

Jangmadang - The Market Generation

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Have you heard of Jangmadang? Loosely translated, it means "the Market Generation" and it describes the lifestyle and mindset of the generation that has come of age in North Korea since the famine of the 1990s. In many ways, they are no longer under the ideological or economic thumb of the ruling regime.

*This is from Park Yeon Mi, a refugee from the north, in her book *In Order To Live*:*

"Still, I learned something important from my short time as a market vendor: once you start trading for yourself, you start thinking for yourself. Before the public distribution system collapsed, the government alone decided who would survive and who would starve. The markets took away the government's control. My small market transactions made me realize that I had some control over my own fate. It gave me another taste of freedom."

In the mid-1990s many in North Korea turned to the illegal markets in order to survive. Funny thing is, those who were the best communists and were most loyal to the Kim regime in word and deed, died first. The rebels, the sceptics, and the adventurers created the markets and survived. One of these was Kim Hee Soon (of course, not her real name) and this is her story.

Kim Hee Soon's mom was one of the market pioneers in their home town in the northeastern hinterlands. After watching her own father turn into a bag of bones and pass away, her mom determined that she and her children would survive. It began small with five pitiful-looking, half-rotten sweet potatoes. She had unearthed them almost accidentally when digging an outhouse. But they were edible and so worth their weight in gold. She boiled two and fed them to her ravenous kids for an unexpected evening meal. The other three she bartered to a neighbor for three cups of oil and a large handful of barley. It was a revelation and a way forward. By hustling around, she began to not only feed her kids but also to build up a surplus. She bought an old bicycle with a basket and was able to move around the villages in the district, always with an eye out for anything that could be bought and sold. Several bicycle vendors would meet up at a crossroads, lay out their wares on blankets spread on the ground, and people would come. Of course, someone would always watch for the police. When the coppers approached on foot, the entrepreneurs would throw everything onto the bikes and pedal off.

Some, like Hee Soon's mom, were naturals at it and they branched out into used clothing, shoes, alcohol, and anything that there was a demand for. The markets expanded and sprung up like mountain mushrooms after a spring rain. The local authorities did their best to suppress this decidedly ideologically polluted activity but a full belly trumps ideology every time. It was dangerous and if caught, a marketer faced severe punishment. A bribe into the right hand often mitigated that.

Hee Soon began helping her mother early on and she found that she also had a talent for buying and selling. "How wicked," she thought. Before long, she initiated her own enterprises. Her specialty was

hooch, a kind of homemade alcohol. She scrounged for the basic ingredients, which were some kind of fruit, sugar, and copious amounts of water. It was close to rotgut but had the desired effect and there were always customers.



For a 12-year-old girl, the effect was powerful. By engaging in her own business activities, she became liberated. She made her own choices and would live or die by the results. She was freed from the thought control imposed by the Workers Party of Korea and the ruling Kim family. She began to think for herself and it was exhilarating. On top of that she ate every day and she and her mother became the saviors of their family, as well as many others in the neighborhood. She and the other marketers her own age became the "Market Generation." Hee Soon and her mom followed their dreams and ambitions out of North Korea and into South Korea.

The initial motivation for folks to engage in such dangerous activities was to stave off starvation and that they did. An unexpected result is that they became free. Free from the enforced thought control of the Korean Workers Party and ruling elite. In the beginning they bought and sold the basic necessities of life like food, clothing, and fuel. As the markets expanded, they began to deal in other things like radios, VCRs, and CD players. With an unregistered radio you could listen to forbidden broadcasts from Voice of America and even Christian Broadcasting. South Korean dramas, K-Pop, and popular TV shows from America and other countries, available on CDs and DVDs, opened up the wide world for those who were wicked enough to dare.

I can't help thinking that there is an entire generation that is already free in mind and heart living in North Korea. They are surely longing to fully experience their God-given human rights of freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and freedom of expression. Any negotiation or deal struck with the ruling elites must take into account the hopes and dreams of the North Korean people.