

# Yeon-mi Park: The hopes of North Korea's 'Black Market Generation'

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By Yeon-mi Park May 25, 2014

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SEOUL

I escaped from North Korea in 2007. Two years later, I arrived in Mongolia, along with my mother and five other people. Armed with knives and prepared to kill ourselves, we begged the soldiers who caught us not to send us back to our native country.

Like a lot of North Korean refugees, I would not mind visiting a reformed North Korea one day. I have hope for such a place because while the international community debates how to help North Koreans, change is happening — from within.

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To paraphrase Lenin, things have to get worse before they get better. In the last decades of the 20th century, North Korea's economy went from bad to worse, hitting rock bottom during the [famines of the 1990s](#). To survive, North Koreans began to engage in private market activity, which today accounts for as much as [80 percent](#) of family income. The public distribution system that has provided North Koreans with rations since the 1950s can't compete with the [spontaneous order of the market](#).

There are many changes going on, and it is my generation — often called the Jangmadang, or "[Black Market Generation](#)" — that will make changes permanent. North Korea's **Black Market Generation** has three main characteristics. The first is that it has no devotion to the Kim dynasty. Kim Il Sung founded the country in 1948 and ruled it with an iron fist until his death in July 1994. Born in 1993, I was brainwashed to glorify him and his economic system of "[juche](#)," or national self-reliance — but I

have no memory of him. There are some in my generation who profess admiration for him and his progeny, but they just don't want to lose their "loyal" status under North Korea's government-imposed "songbun" caste system. They are concerned about themselves, not the Kim dynasty.

The second characteristic: Our **Black Market** Generation has had wide access to outside media and information. The private market has provided more than food and clothing — it has also provided TVs, bootleg South Korean movies and K-pop videos, USBs and DVDs. As a girl in North Korea, I saw "Titanic," "Cinderella," "Pretty Woman" and "Snow White" — not to mention WWE wrestling.

As American philosopher Eric Hoffer wrote: "It is not actual suffering but a taste of better things which excites people to revolt." North Koreans who have grown up watching such entertainments as I did and know they are not as dangerous as the regime has claimed for decades will be unlikely to enforce censorship once they are in positions of influence.

Already, seeing movies and music videos from South Korea has inspired many North Korean youngsters to talk openly about wanting to live there. Of course, they will eventually recognize that not all South Koreans live like those they see on screen — but they will find that even lower-class South Koreans live better than most North Koreans.

Non-governmental organizations and others who have managed to get information and movies into North Korea should be proud of themselves: They have had an impact.

The third characteristic of the **Black Market** Generation: We are capitalistic and individualistic. We grew up with markets; we have experienced buying and selling. I recall regularly going shopping with my mother.

This development of markets is important because it undermines the "songbun" of North Korea. With the government in charge of social classifications and food distribution, it has always determined who could acquire wealth and who would starve. The private market removes that from government control. Members of the **Black Market** Generation want to be as wealthy as the people they see in foreign movies.

Based on reports I have heard from refugees who have recently escaped to South Korea, the late Kim Il Sung would not recognize his country's economy today. Politically, the regime still cracks down on dissent and issues meaningless edicts about the evils of capitalism. But it must know: Juche has died, and markets are on the rise.

The **Black Market** Generation of North Koreans will be the one to change the country's society. We know both halves of Korea well. We can lead change from the bottom up. If I ever return to a reformed North Korea, I will be thrilled to meet my peers, as we attempt to bring wealth and freedom to people who were forced into poverty by the Kim dynasty.

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