Goal

South Korea is the world's most wired country where almost two-thirds of the population uses smartphones. As such, redesigning the *Daily NK* site so it's able to deliver news and information on different platforms by way of *Responsive Web Design* (RWD) is crucial to generating more web traffic and enhancing user-interactivity via SNS. Also important, more and more North Koreans use mobile phones (albeit with severely restricted service). We want to be there when the firewall falls, as it will, and deliver information the fastest and most effective way possible.



@ the Daily NK office



@ the Daily NK office



Responsive  
Web Design  
(RWD)



# Daily NK

## Noteworthy Achievements:

**December, 2004:** Launched Korean and English sites

**January, 2005:** Began publishing regular column by Hwang Jang Yop, the former International Secretary of the North Korea Worker's Party, birthfather of the Juche ideology, and still the highest-ranking North Korean ever to defect

**March, 2005:** Broke news on found footage of a public execution in North Korea, which became the first-ever confirmation of a public execution in North Korea and was shown during a session convened by the *UN Human Rights Council*

**May, 2006:** Broke news on found footage of another public execution in North Korea, this time in Haeju

**January, 2007:** Launched Chinese and Japanese sites

**November, 2009:** Broke news of North Korea's currency redenomination and its aftermath. Major news sources — including the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *CNN* — credited *Daily NK* with the scoop, and South Korea's CIA-equivalent, the NIS (National Intelligence Service), routinely contacted the *Daily NK* news office requesting information

**December, 2009:** Published North Korea's New Year's Statement a day in advance of publication by KCNA (North Korea's official news agency) after obtaining it from an exclusive source

**October, 2010:** Reported exclusively on the funeral of Hwang Jang Yop and his interment in an area of Daejeon National Cemetery reserved for persons who have made an extraordinary contribution to South Korean society

**May, 2010:** Conducted seminar in Tokyo on North Korea strategy surrounding the Cheonan sinking

**July, 2011:** Published a series of exclusive interviews in a book, *NK People Speak*, available for free via digital download. Months earlier, *Daily NK* staff went to the Sino-North Korean border to research the situation there and meet North Korean people. The team did not meet defectors, they met ordinary people: factory workers, traders and even Chosun Workers' Party members. The resulting text was acclaimed by many leading international think tanks, such as the *Peterson Institute for International Economics* (PIIE), and inspired a significant spike in web traffic. A softback version was also published in Korean

**September, 2011:** Established news sharing partnership with *Bloomberg*

**July, 2012:** Broke news of the '6.28 Policy' focusing on North Korean economic reforms ordered by the Kim Jong Eun regime. Released approximately 20 stories over 45 days outlining the basic tenets of the policy, which focused on agricultural reform but did not address North Korea's fundamental economic problems

**January, 2013:** Published report, *North Korea in 2012*, in Korean and English that catalogued information from sources inside North Korea and special correspondents based across the Sino-North Korean border in China. The report tracked events taking place inside the country at the grassroots and administrative-levels following the death of Kim Jong Il



# Daily NK

## So How Is Your Organization Funded?

### Short Answer

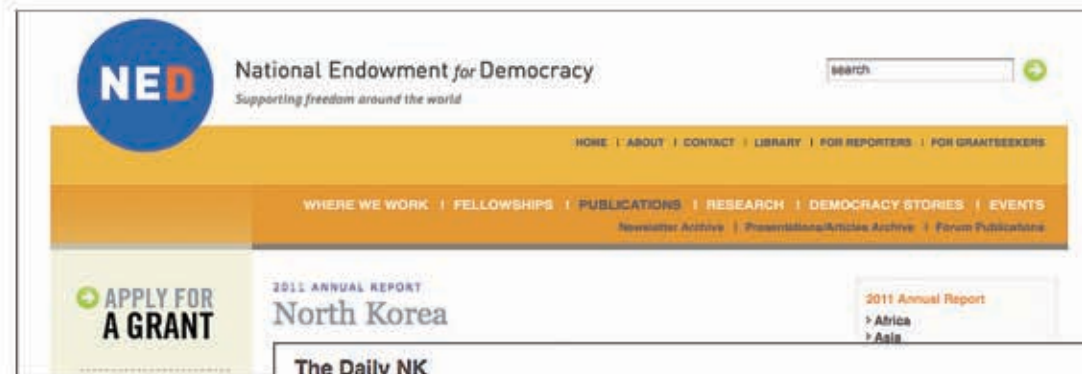
Daily NK lives and breathes as a result of international funding.

### Long Answer

U.S. Congress passed the *North Korean Human Rights Act* in October, 2004. Woefully marginalized for reasons related to South Korea's ideological conflicts, limited secular civil society, and comparably underdeveloped charity culture, North Korean human rights (NKHR) activist groups found their first major benefactor in the U.S. While South Korea's National Assembly has yet to pass a similar act, the law gained traction in the international community; Japan passed its own NKHR Act in 2006 and EU lawmakers collectively urged South Korea, a newly-minted G-20 nation, to pass its own NKHR Act in 2011. Nevertheless, South Korea's progressive and conservative administrations have failed over and over to take moral leadership on an issue inextricably linked to national identity. The invariable response to the international community: "It's. A. Korean. Problem." As a result, *Daily NK* relies on life support from the U.S. taxpayer in the form of annual *National Endowment for Democracy* (NED) grants. The shared interest in promoting and safeguarding democracy has allowed for the foundation of a digital press agency that would not have otherwise existed in South Korea's restrictive, sensationalistic, and biased media landscape.



(Chief Editor Shin at reporter training)



(Screen grabs from NED.org)

The Daily NK  
\$175,000

To disseminate accurate and timely information about North Korea. The Daily NK will produce an online newspaper serving audiences in South Korea and in the international community, and to produce training to citizen journalists in North Korea. The newspaper will include news and information about North Korean politics, economics, and society.

### Daily NK Development Goals

*Daily NK's* 5-year plan includes diversifying its international grantor portfolio and executing online crowdfunding campaigns in lieu of support from South Korea's government. *Daily NK* takes great pride in its role as an independent media outlet in South Korea and seeks to sustain this role by establishing partnerships with respected grant-making institutions that will allow it to maintain its unique position.



### Chief Editor Shin

#### From Rural Activist to Capital City News Commentator

Born: Jeolla-nam province, 1975; arrested: Yonsei University, 1996  
First published: World Human Rights Announcement Day, 2004  
Regular guest commentator for major international media, including:  
the *International Herald Tribune*, *Los Angeles Times*, *KBS*, and *Al Jazeera*

#### How did you first become involved in South Korea's democracy movement?

I moved to Gwangju from rural South Jeolla in 1983; my parents, middle-class country farmers, sacrificed so that I would have access to a better education. Deeply affected by the community's suffering following the [1980] massacre by Chun Doo Hwan's soldiers, I followed in my older brother's footsteps and joined the democracy movement at Chonnam National University. Even before then, I had read Kim Il Sung's biography, *With the Century*, and was impressed by Kim's victory against the Japanese colonialists.



South Korea's government-controlled media initially portrayed the struggle as a pro-Communist riot. Only later, after hundreds of deaths, mass protests against authoritarianism, and constitutional reforms, was this tragic event declared "The Gwangju Democratic Movement" by late former President Roh Moo Hyun

#### What did the movement seek to accomplish?

Two organizations competed for influence among student activists at the time: *People's Democracy Revolution* group (PD) and *National Liberation Revolution* group (NL). PD was attached to the European Marxist paradigm, whereas NL, the group I joined, asserted America was the greatest obstacle to true democracy and Korean reunification. Being from Gwangju, it made sense for me to join this group as our efforts were geared towards overthrowing the military dictatorship regime that we determined was a puppet of the United States.



## What was life like as a member of NL?

My first year in college, I visited rural provinces similar to my hometown and distributed ideology books regarding the troubles facing Korean agriculture. While premised on concern for public issues, the books' underlying themes included anti-Americanism, Communism, and fellowship with North Korea.

I was later invited to join the underground student movement, *Hanchongryon*, which was present at many college campuses. To ensure secrecy, senior underground members directed the social lives of junior members. If a member was caught meeting people outside the group without prior permission, he/she could expect some form of discipline. But I felt empowered. I sought to become a representative of the student movement, to effect change and fight injustice.

## Did you ever meet a North Korean as a member of NL? An American?

No, I never met a North Korean. It was the 1980s and very few refugees or defectors lived south of the 38th parallel; in fact, any North Korean in South Korea was presumed to be a spy. The consequences for communicating with them were severe under the *National Security Law*. I did meet a few Americans, but please understand our group did not hate the American people. Rather, we sought independence from American foreign policy because we saw ourselves as a colonized state under "Pax Americana."



## You were arrested during a 1996 riot at Yonsei University, one of the most prestigious universities in Korea and a historic hotbed for student activism. What happened? And why did this demonstration turn so violent?

I was a bannerman for a reunification rally that was judged a pro-Communist event. Seoul police blockaded the meeting space and denied our right to peaceably assemble. Our response was about as intelligent as the blockade itself. KSM was always behind the times, determining violence was essential to our revolution. As such, student leaders sought to create an extreme situation in order to delegitimize police authority so we literally punched a hole in the blockade and, for nine days, fell under siege at Yonsei.

My physical weariness transformed into an overwhelming sense of betrayal later. The senior members recounted to us Kim Il Sung's successful guerrilla campaign against the Japanese in an effort to keep morale high, but one leader proclaimed, "You are no longer a student movement activist group, but now the Chosŏn inmin'gun 조선인민군 (formal name for North Korea's military, or *Korean People's Army*)!" I never saw myself as anti-South Korea and immediately protested this affiliation. A lot of us tried to escape afterwards; in fact, a friend ducked into an ambulance to make his getaway but I was arrested, detained for three months, and released on probation.



## What motivated you and your colleagues to dedicate your lives to North Korean democracy and human rights?

Our student movement was corrupted by professional militant protesters who easily grab the attention of reporters' cameras by slinging Molotov cocktails but fail to represent the typical activist. We lost public opinion as a result of extremism. In the aftermath of the 1996 incident, reform was necessary and, actually, timely. More and more people became aware of the crisis inside North Korea resulting from natural disasters, famine, and misgovernment. Tens of thousands of defectors who have arrived in South Korea the past decade — including my mentor, Hwang Jang Yop — corroborated these stories. We still remain committed to democracy and reunification; however, the situation in North Korea where people lack basic human rights is not acceptable and we're proud of the fact we were one of the first Seoul-based organizations to dedicate news coverage to a topic that had been ignored, politicized, or worse.

Finally, I'm proud of the fact the *Daily NK* is a place where North Koreans and South Koreans work side-by-side, developing skills, creating opportunity, and increasing access to information.



(Chief Editor Shin, middle, and President Park, right)



### Mr. Choi, Field Reporter

#### From Oppression to Opportunity

Born: North Hamkyung Province

Escaped: via China and Vietnam, 2011

First published: 2012

#### Why do people leave North Korea?

People leave [North Korea] for two reasons: they have no hope for the future or they fear government oppression. My son was caught listening to a South Korean radio broadcast and was sent to prison but ran away.

#### The imprisonment of your son prompted your decision to leave North Korea?

No, a series of events pushed us to leave North Korea. Still, my wife and I worried a lot about our son's future. North Korea forces males into the military for a period of ten years; in contrast, South Korea's military conscription lasts only two years. Young South Korean males can find jobs after discharging but there are no jobs available in North Korea. Learning more about the [comparably better] living situation in the South from family members and smuggled commodities helped us choose to leave.

Our decision didn't happen overnight. It took a long time. But now there's many defectors living abroad; 25,000 in South Korea and many more thousands in China. This is because North Korea's government was unable to feed its people. From creating a situation where people cannot eat so they have to leave while also being a fundamentally oppressive government, responsibility for all of this rests squarely on North Korea's ruling regime.

#### What was your living situation like in North Korea?

People my age and older have a nostalgia for North Korea during the 1960s and 1970s. From the early '80s, the situation changed as the state economy began to fail and we became more isolated. Poverty and starvation became serious social issues even before Kim Il Sung died and the Arduous March began. By the '90s, a lot of people, young to old, just passed away in the streets beneath billboards proclaiming "Live By the Law" and "Go Back to the Fundamentals of Socialism." Society's temperament began to change. In the past, beggars received food; now mercy was a luxury no one could afford.



*(Mr. Choi, foreground, at a reporter training workshop)*



Capitalism was a means of survival. The government's ban on private enterprise created a black market that the authorities could not stop from spreading; from 2002-2005, the regime loosened control so individuals suddenly had the ability to sell goods in the open. Many people for the first time discovered the joy of making money.

### **Did you participate in the market?**

I started a transportation company during this period. The government allowed me to buy a factory but we immediately experienced problems getting the necessary materials. In 2005, Kim [Jong Il] suddenly halted economic liberalization. Restaurants and noraebangs (karaoke clubs) that were created during this free market period were closed but many already had their eyes opened to realities the regime could no longer hide. For example, many of us took pride in the fact the South Korean products on sale at the market were noticeably better than the Chinese competition. I can tell you the young people were impressed and felt positive feeling towards South Korea.

The 2009 currency redenomination destroyed all private wealth. Life became miserable. The authorities did not use the word "reform," but opted instead to use "exchange" or "switch" of policies. For all the money I was forced to exchange, I received only a very small percentage back (approximately 10%). This event had a very serious effect on me because people I knew could not survive afterwards. The redenomination, coupled with a series of misfortunes, inspired our decision to leave.

### **How did your family escape North Korea?**

My wife and I secured passage for our son following his imprisonment and adopted the same method in May, 2011. We bribed soldiers at the Tumen River and traversed chest-deep water to arrive in China. There, we met our broker who guided us to our destination. Via Vietnam, we ultimately arrived in South Korea on June 16, 2011, and spent 3 months at Hanawon, a state-operated facility where we learned assimilation strategies. On the final day, we received ID cards and a place to live.

### **How did you learn about the Daily NK?**

Hanawon hosted a conference attended by CEOs, nonprofit directors, and executives throughout the country. Here, I was first introduced to *Daily NK* and learned about the organization's work promoting North Korean democracy and informing the world about the reality inside North Korea. After experiencing a number of mini-internships, I ultimately decided to try and earn a position at the *Daily NK*. I was impressed with the media company first and foremost because all the information was translated into different languages— English, Korean, Chinese, and Japanese — to inform the world about North Korea. Now in my mid-50s, I also thought this might be my last chance I have to tell the world what I had experienced in North Korea.

### **Please describe your transition to South Korean society.**

Arriving in South Korea, I had no skill or capital, just my memories and knowledge. The transition from socialism to capitalism was very difficult; however, friends eased the burden by helping me learn how to accomplish daily tasks, such as: buying food, riding the bus, and using a cellphone.



Likewise, my time at the *Daily NK* included a 3-month internship where I learned the basics, such as: reading the news, writing articles, and receiving editorial feedback. Thus, the company has helped me to adjust to my new home in a way other companies could not. I am learning daily from the news while also developing a skill and exercising critical thinking. I am not marginalized, and have a voice. I feel empowered in a way I did not before.

**For a long time you lived in a relatively closed society. What do you think of the international community?  
What do you think of working with former pro-NK activists?**

I am a North Korean who now works with a number of foreigners to inform the world about the reality inside my home country. I feel grateful and a sense of responsibility. My connection to the former pro-NK activists is deep as we all share a common vision of a unified Korea and feelings of betrayal by the North Korean government. While the *juche* ideology talks about human rights and is a human-centered ideology, in reality North Korea is one of the biggest human rights abusers in the world. The reason why it has become what it is today is because it has not allowed anything good to come inside the country.



(Mr. Choi, foreground, at work)



## President Park

### From Muffled Voice to Influential Spokesperson

Born: Seoul, 1972

Founded *University Student Volunteer Network of Korea*, 2001;

co-founded *Daily NK*, 2004; and promoted to President of *Daily NK*, 2011

**Like Chief Editor Shin, you participated in the student democracy movement in the 1990s, yet, unlike him, you were arrested several times. What happened?**

I enrolled in university to study law and was arrested five times from 1991-1998 on various charges, including: disorderly conduct, violating election campaign law, and interfering with official police business. Because of the statutes of limitations, prosecutors ultimately dropped these cases and amnesty was given.

I do not take pride in my past arrests. I take full responsibility even if my motivation was rooted in idealism and the practice of civil disobedience. As a young person, I believed South Korea was in desperate need of democracy and that oppressive laws in service of authoritarian leaders, not the people, infringed on human rights unnecessarily.

### **Why did you support North Korea initially?**

The utopian vision detailed in the North Korean textbooks I read contrasted my personal experiences in the South where the ever-widening income gap was creating serious social problems. As the government controlled information about North Korea under the *National Security Law*, I distrusted major media and the propaganda it disseminated. Moreover, I felt deep antipathy towards the U.S. government for not stopping the bloodshed in Gwangju by Chun's shock troops years earlier. In the absence of information I could trust, I turned to pro-North Korean textbooks, distributed via the underground, for the truth.

### **When did your support for the North Korean regime end?**

A real turning point for me was South Korea's 1993 presidential election. Democracy activist Kim Young Sam was elected to office freely and fairly, but North Korea launched a smear campaign to undermine his legitimacy. Why? Day after day North Korea's propaganda judged Kim Young Sam as a "traitor" yet the South Korean people voted for him as their representative. In this way, North Korea's propaganda was an insult to the democratic process and I lost faith in the utopian vision I embraced earlier. Over the next year my views changed dramatically with the death of Kim Il Sung, the collapse of North Korea's planned economy, and the influx of defectors into South Korean society.



(President Park. left)



### How did your friends feel about your political transformation?

Well, I was quickly judged a “traitor” and a “turncoat” by progressives. They ceaselessly denied the existence of North Korea’s nuclear weapons program and human rights abuses despite the growing amount of evidence to the contrary. In my opinion, this self-deception was, and remains, rooted in the dangerous twin-pairing of the Korean utopianism and anti-Americanism I once supported. On the other side of the political spectrum, the pro-business conservatives who sounded the rallying cry against Communism distrusted my ideological conversion and the creation of a “new Right” movement that held North Korea accountable but also championed universal human rights. To this day, I sympathize with the progressives and their campaign for social justice but remain dumbfounded by their stubborn, self-induced blindness. Likewise, I’m very concerned by the lip service, not action, conservatives pay to North Korean human rights. That’s why some of us founded the *Daily NK*; we thought we could do better.

### Has your own opinion of violence also changed?

Yes. As a young person, I learned both sides of the DMZ adopted tactics of terror and believed the North must have had some reason for pursuing aggression. The 1987 bombing of *Korean Air Flight 858* by North Korean agents, for example, may seem akin to the bombing of British pubs by Irish nationalists during The Troubles. But the Korean People’s Army (KPA) is not the Irish Republican Army (IRA), and the North Korean regime is more interested in survival than national independence. 9/11 was another turning point. Everyone felt great anger and sadness for America, understanding targeting innocent civilians to achieve political goals is totally unacceptable. The North Korean regime’s liberal use of terror on its own people and the international community fostered associations with 9/11 that hit deep with me. Many Americans felt the same rage and sadness we felt after Gwangju. Now it’s clear we all want to see positive change



(Daily NK reporters at work)

### Why start a website devoted to news and information about North Korea?

Following the historic inter-Korean summit between South Korean President Kim Dae Jung and North Korean leader Kim Jong Il in 2000, an agreement was reached whereby the South would send oil/money to North Korea, and the North would work in partnership to end tensions. Many South Koreans suddenly had renewed hope for reunification; thus, a type of self-censorship occurred that prohibited reporting North Korean misgovernance for fear this moment of long-awaited harmony would end.

Needless to say, our team, which was responsible for monitoring the human rights situation inside North Korea and building relationships with defectors in China, felt bitter disappointment.

Only later in 2003 did everyone learn about the \$500 million payout for the summit. The general public now felt betrayed, both by the media for failing to do its job and by politicians for failing to do theirs. Deep-seeded apathy among a new generation of Koreans became even more entrenched during the Lee Myung Bak administration. Lee made the mistake of trying to manage the North Korean crisis like a business when normative rules do not apply. It’s in this vacuum of critical information and resolve that the *Daily NK* sought to make a difference.



### **How did your team recruit reporters inside North Korea?**

Based on the interviews I conducted with defectors in Seoul, it was clear that I should travel to the Sino-NK border to recruit North Korean nationals to work as reporters. Relying on skills I honed as an activist, I assumed the identity of a student and was introduced to a number of North Koreans by Christian missionaries, aid workers, and others. My extensive knowledge of North Korea was an asset, helping me to connect with wary strangers suffering from severe famine. Not all my meetings proved productive; for instance, North Koreans would take payment and then just disappear. However, I also discovered very talented people from the North who would later become contributors to the *Daily NK* after passing a number of trust-building tests. I've told them their job, first and foremost, is to survive. Reporting information is important, but a secondary priority.

### **Many people criticize China for its support of the North Korean regime and refugee repatriation policy, but I'd like to know your opinion of China's role with respect to North Korean human rights.**

While in China, I took many precautions to avoid capture by the police. The Chinese government, unlike most of the international community, has very little sympathy for defectors given the destabilizing role they can play in the region's politics. The situation is also a bit more complex than the oft-heard story of innocent refugees falling under the fist of evil Communists. Remember that approximately 1,000,000 Chinese "volunteers" died during the Korean War to support the North Korean state. As I alluded to earlier, some defectors participate in criminal activity at the Sino-NK border— such as smuggling, theft, and murder — in addition to falling victim to human trafficking. *Daily NK* has reported such instances. That said, China's repatriation policy defies international norms by sending human beings into harm's way.

### **Approximately one-fifth of the Daily NK's traffic comes from China. Do the Chinese people have sympathy for the North Korean people?**

Many Chinese are sympathetic to the widespread starvation and human rights problem inside North Korea. Moreover, many North Koreans and Chinese share blood ties. The fact is the Chinese government has determined North Korea's collapse poses a serious threat to the state for a multiplicity of reasons, such as refugee migration. End of story. Any Chinese national who knowingly aids a North Korean defector risks criminal prosecution.

### **What do you see as the core problem preventing positive change on the peninsula?**

Koreans need to move past their ethnic nationalism. The North Korean problem is not a Korean problem; moreover, it's not a problem that can be solved by framing politics in terms of anti-this or anti-that. I believe South Korea can lead the way in terms of developing civil society-based institutions to promote social justice while at the same time promoting student activism that's service-oriented and grounded in democratic values. In this way, South Korea can become a beacon in East Asia where race-based national identities have precipitated tragedy, such as the situation in North Korea.



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