THE NORTH KOREAN FAMINE

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NORTH KOREAN AGRICULTURE

• After collectivization and reorganization of the countryside into cooperative farms (one for each village) the DPRK concentrated on development of intensive, industrial agriculture
  • Self-sufficiency in agriculture a primary goal
  • Initially in the 1960s: irrigation, electrification, and mechanization
    • By the 1970s most land was being plowed by tractors run by county farm machinery stations
    • Production of grains grew rapidly in the fifties and early sixties, but leveled off as new land available for cultivation declined
KIS 1964: THESES ON THE SOCIALIST RURAL QUESTION IN OUR COUNTRY

- Emphasized technical, cultural and ideological revolutions
  - Peasants are backward and need to be brought up to urban standards
  - Ideological revolution most important
- Emphasized working-class leadership of the peasantry
  - i.e. leadership and assistance by the Party and state
- Emphasized guidance and management of agriculture
  - “steadily bringing the method of management in the agricultural cooperative economy closer to the more advanced method of management of industrial enterprises”
  - This involves “intensive technical guidance in production and the planning and systemization of all management work in an enterprise”
ACHIEVEMENTS IN AGRICULTURE

• Emphasis on irrigation, mechanization, intensive use of agro-chemicals (“chemicalization”), development of hybrid seeds, and rural electrification
  - Rural investment in power, irrigation, and reclamation of new farmland
  - Rural electrification completed by 1974
  - By 1977 70% of plowing was being done by tractor
  - Irrigation increased 6-fold 1954-1988
  - Heavy inputs of fertilizer, herbicide, and insecticide
  - Agricultural infrastructure to develop hybrid seeds responsive to irrigation and fertilizer
  - By mid-1970s caloric intake per capita was adequate and comparable to South Korea
INTERDEPENDENCE OF AGRICULTURE, ENERGY, AND INDUSTRY

- Agriculture depended on industrial input
  - Production of fertilizers, herbicides, and pesticides required imported raw materials (especially petroleum and potash) and use of energy
  - Mechanization required continuous production of new machines and spare parts, as well as fuel to run the machinery
  - Irrigation was not gravity fed, but depended on electric pumping stations to lift water into the fields
    - Up to 1/3 of DPRK electricity went into irrigation systems
  - Inadequate production of coal led peasants to cut trees on the hillsides for fuel, after which KIS suggested in the seventies that steep slopes be planted in crops
DECLINE OF AGRICULTURE BEGAN IN THE LATE 1980S

• Production of grain peaked in 1984, and then declined (down 20% by 1993)
• Why?
  • Inherent inefficiencies of collective agriculture?
    • But collective agriculture changed little during this period
    • Pushed them over the brink, but decline preceded natural disasters
  • Loss of trade with socialist block (1991-1993)?
    • Pushed them over the brink, but decline preceded 1989 dissolution of socialist block
  • Environmental degradation?
    • Over chemicalization can lead to acidification of soil, and loss of humus that creates the soil’s natural fertility
    • Deforestation left North Korea vulnerable to flooding and mud slides when heavy rains fall
MODEL OF AGRICULTURAL DECLINE

• 1980s
  • Limits of industrial agricultural model reached
  • Marginal returns on investments in irrigation and chemicalization had reached zero or less
  • Little land available for reclamation
  • Steep slopes were losing their fertility to erosion
• Early 1990s
  • Loss of trade with socialist block was a devastating blow to industry and then agriculture
    • Loss of imported fuel meant tractors couldn’t be run or repaired
    • Shortages of fuel meant electricity for irrigation was inadequate
    • Production of high-quality seed faltered, meaning farmers had to put more seed on the field to get the same production
    • Shortages of imported raw materials (petroleum, potash) hindered production of balanced fertilizers
DEATH OF KIM IL SUNG

• 1994.7.8 KIS dies
• 10 day mourning period until July 19th funeral announced, but KJI delayed until 20th
• KIS’s body placed in Kūmsusan Palace “sadang”
• 1997 Moranbong shrine erected for “ch’umo” (like taesang)
  • Kūmsusan Palace becomes “Kūmsuan Memorial Palace”
  • April 15th declared “Sun Days” 태양절
  • Dating Change to Chuch’e 1 (1912)
KŬMSUSAN MEMORIAL PALACE
KIM JONG IL’S SUCCESSION

• Before KIS’s death
  • 1992 KJI KPA ‘Marshal’ 조선인민군초고사령관
  • 1993 Chairman of National Defense Com.

• After KIS’s death
  • 1995.1.1 New Years Message “Military-First”
  • 1997 (following “end of three year mourning”) KWP General Secretary “by special announcement”
    • (NB supposed to be elected in plenary meeting of the Party CC but no such meeting is known to have been held since December 1993)
  • 1998 promulgation of new constitution
DECLINE OF INDUSTRY AND AGRICULTURE IN EARLY 1990S

- Lack of petroleum led to lack of coal
- Lack of coal led to lack of electricity
- Lack of electricity led to lack of irrigation (and fertilizer)
- Lack of petroleum and potash led to lack of fertilizer and fuel for farm machinery
- Lack of fertilizer, machinery (and fuel), seed, irrigation led to falls in productivity
- Fall in natural soil productivity due to over fertilization compounded problems
INITIAL POLICY REACTION TO AGRICULTURAL DECLINE

• 1993.12 DPRK admitted that the 3rd Seven-Year Plan had not achieved its goals

• Government reaction
  • Modest reforms
    • Increased scale of private plots from 80 to 120 square meters
    • Frequency and scope of farmer's markets expanded (allowed to trade grain)
  • Intensify traditional agricultural policies
    • Expand acreage seeded in grain (even if not suitable)
    • Shift into more high-yield rice and corn
    • Maximize industrial inputs (when possible)—more fertilizer
    • Intensify double-cropping and dense planting
    • Bring marginal and steeply sloped land into production
WEATHER DISASTERS COMBINED WITH ECOLOGICAL DECLINE

• 1994 Hail storms in No and So Hwanghae
• 1995-6 floods in July/August (monsoon season)
  • Aggravated to deforestation
  • Destroyed crops and irrigation facilities, roads and storage
  • Erosion of hillsides and silting of rivers and irrigation facilities
    hindering recovery
• 1997 drought
• 1998 weather improvement didn’t lead to improved crops
FIGURE 2.3. Estimates of North Korean Grain Production, 1982–2005

WHAT CAUSES FAMINE?

- Famines are more common in authoritarian states than democracies?
  - Why? Because in democracies the plight of the foodless sets into motion government and non-governmental organizations that find food elsewhere and provide it to people
  - Commercial food import
  - International aid
  - Distribution to people who most need it
    - This usually means to people who lack the means to buy food on the market
    - In a centrally planned system with government distribution, however, certain groups may be favored over others
PUBLIC DISTRIBUTION SYSTEM

• Each province (plus P’yŏngyang, Namp’o, and Kaesŏng) has a Food Administration Department
  • Each county has a Food Administration Section and a warehouse that supplies a few institutions directly but otherwise distributes food to local Public Distribution Centers
  • Each PDC serves 1,500-3,000 families
  • County warehouses are controlled by the County People’s Committee (Party functionaries and government staff)
  • Rations varied by occupation and position in the hierarchy
  • PDS prices were highly subsidized so that market prices (when even available) were 300x higher
DIFFERENTIAL PRIVILEGES

- Military, secret police, high ranking bureaucrats, and those engaged in heavy labor had higher rations.
- Top ranks got their rations through the Party or special government supplies.
- Military has its own, separate distribution system.
- State and cooperative farmers retain part of their crop for personal consumption (and have access to private plots).
- PDS thus supplied about 60-70% of the population.
  - Children, elderly and disabled had the lowest food priority.
  - Prisoners (about 1% of the population) deliberately given little.
  - Sŏngbun affects one’s success and thus indirectly access to food.
    - Family social, political, and occupational background (29 distinct groups grouped into “core, wavering, and hostile classes”)


BREAKDOWN OF PDS

• After 1987 when Soviet aid stopped rations cut by 10%
• 1991 “Let’s eat two meals a day” campaign
• 1992 rations cut another 10% and PDS food distributions began to get erratic
• By 1994 almost 64% of people reported erratic distributions and were getting less than half their food from the PDS
UNFOLDING OF FAMINE

• 1994—drop of imports of maize from China and poor harvest in northeast
  • Northeast highly urbanized and thus dependent on PDS (Hamhŭng, Ch’ŏngjin)
  • Initially tried to squeeze farmers for more grain, but this backfired
  • KJI saw “hoarding”

• Mortality
  • Highest among youngest and oldest
  • About 1/5 of the population elite enough to not be exposed to starvation
  • Most responsible total estimate 600,000 to 1 million deaths with urban areas in the northeast the hardest hit
FIGURE 7.7: Wasting
FOREIGN AID

- 1995.8 DPRK made an official request for humanitarian assistance
- Massive aid 1995-2008
THE ARDUOUS MARCH

- 1996.1.1 Joint Editorial in the Rodong Sinmun
  - ‘모자라는 식량을 함께 나눠먹으며 일본군에 맞서 투쟁한 항일 빨치산의 누굴겨운 고난과 불굴의 정신력’ 을 상기하자
  - Let us remember the ‘indomitable spiritual strength and heartrending hardship of the anti-Japanese partisans who struggled against the Japanese army while sharing with each other their meager rations’
  - ‘고난의 행군’ 정신으로 어려움을 헤쳐나가자
  - Let us push aside difficulties with the spirit of the ‘arduous march’

- 1998 began using image of “socialist forced march” for economic construction along with introduction of new constitution
INTERNAL DISORDER

• 1993-6 Strengthen State Council
  • 정무원책임제—start with “reality” 현실
• Travel restrictions lifted to allow urban residents to travel to cooperative farms to seek to buy food, or to forage in the mountains
• 1996 Kim Jong Il “State of Anarchy” speech at Kimdae
  • Criticizes Party for ineffectiveness
  • Praises military and associates himself primarily with this—saying economic affairs are for others
  • “If you say food problems solve themselves, then only peasant markets and traders become prosperous, self-profitism wells up in people, and the party’s class fortress might collapse.”
• 1997.4.3 Continues to criticize Party in State Council
WHY DELAYED DPRK RESPONSE?

• Hypothesis 1: US and ROK didn’t understand DPRK’s nuclear program as “call for help”?  
  • Yet DPRK continuously tried to hide the problem
• Hypothesis 2: hardliners and softliners in DPRK couldn’t agree  
  • Selig Harrison evidence, and KJI’s Kimdae speech
• Hypothesis 3: during 1991-2 both KIS and KJI were shielded from knowledge by bureaucrats  
  • Oberdorfer says KJI didn’t know until Kang Sŏng-san went to him directly in 1993  
  • KJI did complain about yoryŏngjuŭi (using rough estimates to protect your back)
GAUSE’S ANALYSIS

• Hardline elements tied Kim Jong Il to past failed policies?
  • Gause argues that Kim Jong Il’s authority was probably not constrained
  • Kim maintained control through parallel channels
    • One channel through the formal heads of agencies
    • One channel through his closest aids who also interacted with the agencies
• Kim’s “state of anarchy speech” blamed the administration and the Party, and concluded that only the military was competent
FAMINE DECLARED ENDED IN 2000

• 2000.1.1 Joint Editorial
• 우리 인민의 토쟁으로 여러 해째 계속된 여려운 행군이 마침내 ‘구보(驅步)행군’ 단계에 접어들었다
• Through our people’s struggle the difficult march of the last few years has finally reached the stage of ‘double time march’
• Estimates of deaths 1996-2000 range from 350,000 to 1 million or more
  • Northeastern industrial cities were especially hard hit (Chŏngjin, Hamhŭng)