



BACKGROUND

Land and Climate

North Korea occupies more than half of the Korean Peninsula and covers some 46,540 square miles (120,538 square kilometers). It is just smaller than Mississippi and about 20 percent larger than South Korea. Mountains and narrow valleys dominate the landscape. As a result, the majority of the population resides on only about one-fourth of the land. The mountainous interior is isolated and sparsely populated.

The climate is continental, with relatively long, cold winters and hot, humid summers interrupted by a two-week monsoon season. Spring and autumn are more temperate and pleasant. Land continues to be cleared for agricultural production; the resulting deforestation has increased the severity of frequent floods.

History

North Korea was once part of Koguryō, one of the peninsula's three kingdoms, which were united in AD 668 by Silla. A new kingdom called Koryō ruled most of what is now North Korea from 918 until 1392, when Yi Sōng-gye took power and established the Chosōn (or Yi) Dynasty. The Chosōn kings controlled the entire peninsula for five hundred years, until Japan annexed Korea in 1910.

Korea was liberated from Japan at the end of World War II. The Soviet Union accepted the Japanese surrender in the northern part of Korea (north of the 38th parallel), and the United States accepted the surrender in the south. Former anti-Japanese guerrilla Kim Il Sung, with the full support of

the Soviet command, took power in the north in 1948. He remained in firm control until his death in 1994. His son Kim Jong Il then assumed power.

On 25 June 1950, the North Korean army invaded South Korea, initiating a war that lasted three years and caused untold suffering to all Korean people. The United States and a military force from the United Nations supported the South, while China and the Soviet Union supported the North. In July 1953, a treaty was signed near the town of Panmunjōm (on the 38th parallel). Part of the truce outlines a demilitarized zone (DMZ), which separates the two Koreas today. The border is the world's most heavily armed, with some two million troops on either side of the DMZ. A peace treaty was never signed.

North Korea, though allied with the Soviet Union, became an isolated and almost xenophobic nation under Kim Il Sung. In addition to an extreme policy of self-sufficiency, Kim placed heavy emphasis on reunifying the Korean Peninsula, sometimes sending spies into South Korea or digging invasion tunnels near the border. Talks on reunification were first held in the early 1970s, and again in the 1990s, but little progress was made in an atmosphere of distrust. Neither side was willing to accept the other's vision for the peninsula's future, though in 1991 both signed the Basic Agreement, in which they pledged to avoid aggression and to promote dialogue and cooperation.

North Korea threatened to withdraw from the global Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty in 1993, prompting the United States and others to negotiate a nuclear accord. The agreement called for North Korea to abandon any nuclear weapons program in exchange for two modern nuclear energy

reactors that could not produce weapons. The agreement faltered more than once over delays, suspicions, an economic crisis, and military maneuvers. Talks in 1999 also faltered, although North Korea agreed to stop testing ballistic missiles.

Since 1994, food has been more on the minds of average North Koreans, as poor economic management, the collapse of communism throughout the world, outdated farming practices, floods, droughts, and typhoons all combined to decimate the country's harvests. While still suspicious of outside help, North Korea requested more aid as the severity of the food shortages increased. In 1999, the North received a vital shipment of fertilizer from the South and, in an unprecedented move, signed an agreement with a major South Korean conglomerate (Hyundai) to allow tourism development in the Kŭmgang Mountains near the border. The first cruise, though tightly controlled, occurred in 1999.

In June 2000, South Korean president Kim Dae Jung visited Kim Jong Il in North Korea's capital of Pyŏngyang. Kim Jong Il surprised the world by greeting Kim Dae Jung at the airport to begin a friendly three-day summit. The two leaders immediately enjoyed warm relations and soon issued a joint declaration to solve the question of reunification. As part of the historic agreement, both nations agreed to end their bitter propaganda war, sponsor joint sporting teams and events, open communication and economic links, and set a timetable for separated families to be reunited (beginning in August 2000). Soon after, the United States lifted all nonstrategic sanctions against North Korea, and many Western powers established diplomatic ties with Pyŏngyang.

North Korea's improved relations with South Korea and the West were short-lived. In December 2002, North Korea expelled UN nuclear inspectors, later announcing it would withdraw from the global Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. North Korea's threat of nuclear weapons development alarmed its neighbors and the international community. Six-nation negotiations (known as the Six-Party Talks) involving North Korea, South Korea, the United States, Japan, China, and Russia began in August 2003. During a round of negotiations in September 2005, North Korea declared that it would eliminate its nuclear program if it received economic aid and security guarantees, but disputes arose over the details of the exchange. North Korea continued to pursue its nuclear program and, in October 2006, announced that it had tested a nuclear weapon.

The Six-Party Talks finally produced an agreement in February 2007. Under its terms, North Korea pledged to end its nuclear activities in exchange for oil and other economic incentives. North Korea shut down its primary nuclear reactor at Nyŏngbyŏn (Yŏngbyŏn) in July 2007 and demolished the reactor's cooling tower in June 2008. The UN condemned North Korea in 2009 for attempting to launch a satellite. In response, North Korea left the Six-Party Talks, expelled nuclear inspectors, and conducted a second nuclear test, in May 2009. In February 2012, North Korea reached a deal with the United States, in which North Korea would freeze its nuclear programs, halt long-range missile testing, and allow nuclear inspectors to return, in exchange for food aid. However, the deal fell apart after North Korea staged an unsuccessful satellite launch (in violation of agreements) the

following April, in celebration of Kim Il Sung's 100th birthday. A successful launch followed in December 2012, and a third nuclear test was held in February 2013. In response to increased UN sanctions following the third test, North Korea withdrew from the cease-fire agreement and disconnected a Red Cross hotline between Seoul and Pyŏngyang.

Tensions with South Korea remain high. In 2009, North Korea announced that it did not consider itself bound by the 1953 truce. North Korea also declared four areas near its sea border naval firing zones and was accused of sinking a South Korean warship in March 2010. Tensions were elevated further in November 2010 when North Korea shelled the South Korean island of Yŏnpyŏngdo in response to alleged South Korean artillery fire inside the territorial waters of North Korea. North Korea regularly threatens war with South Korea.

After suffering a stroke in 2008, Kim Jong Il began grooming his son Kim Jong Un as his replacement by appointing him to key military and party positions. Kim Jong Il died in December 2011. Under Kim Jong Un's rule, moves toward economic reform are beginning to show, some observers believe. However, the secrecy of the regime makes it difficult to know for sure what, if any, reforms are on the horizon.

THE PEOPLE

Population

North Korea's population is estimated to be about 24.6 million, growing at an annual rate of 0.5 percent. Ethnic Koreans comprise almost the entire population. About 60 percent of all people live in urban areas. Pyŏngyang has a population of about three million.

Language

The Korean language plays an important role in the identity of the Korean people. Korean is written in a phonetic alphabet created in 1446. The alphabet is called *Han'gŭl* in South Korea but is known as *Chosŏn'gŭl* in North Korea. Although the Korean language is replete with words adapted from Chinese, North Koreans, unlike South Koreans, do not use Chinese characters in their newspapers and publications. They prefer to use only *Chosŏn'gŭl*, which is sufficient for most needs. There are also significant differences in vocabulary between the North and the South, influenced by the total lack of contact between the two halves of the divided nation and somewhat by international politics. For example, North Korea has a policy against adopting Western words, although recently more English words are being used in the context of North Korea's technological modernization. English, Chinese, and Russian are offered as second languages in schools and universities.

Religion

The government of North Korea has constitutionally confirmed freedom of religion. In reality, however, the effectual state religion since the 1950s has been the

eneration of Kim Il Sung, the first Great Leader. Kim Il Sung was portrayed by the government-controlled media as a highly paternal figure and a near-god. His picture was (and is) everywhere, and his will was obeyed before any other. The government continues to promote his image and that of his son, Kim Jong Il. Kim Jong Il (known as Dear Leader, Supreme Commander, and General Secretary) did not officially assume leadership of the country until after a mandatory three-year mourning period following his father's death. In 1998, Kim Jong Il named his father the "eternal" president, and in 1999, his government affirmed Kim Il Sung's place as the nation's "sun" and the source of its great policies.

Despite the personality cult that surrounds Kim Il Sung, the way of life and philosophy in North Korea echo traditional patterns and are based fundamentally on Confucian thought. Roman Catholic and Protestant beliefs were introduced in the 18th and 19th centuries, respectively. *Ch'ondogyo* (also known as *Tonghak*) is an indigenous religion founded in 1860 as an eclectic combination of Buddhist, Confucian, Taoist, and Christian beliefs. The present government points to this religion, which has organized a political party, as proof that religious and political freedoms exist in North Korea. Christians are permitted to meet in small groups under the direction of state-appointed ministers. Pyöngyang has four Christian church buildings (a Catholic church, a Russian Orthodox church, and two Protestant churches) which primarily accommodate foreign diplomats and guests. Shamanism, a native belief in natural and household spirits, gods, and demons, may have limited influence in rural areas, but the government promotes it mostly as an art form.

General Attitudes

The establishment of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea brought about radical changes in the nature of traditional Korean society. The Confucian concept of filial piety and loyalty to one's lineage has largely been supplanted by an intense nationalism that is described as both fiercely proud and excessively paranoid. The interests of the state have taken priority over the interests of the family. Kim Il Sung, through extensive indoctrination, effectively united the North Korean people in the belief that their political system and way of life were superior. Although contemporary North Korean society is structurally and theoretically socialist, the most important and influential concept is Kim's idea of *juch'e* (independence and national self-reliance). *Juch'e* colors every aspect of life, from popular music to political speeches and everyday conversation. *Juch'e* gives people a reason to sacrifice and accept difficult times. It also defines North Korea's isolationism and resistance to outside influence. North Koreans know very little about anything that occurs outside of their country, except as it is reported by the government. However, nearly all North Koreans desire reunification with the South.

Personal Appearance

North Koreans wear simple attire when working, often consisting of one-color jumpsuits. Office workers may wear

uniforms, and urban professionals wear suits or dresses. The most common type of formal attire for North Korean men is the Mao-style jacket, known by the Japanese word *sumeru* (literally, "tightly closed"). On special occasions, North Koreans often wear a traditional *chosönot*. For women, this is a long two-piece dress that is often very colorful. For men, a *chosönot* includes trousers and a loose-fitting jacket or robe.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings

Confucianism has taught Koreans to behave with decorum and respect. Therefore, greetings and introductions tend to be rather formal. Handshakes are common among men, but a bow is still the most common greeting. A younger or lower-status person always bows until the other returns the bow or offers a handshake. When Korean men do shake hands, they extend the right hand, often supported by the left at the forearm to show deference, and slightly bow the head. When women meet, they usually extend both hands and grasp each other's hands. Children always bow to adults and wave or bow among themselves. Several phrases are used in greeting, but the most common is *Annyöng hasio* (Peace be upon you). The Korean language has different levels of formality, so this and any other greeting will differ depending on the people involved. For example, *Annyöng hashimnikka* is used for superiors, while *Annyöng* is used with children. The variations have the same meaning, but the different endings indicate differing levels of respect. When greeting a superior, one commonly asks about health and parents. When greeting a subordinate, the questions are about the spouse and children.

Gestures

It is not unusual for men to hold hands in public or walk down the street with an arm over each other's shoulder. This is an expression of friendship. Touching between strangers or casual acquaintances, especially between opposite sexes, is considered inappropriate. In most situations, people maintain good posture to show respect for a host or speaker. Sitting in a relaxed manner is considered an insult. One takes care not to expose the bottom of one's feet to another person while sitting. People give and receive gifts with both hands. Hands generally are not used much in conversation. The sign to beckon someone is made with the hand at head height, palm down, with the fingers making a scratching motion. Men remove hats in buildings as well as in the presence of an elder or superior. One never looks a superior directly in the eye.

Visiting

North Koreans do not commonly visit one another unannounced, and arranged social visits are infrequent. Generally, people visit relatives for the Lunar New Year, Parents' Day, and Mid-autumn Festival but not often otherwise. Unless special business calls for it, a superior never visits a subordinate. Traditionally, invited guests are offered light refreshments that might include a drink, fruit, crackers, cookies, or coffee. It is considered polite and a sign

of respect for guests to take a gift to the hosts. The value of the gift is far less important than the gesture of giving it. In most cases, a gift will be fruit, a beverage, or something from one's home region. Food and economic crises have curtailed such practices.

People remove shoes and hats when going indoors. In some cases, they put on slippers, but otherwise they wear only socks in the home. Etiquette requires paying particular attention to the hosts and making sure their feelings are respected. Showing respect for the family and state are of utmost importance for most visits. Koreans view the care of a guest as basic good manners, so visitors are given the best the household has to offer. If there are many guests, then age or status determines who gets the best seat, the best cut of meat, and so forth.

Eating

Families rarely have time to eat daily meals together. Fathers often leave early in the morning and return late at night. Urban workers commonly eat their meals at workplace cafeterias. Koreans consider eating while walking on the street offensive, something only a child is allowed to indulge in. Conversation during meals is limited. Eating with the fingers is considered impolite. Slurping soup and noodles is accepted; in fact, it is a practical way to eat hot food at the rapid pace Koreans are used to. Spoons are used for soup, but chopsticks are used for all other foods. Restaurants in North Korea are few and very expensive; however, recent changes in the economy have made them affordable to the wealthy. The average worker eats in a restaurant only on special occasions. Tipping is not allowed, except in restaurants where hard currency is accepted.

LIFESTYLE

Family

Filial responsibility is an enduring tradition in North Korea, although it frequently conflicts with the ideals of a socialist system. The population is exhorted by the government to love their families and state, but the emphasis is on the state. Since 1948, the government has worked to break down the traditional extended family and clan system. Devotion was redirected toward the country's ruler, whom children were taught to refer to as Father Kim Il Sung.

Because North Koreans consider their society to be very family focused, sons are often expected to follow in their fathers' footsteps. Therefore, inherited leadership positions, such as from Kim Il Sung to Kim Jong Il, are socially accepted.

The government provides incentives for couples to have large families. For example, medals or discounted trips to a seaside resort are awarded to families that have more than three children. The public distribution system provides more food to families with more children, but the family's class and social status also influence the amount of food received. Still, the birthrate has fallen dramatically since the mid-1990s. Today, the average North Korean family has two children.

The family is headed by the father, who provides for the

family financially. The mother, while often required to work, is responsible for taking care of the home and children. Children are expected to assist in chores around the home. Although personal austerity was encouraged before recent food shortages, for most families, the average monthly wage sometimes is not enough to purchase daily necessities, and most cannot pay for the luxury of nonessential goods. Due to these difficult economic conditions, both parents usually work and their children go to day care centers (often located at the workplace) or stay with grandparents. It is estimated that about 10 million extended families are separated by the border between North and South Korea. Since 2000, roughly 20,000 divided families have been permitted to have brief reunions.

Despite legal equality, women are generally accorded lower social status than men. However, since 1990s, women have had more opportunities to participate in the economy. Several factors contributed to the raised social status of women, including the collapse of North Korea's public distribution system (a method of distributing government-controlled food and goods), the simultaneous collapse of heavy industry (a major employer of the male working population), and a famine during the mid- and late 1990s. During this time, women contributed financially to the support of their families through small cottage industries (sewing services or homemade snack sales), which, despite their illegality, were widely tolerated. Today, women not only help support their families, but many companies and farms are headed by women. Traditional norms have relaxed enough in urban areas that it is acceptable for women to drink alcohol and socialize with those outside of their families.

Despite these changing opportunities and the belief that women "push one wheel of the ox cart" (meaning they are equal to men), most power, influence, and good jobs are held by men. Conservative traditions nationwide remain strong; women are rarely seen driving (except in propaganda pictures) and are expected to be skilled in domestic tasks such as cooking and making handicrafts. Conservative traditions are also institutionalized—for example, women are also forbidden from riding bicycles in Pyŏngyang (though the rule is rarely enforced). Although Kim Jong Il promoted his sister, Kim Kyung Hee, to the rank of four-star general, a member of the Political Bureau of the Korean Workers' Party, and the Director of the Light Industry Department, women are generally absent from higher levels of government or military service.

Housing

Approximately 40 percent of North Korea's population lives in rural areas, and many rural inhabitants live in agricultural cooperatives. By 1958, all farms in North Korea were incorporated into more than three thousand cooperatives, each comprising about three hundred families on about 1,000 acres. Rural homes are generally built using local natural materials, such as thatch used for roofing. Pyŏngyang has modern high-rise apartment buildings, and urban streets, roads, and avenues are broad, tree lined, and well kept.

Dating and Marriage

Western-style dating is not common but is increasingly practiced in urban areas. Couples may meet through work or at university; however, matchmaking is very common, and parents or their friends often suggest potential spouses to their children. Suggested matches are not considered binding and can be rejected. Matchmakers generally arrange matches for friends as a service, but if a match they suggest is successful, they may be given a gift. Though not legally required, in rural areas youth seek their parents' consent to wed. It is unusual to see public displays of affection, but some younger couples may occasionally hold hands while walking down the street. Premarital sexual relations are frowned upon.

Marriages often happen very shortly after a couple has met. The government has established minimum recommended marriage ages (27 for men, 25 for women, described as "revolutionary maturity") to allow for the completion of military service and university studies. An urban woman who reaches 30 without marrying faces great social pressure to accept a match or risks being considered to be without marriage prospects due to her age. Rural women face similar pressure at an earlier age. Single men are pressured to find a spouse when they reach their mid-thirties.

A typical urban wedding ceremony lasts most of the day and involves visits by the bride and groom to the homes of both sets of parents to pay respects. During the visit, the bride and groom present their parents with new clothes and a "wedding table" made up of specially prepared foods, liquors, and photos. The legal wedding takes place in a local administrative office and is a civil affair; religious weddings are exceptionally rare due to the very low number of practicing religious people in North Korea as well as the small number of churches. The couple, along with the best man and maid of honor (and sometimes other members of the wedding party), then take a tour of the city's main landmarks, posing for pictures in front of each. A statue or site associated with President Kim Il Sung is considered an obligatory stop on this tour. After several changes of clothes (from traditional clothing to Western-style clothing) and picture taking, a meal is held in a local restaurant. Friends offer toasts and speeches in honor of the couple and their relationship. If they can afford it, couples may go on a honeymoon, usually a short domestic trip. Officially, payment of a dowry (money or property brought by a bride to her husband) is an illegal practice held over from feudal times, yet dowries are frequently arranged in the countryside and in some urban areas too.

Married couples are expected to start having children very soon after their wedding, so it is very common for a first child to be born only a year or so into a marriage.

When a woman gets married, she becomes a member of her husband's family and comes under the command of her husband's father (the head of the household) and mother (who is effectively in charge of the women of the house). If her husband is the oldest son, she can expect to live with his parents for the rest of their lives and to inherit what they leave behind. Although property is not privately owned, a kind of inheritance occurs. For example, a family apartment is expected to be inhabited by the oldest son and his family at his parents' death. It is considered the responsibility of the

oldest son to take care of his parents in their old age until he becomes head of the family himself. Younger sons apply to the government for their own housing after marriage or may stay in the family home if there is room. Some men move in with their wife's family, at least for a short time.

Divorce is rare in rural areas. Young urban women (typically under 30) may have a chance to remarry following a divorce; older women have less opportunity to remarry.

Life Cycle

When a woman becomes pregnant, she is likely to continue working for some months, but around halfway through the pregnancy, she stops and spends most of her time at home, where she is cared for by her mother or mother-in-law. Visibly pregnant women are rarely seen in public. Most births happen in hospitals; home births are rare and generally only happen in rural areas. After a child is born, mother and baby are usually kept in the hospital for three days before being sent home. They then remain in seclusion for a few weeks while gaining strength. They are visited only by members of their family during this time. After this period is over, guests are invited to see the baby; they bring presents for both the parents and child.

High infant mortality in the past kept parents from naming children until they had survived one hundred days. Today, according to this tradition, babies are named on the hundredth day after birth. The name is chosen by the parents (in the past, by the father's parents). The baby, whether boy or girl, takes the father's surname.

North Korea is a highly regimented society, and many milestones are marked as children progress through national institutions. Around age 7, exceptional students are invited to join the Young Pioneers Corps, a communist youth group recognizable by their red neckerchiefs and badges featuring the red flame of the *juch'e* (the political ideology outlined by Kim Il Sung). Other students join the Young Pioneers within a few years. Around age 14, students join the Kim Il Sung Socialist Youth League, at which time the red neckerchief is replaced with a badge with the portrait of North Korean president Kim Il Sung, which they will wear over their hearts at almost all times. These badges come in many designs, and individuals eventually collect many; sailors tend to favor a flag-shaped one, and young women, a small round pin. Gaining a Kim Il Sung badge is an important step toward adulthood.

Males are considered adults at age 17, when they become eligible for military service. National military service in North Korea is mandatory for 7 to 10 years (depending on the military branch). In total, an estimated 1.21 million North Koreans serve as military personnel between the ages of 17 and 54. Women can enter university or the labor force at the same age and are viewed by society as adults.

For older people, age 60 (called *Hwan'gap*) is considered an important milestone. The traditional Korean calendar is based on a 60-year cycle, and at the age of 60, people are believed to have completed one cycle and begin a new one. Celebrations for a *Hwan'gap* are generally prepared by the person's children. The celebrations are focused on wishing the celebrant an even longer and more prosperous life. During a

Hwan'gap, the family prepares a large table of food; prominent people have received a special birthday table from Kim Jong Il. Sixty is also generally the retirement age for most working Koreans.

When a person dies, a simple funeral where the deceased is eulogized takes place with family and close friends. Traditionally, burial was the norm, hillside graves being considered the best aesthetic option. The grave would be visited every year by relatives for a cleaning and remembrance of the departed loved one. Today, cremation is more common, and the ashes are generally kept at a cemetery, although occasionally they are taken home or scattered in a significant area. During the famine of 1995–1997 (which is commonly called the "Arduous March"), many people died away from their homes and were buried in mass graves; the exact locations remain unknown to their relatives.

Diet

Meals usually consist of soup, fish, *kimch'i* (a spicy pickled cabbage), and a number of spicy vegetables. Because of the lower economic level of North Korea, traditional Korean delicacies such as *bulgogi* (marinated beef) and *kalbi* (marinated short ribs) are not as common as in South Korea. A favorite food in North Korea is *naengmyon*, a cold noodle dish.

Since 2002 (when control over small markets was relaxed), a large number of roadside stalls have sprung up, offering snacks, drinks, and other items to passersby; the most common items are domestically produced ice creams, hard biscuits and dough snacks, sodas (including cider, a light, fruity carbonated drink), water, beer, and cigarettes.

Korean food generally is spicy. *Kimch'i* and rice are the traditional mainstays of the diet around which most other dishes revolve. Nearly the entire urban population is mobilized for about two weeks twice a year to assist in transplanting and harvesting rice. Recent efforts to diversify food production have focused on growing potatoes, especially in the north, where conditions are ideal. There is growing regional divergence in staple food production and consumption. For example, noodle dishes made in coastal cities in the northeast, like Hamhung and Chongjin, are as likely to be made from potato noodles as they are from the traditional buckwheat noodles used in Pyöngyang. People also consume soybeans, corn, millet, and wheat when available.

Food shortages in North Korea occur to some degree every year. A famine that lasted for the latter half of the 1990s killed hundreds of thousands of people (estimates range from 800,000 to 2 million). The fear remains that successive poor harvests could return North Korea back to a 1990s-level famine. In food crises, only the governing elite and military personnel have regular access to rice. One or two meals per day are standard during shortages, as rations are often set well below minimum subsistence levels. Hunger is most acute in the spring, when food supplies may run out before the new harvest.

International food donations provide some relief, and many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are operational in North Korea. These agencies provide both food

aid and developmental assistance to people and institutions in North Korea, and their work is seen as critical to the stabilization of the agricultural system in many areas.

Recreation

Taking part in sporting activities is encouraged by the government but is also an inexpensive way to pass the time. It is common to see people playing volleyball or soccer. Soccer is the national sport, although volleyball is played more. Workers often organize sporting events with their co-workers. The most common activities are morning calisthenics and volleyball, which can be played with very little equipment and involve both men and women. Older people often attend *ssirum* events (Korean wrestling), and urban men prefer to watch local soccer matches. Most popular is women's soccer; the national team is top-ranked internationally. Soccer balls and volleyballs are not cheap, but groups of people may own one collectively. Many people also play table tennis and basketball. Sports facilities are plentiful.

Sunday is the worker's day of rest, and family outings and picnics to North Korea's many parks and cultural and historical sites are traditional Sunday activities. Television is popular and widely available, but the selection of channels and content is strictly controlled. Even in Pyöngyang, Chosön Central TV broadcasts only one channel on weekdays (during the afternoon and evening hours) and one extra channel on Sunday.

Retired people have the most leisure time, and men and women tend to take part in different activities. Older women generally base their social lives around visiting friends and family members but usually have less free time, as grandmothers are often expected to raise their grandchildren while their children are working. Retired men often play cards or *chang'gi* (a Korean version of Chinese chess) on the streets or smoke cigarettes while observing passersby. Fishing is popular among retired men in Pyöngyang and other areas, even if the actual fish can be scarce at times. Any fish caught are often very small and are as likely to be cooked over a small fire and eaten on the spot (with some beer or liquor) as to be taken home for later.

Each worker in North Korea is entitled to a vacation of varying length in addition to national holidays held throughout the year. Usually industrial and agricultural workers are given two weeks of vacation time, but agricultural workers are typically unable to afford time away from their fields. When people do take vacations, they tend to spend their time visiting relatives or friends nearby. Visits to a beach or mountain area for a simple holiday spent mainly outdoors are other options. Hot spa resorts are available for the few elites who can afford them. Travel to other cities is possible, but for the most part, the average North Korean is very limited in the range of vacation options available. Permits are needed to travel even internally. International travel for leisure purposes is something available only to the elite. Most North Koreans who travel abroad do so for work and not out of personal interest or for fun.

The Arts

Music and theater play important roles in North Korea's

cultural identity and are closely intertwined with ideological propaganda. Oral histories and national values are transmitted through song, usually accompanied by an ensemble of bamboo flutes, percussion, and stringed instruments. Performances are highly polished, and form is valued over spontaneity or individuality. Movies, plays, and operas, usually with strong political messages, are well attended. The main themes of songs include the homeland, nature, the socialist paradise, and the leaders. Singing styles are conservative with blends of traditional Korean folk music.

Often, literature has strong political undertones as well. Poetry is the principal form; however, North Koreans enjoy literature of many genres. Visual arts and architecture show the influences of traditional as well as Western styles. The Mansudae Art Studio, in Pyŏngyang, is the largest art production center in the country. It employs nearly one thousand artists, most of whom are graduates of Pyŏngyang University. Their artistic works range from traditional Korean ink-on-paper painting, embroidery, and ceramics to oil paintings, bronze sculptures, wood cuts, and charcoal drawings. More modern art forms include *posŏkhwa*, which are paintings made with crushed jewel stones mixed into a paste.

Cinematography is considered the most powerful art. The film industry, which blossomed in the 1970s and 1980s, was supervised for many years by Kim Jong Un (son of Kim Jong Il). The Pyŏngyang International Film Festival biannually showcases films from nations friendly to North Korea. After a brief resurgence in the mid-2000s, North Korean cinematographers have produced no new movies since 2010.

Holidays

Official holidays include New Year's Day, the birthdays of Kim Il Sung (15 Apr.) and Kim Jong Il (16 Feb.), May Day (1 May), Victory Day (27 July), Liberation Day (15 Aug.), Independence Day (9 Sept.), Workers' Party Day (10 Oct.), and Constitution Day (27 Dec.).

Holidays are generally marked by having a barbeque and drinking together. Although holidays are state sponsored, people also sing, dance, play sports and games, and turn the occasion into family time.

Due to his position as founder of the state and "eternal" president, Kim Il Sung's birthday on 15 April is considered the most important day on the national calendar and was officially declared as the Day of the Sun in 1999. To celebrate, many people take part in organized events such as large-scale synchronized dances that take place in cities, in towns, and on farms. These dances generally consist of choreography learned many years previously, set to well-known songs. Occasionally, new songs are introduced, such as the "Song of CNC" (a song dedicated to computer-controlled machining, where CNC stands for Computer Numerical Control) or the song "Steps," about Kim Jong Un—both introduced in 2010. The largest of these events take place in Pyŏngyang and are filmed and broadcast on TV in the evening. People not participating in these dances spend this day relaxing with family and friends. Places associated with Kim Il Sung are frequented on this day, especially his birthplace near Pyŏngyang, his mausoleum

(where he lies in state), and any of the thousands of places he formally visited across the country. Flowers are laid at the many statues of the leader around the country on this holiday and on others.

Liberation Day, on 15 August, commemorates the end of Japanese colonial rule in 1945 and is the only official national holiday shared in North and South Korea. Liberation Day is a significant day for Koreans due to the length and severity of the Japanese presence. During the occupation, use of the Korean language was suppressed and use of Japanese names became mandatory. Therefore, Liberation Day is centered around Korean nationalism. This holiday, like most others, is marked either by taking part in a mass dance, visiting sites associated with the day (generally places Kim Il Sung visited on that day), or relaxing with friends and family. If the anniversary is numerically significant (60th anniversary, for example), larger events are held, such as a military parade in Pyŏngyang. Although North Korea is a military state, military parades do not take place very often.

In addition to national holidays, many commemoration days can be declared holidays if local authorities are satisfied that production will not be significantly disrupted. Although not official, many people, particularly in the countryside, still celebrate traditional holidays, which are calculated using the lunar calendar. The most significant of these is Chusŏk, a harvest festival held on the 15th day of the 8th month of the lunar year. This holiday is marked by eating traditional foods, such as rice cakes, and taking part in or watching sports events, such as traditional Korean wrestling. Chusŏk is not an official state holiday in North Korea due to its links to historical feudalism. However, because the state emphasizes the richness and depth of Korean history, people feel justified in celebrating Chusŏk.

SOCIETY

Government

North Korea is a communist state. At the time of his death in 2011, Kim Jong Il was head of state as the general secretary of the ruling Workers' Party of Korea and as head of the military (officially, the chairperson of the National Defense Commission). After his death, he became the "eternal general secretary" of the Party and "eternal chairman" of the National Defense Commission. Kim Jong Il's son, Kim Jong Un, is now head of state as the first secretary of the Workers' Party of Korea and first chairman of the National Defense Commission. The title of "president" is occupied permanently by Kim Il Sung. An appointed premier (currently Choe Yong Rim) is technically head of government.

The 687-seat Supreme People's Assembly forms the legislature, but it has very little real power. When elections are held, only a single candidate runs for each office. The candidates are nominated by the Workers' Party or a few minor associated parties. Voters can only vote "yes" or "no" for each person, and they generally vote "yes." Voting is seen as a demonstration of political activity rather than part of a competitive democracy. The voting age is 17, and turnout usually is reported as 100 percent.

Economy

As with other key aspects of North Korean society, the government is closely involved in the mobilization of labor. Adults are expected to work at least 40 hours per week and attend various political and production meetings. Technically, workers can earn a variety of supplies, benefits, and gifts from either their employers or the government. However, workers' benefits are constrained by lack of resources. Tightly controlled work teams laboring on farms and in factories are the norm.

Since its inception in 1948, North Korea has changed from an agricultural to a semi-industrialized nation. The means of production are almost completely socialized. Planning for economic development is centralized and set forth by the government in a series of seven-year plans. North Korea has about 80 to 90 percent of all known mineral resources on the Korean Peninsula, and the extraction of coal, iron ore, and other minerals fueled North Korea's past industrial growth. Major industries include mining, steel, textiles, chemicals, cement, glass, and ceramics. However, there is a shortage of light manufactured items (mostly consumer goods). North Korea remains one of Asia's poorest nations as a result of natural disasters, political isolation, and poor management. It is the recipient of large amounts of foreign aid each year. The currency is the North Korean *wŏn* (KPW).

Transportation and Communications

The rail system is the principal means of transportation in North Korea. The subway in Pyŏngyang is efficient and cheap. Few motor vehicles are available to the general population. Most North Koreans usually walk or ride a bus to their destinations. Bicycles, once rare, are now a principal mode of transport for men, but women are not allowed to ride them. Ox carts are common in rural areas.

Communications systems and the media are tightly controlled. In 2001, the number of mobile service subscribers reached 600,000. In December 2009, a new cellular network, Koryo Link, was established with the help of an Egyptian company. The government runs all newspapers and radio and television stations. The internet is not widely available in North Korea, except to certain elites and foreign organizations. However, there is a national intranet system, which can be used to find and share education-related information, that links all the universities in the country.

Education

Considering the country's level of economic development, North Korean schooling is comparatively advanced, with well-trained teachers in most areas. North Korea has more than two hundred universities and colleges, more than four thousand high schools and specialized institutions, and nearly five thousand elementary schools and kindergartens. An 11-year education program is compulsory and free, and illiteracy has been all but eliminated. Women have access to education, and girls are often among the best students. Schools at every level tend to suffer from shortages of basic goods such as pens and paper. Food shortages also prevent some children from attending.

There is a notable gap in the quality of urban and rural schools. In the countryside, tales of school children being sent out to collect wood and gather food for the benefit of the school are widespread. Dedicated teachers are not enough to overcome problems caused by underfunding, and schools in poorer areas are less likely to produce the educational results of those in urban centers.

The school day in North Korea begins around 8 a.m. and finishes early, around 1 p.m. In the afternoon, students take part in clubs that feature various extracurricular activities. Every school has programs for these clubs, which range from traditional (music, sports, and art), to vocational (automotive maintenance and computers), to the obscure (taxidermy). Students who excel in these clubs can apply to attend specialized institutions known as Children's Palaces. Each North Korean city has one of these (Pyŏngyang has two), usually located in a central and prominent location. Students who are accepted to these schools receive advanced training in addition to their normal study.

The socialist and nationalist focus of the North Korean educational system, while supplying the state with skilled and compliant workers, aims to produce uniformity in thought and action, with little room for individuality and diversity. School subjects tend to be politicized; for example, history classes are titled "revolutionary history."

There are universities in every city in the country; some are general schools and others are vocational institutions teaching specialized skills such as engineering, construction, and others. Competition is fierce to be admitted to the two most well-known and well-regarded universities, both of which are in Pyŏngyang: the Kim Il Sung University (founded in 1946) and Kim Chaek University of Science and Technology (named for Kim Il Sung's second-in-command in the early days of his rule). Kim Il Sung University is a general academic school that boasts Kim Jong Il as a former pupil. Kim Chaek University primarily offers classes in technology-based subjects and has a very well-regarded computer laboratory. Many Eastern Europeans studied at Kim Il Sung University from the 1960s to 1980s, and there remain some foreign students (mainly Chinese, Mongolian, and Russian). Despite the politicization of the curriculum, it is regarded as North Korea's best school. Universities cancelled their classes during the academic year of 2011–2012, as most students were sent to their home provinces to help farmers with their crops.

In addition to universities, each city also has "study houses," which offer adults free courses on a range of subjects. People who attend these classes may be trying to gain skills to make them more employable or knowledge in subjects that interest them personally. Companies also use the study houses to train employees. Foreign language and information technology (IT) courses at the Grand People's Study House, in Pyŏngyang, are particularly popular.

Health

Although the healthcare system is extensive and care is free, quality is relatively poor and medicines and supplies are often unavailable. Hospitals lack sufficient electricity and food for patients. Due to malnutrition, the mortality rate for children

younger than age five has doubled since the mid-1990s. The average birth weight is low, and children are growing at about half the normal rate. Prolonged malnutrition in children is beginning to affect long-term mental and physical development. Minor illnesses can turn deadly because of the lack of antibiotics or because people are too weak to combat infections. Tuberculosis and other diseases are spreading.

AT A GLANCE

Contact Information

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POPULATION & AREA

Population	24,589,122 (rank=49)
Area, sq. mi.	46,540 (rank=99)
Area, sq. km.	120,538

DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	NA
Gender inequality rank	NA
Adult literacy rate	99% (male); 99% (female)
Life expectancy	65 (male); 72 (female)

*UN Development Programme, Human Development Report 2012 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).