

## **Social (Im)mobility and Bureaucratic Failings: Family Background and the Songbun System in North Korea**

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### **Abstract**

This article argues that North Korea's system for family background registration, *songbun*, has historically been more complex than commonly believed. Using oral testimonies, it shows that the registration process, as seen from a grassroots perspective, involved and likely still involves a great deal of social turmoil. The essay focuses on the period before the famine of the 1990s, often not sufficiently investigated in scholarship on North Korean society. The *songbun* registration process, by contrast, constitutes a chaotic, messy chapter in North Korean social history, calling the narrative of stability into question. This article also situates North Korea in the broader history of state-building, showing that attempts by states to classify the population and make it legible often involve a great deal of chaos, flaws, and dynamic change. Cataloging the population along lines of political order was not merely a project of sheer repression, but also one of scientific, rational and forward-looking state-building. Although some citizens manipulated the process to their benefit, several interviewees attested to worse outcomes due to bureaucratic mistakes and re-investigations of their *songbun* by the state.

Around the late-1950s, the North Korean state launched a massive endeavor to catalogue the family background of the entire population, and classify each individual on a ladder of political loyalty known as *songbun*: a three-tier classification scheme grouping citizens into core, wavering, and hostile classes based on their family's class background. Throughout the 1960s, 70s, 80s and beyond, a significant proportion of the population saw their lives uprooted as the creation of the *songbun* classification scheme moved them several levels down on the social class ladder. Many were deported from the relative comfort of the cities to the rugged countryside as the state "uncovered" their enemy class family backgrounds, sometimes based on

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inaccurate information. Because upward mobility was and remains rare, this chaotic, disruptive process left a multi-generational mark on North Korean society.

This article argues that the process of creating North Korea's songbun system is a story of social turmoil and grassroots disruption, and one that is largely missing from the historical scholarship on North Korea to date. It demonstrates this claim using oral history interviews and documentary analysis.<sup>1</sup> The 1960s, 1970s and 1980s were decades of social upheaval for tens of thousands, and perhaps hundreds of thousands, in North Korea, who had their family background registrations changed in recurring rounds of messy investigations. With such a massive task as cataloging the family ties and background of the entire population, operational errors were inevitable. While some individuals were able to take advantage of cracks in the bureaucracy and use personal connections and bribes to escape social downfall, these small evasions were coping mechanisms rather than outright resistance, and most people conformed to their new places in the social hierarchy simply because they had little other choice.<sup>2</sup>

The portrayal of the creation of North Korea's songbun system offered in this manuscript makes two main interventions. First, it seeks to contribute to a more nuanced, complex understanding of North Korea in the decades between the end of the Korean War (1950–1953) and the famine of the 1990s. Much scholarship of this period, including classic works by Robert Scalapino, Chong-sik Lee, and Suh Dae-sook, focus on the state, regime leadership, and political history.<sup>3</sup> More recent work by scholars like Sonia Ryang, Chung Byung-ho, and Heonik Kwon, focuses on the role of literary texts and cultural productions to examine charismatic power in governance and state-society relations.<sup>4</sup> Social historians such as Bruce Cumings and Suzy Kim examine the Korean War's legacy for state-building in North Korea, as well as grassroots governance in the pre-war period.<sup>5</sup> These works, while highly valuable, do not cover the full

period during which the state's post-war efforts at creating social order and classification played out, leaving us with an incomplete understanding of how history unfolded at the grassroots. The present historiography risks giving readers the impression that not much happened in North Korea between the Korean War and the famine of the 1990s. In fact, while the famine is often seen as the watershed between efficiency and disorder in North Korean governance, faults, weaknesses, and inefficiencies in North Korean governance predate the famine. As is shown here, much of the turmoil from below experienced by North Korean citizens occurred in the 1970s and 1980s, a period where there is relatively little grassroots-level social history written on the country.<sup>6</sup> This manuscript, therefore, aims to fill in some of the missing history of this period.

Second, the manuscript situates North Korea's experience in the larger historical processes of fascist and communist state-building that were unfolding worldwide during this period, and thereby sheds light on the kind of state that North Korea has been, and arguably is today. North Korea's system, at least prior to the famine of the 1990s, is best described as Stalinist with strong influence from traditional social values.<sup>7</sup> Despite horrific outcomes for many, oppressive systems such as Stalinism are best understood as utopian, forward-looking projects striving to create a fully rational, scientifically based social order, as Stephen Kotkin has shown through his study of the Soviet town of Magnitogorsk.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, wartime Japan's so-called "reform bureaucrats" aimed to create, through what Janis Mimura terms "techno-fascism", a totalistic state where technocratic administration would fuse military and bureaucratic planning agencies to create an economically productive and hierarchical national community.<sup>9</sup>

Thus this article seeks to situate North Korea as part of a larger, historical tradition of state-building, legitimacy generation, and repression – but at the same time, to show the turmoil

and limitations that are inherent to these historical processes, as grand ambitions falter on the ground and processes of creating administrative capacity involve a great deal of contestation, evasion, disruption, and difficulty for both the regime and ordinary citizens.<sup>10</sup> By attempting to catalogue the entire population in an ideological hierarchy, the North Korean state quite literally strived to see its citizenry through administrative, bureaucratic glasses – while the cracks in its effort left enough space for citizens to manipulate the state to their advantage, without overturning in any fundamental way the new order that the state sought to create.<sup>11</sup>

### *Data and Method*

The evidence for the arguments made in this manuscript come primarily from oral history interviews, supplemented by a few key documents. Oral histories are critically important given that I am interested not just in characterizing state policy as it existed on paper, but in understanding how citizens at the grassroots *experienced* the process of creating the songbun system.

This article draws upon deep, qualitative interviews with ten individuals. These were primarily recruited through friendship networks and contacts in the defector community and selected out of a larger sample of 36 interviews because they went into greater depth than others about their experiences with the songbun system, particularly prior to the 1990s. As Table 1 below shows, interviewees vary in *songbun* status, allowing me to examine how the evolution of the system has impacted people of both low and high-status backgrounds. The majority hails (at least for part of their lives) from the northern regions of the country, consistent with the larger population of North Korean defectors residing in South Korea but comprises a fairly diverse

range of social backgrounds. Some details about the interviewees were not stated outright but presumed from other statements in their narratives.

**Table 1: Oral History Interviewees**

<b>Name (pseudonym)</b>	<b>Birth year</b>	<b>Home region</b>	<b>Socio-economic status</b>	<b>Songbun status</b>
Kim Kwan-il	1954	Pyōngyang (capital city)	First rejected from party membership but later awarded	Medium <sup>12</sup>
Chu Sin-il	1954	Near Hyesan, Ryanggang Province	Parents were Party members; Chu worked for MPS within a high-status military unit protecting the leadership family	Good
Pak Jang-ri	1966	Chōngjin, North Hamgyōng Province	Landowner family background	Initially good, classified as bad after re-investigation
Ri Young-hee	1966	First Pyōngyang, then North Hamgyōng Province	Comfortable childhood, parents were Party members	Good (but forcibly relocated to North Hamgyōng Province)
Ri Jae-min	1953	Near Chōngjin, North Hamgyōng Province	Subject to hard labor in a coal mine after new family background information uncovered in songbun investigation, later able to join the Party	Bad
Kang Kyōng-ha	1978	South Hamgyōng Province	Father could not join the Party; erroneously	Bad

			admitted to vocational training college	
Ch'ae Kyōng-wŏn	1969	Hyesan, Ryanggang Province	Some higher education; worked as a propaganda announcer	Medium
Kim Yōng-suk	1981	Pochon County, Ryanggang Province	No Party members in immediate family (presumed)	Medium (presumably wavering class)
Yi Seul-gi	1968	Ryanggang Province (derived from context)	No Party members in immediate family (presumed)	Bad (one parent born in China)
Han Mi-sun	1968	Hyesan, Ryanggang Province	No Party members in immediate family (presumed)	Bad (child of an ethnic Korean immigrant from Japan)

Most interviewees did not specify their exact songbun category, but all knew from experience whether they belonged to privileged or non-privileged categories. As I discuss further below, interviewees would often speak about their “good” or “bad” status in general terms, without specifying their exact songbun category, which many were likely unaware of. Interview questions were specific but open-ended and often began with the interviewee’s childhood experiences and the like. Conversations often went on from there to other circumstances and memories from their younger years. By asking specific questions about concrete circumstances, the present author sought to avoid steering the interviewees’ responses, and questions of a normative nature (e.g. “how did you feel about Kim Jong-il?”) were avoided entirely. All interviews were conducted in Korean, and some lasted for a couple of hours, while others went on for several hours over multiple meeting occasions. With a few exceptions, all interviews were recorded and transcribed in Korean. The present author presented [gender masked for

anonymization] self as a researcher studying everyday life and state surveillance in North Korea with a particular focus on the period prior to the famine. Most interviewees were highly concerned with their identities not being revealed, and all names in this article are pseudonyms.

*North Korea's Approach to Family Background: Songbun in Comparative Context*

In North Korean parlance, the most basic meaning of songbun is socio-political family background. At the same time, it is also a bureaucratic system of population registration. Moreover, as I explore further below, it is also often used in everyday speech to denote social privilege on the one hand, and low social status on the other. This article uses the term interchangeably when discussing all these contexts, with clarifications when necessary.

Academic literature on songbun is sparse. Hyŏn In-ae provides the most extensive scholarly description on how the system works and the dynamics of historical, structural change of the institution, and argues that the system has weakened significantly in the wake of North Korea's marketization.<sup>13</sup> Kim Byŏng-no and Kim Sŏng-ch'ŏ's convincingly describe songbun as the foundation of North Korea's unequal social structures, and traces its historical roots to the Korean War.<sup>14</sup> Robert Collins provides a thorough, English-language overview of the system, focusing on the systematic discrimination that it causes.<sup>15</sup> This article seeks to add a dimension of social history to this robust body of descriptive scholarly works. The testimonies from North Koreans who resettled in South Korea give new insights into the dynamics of the songbun system, particularly in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, decades otherwise often glanced over by the historical literature.

Historically, family background has played a significant role for social and political advancement in other communist or authoritarian contexts, but these practices have not been as

persistent, permanent, or institutionalized as North Korea's.<sup>16</sup> In the Soviet Union under Stalin, the families of victims of de-kulakization and purges were often deported and punished together with their spouses or parents, but the state employed such practices chiefly during specific campaigns and periods of intense social rupture, and not as permanent, bureaucratic practice.<sup>17</sup> Although family background was often seen as politically significant, no other communist state has systematically recorded and used family background to create a social class ladder. Other Soviet allies, and the Soviets themselves, saw the system as a strange anomaly. In 1964, the Hungarian ambassador to Pyöngyang reported to the Hungarian foreign ministry about an "incomprehensible paranoia" against people with suspect family backgrounds. The Soviets, the ambassador wrote, shared this "amazement."<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, the songbun system likely contributed to North Korea's survival while most other socialist states fell in the early 1990s. The threat of collective punishment of entire families for one individual's suspected wrongdoing has certainly been a powerful deterrent against social disobedience. Through the songbun system, moreover, the North Korean government holds immense amounts of data on each citizen, enabling it to take pre-emptive action against social threats. While the songbun often made life chaotic for people whose status was downgraded, it may have contributed to social stability and political control on the whole.

Under Mao, the Chinese state recorded people's family backgrounds during land reform in the late 1940s, and much like North Korea, dispatched teams around the country to re-investigate and "uncover" previously hidden class enemies in the 1960s.<sup>19</sup> The process of social class labeling in Maoist China was, like songbun in North Korea, often chaotic, arbitrary and riddled with mistakes.<sup>20</sup> However, social class labeling in Maoist China primarily happened through campaigns that were often brutal but not temporary, and the Chinese state did not



construct a full bureaucracy tasked with maintaining people's family background records. The Chinese government, moreover, essentially did away with the hereditary nature of the system during the post-Mao reforms in the late-1970s, and reassessed classifications of those who had been wronged by corrupt and sloppy investigation officials in the 1960s.<sup>21</sup>

Family background and social advancement being closely intertwined is also not a new tradition on the Korean peninsula, and only those from good families could advance in the bureaucracy during the *Chosŏn* Dynasty (1372–1908).<sup>22</sup> Chosŏn, however, was not a modern state with the same ambitions for governance as that of North Korea. Still, this precedent may have facilitated social and bureaucratic acceptance for the strong role of family background in governance in North Korea.

As the comparative cases show, processes of family background registration are relatively common, often chaotic, and change over time. Though no examples match up to the scale and scope of North Korea's songbun, this comparative overview helps us raise important questions about the current conceptions of the system.

### *Songbun in Practice: Changes over Time*

The songbun registration process in North Korea built on earlier efforts at registering the population but extended further than any ordinary census. Even before North Korea was formally founded as a state, in 1946, the nascent government began to conduct a census of the population, as any modern state would have. According to Hyŏn In-ae, this period stretched till 1963. Only after that, in 1964, the state began to divide citizens into classes of political loyalty.<sup>23</sup>

The testimony of Kim Kwan-il<sup>24</sup> shows that the tasks of an ordinary census and songbun investigations were not always entirely separable. Kim is the only interviewee for this project who directly recalled the time when state functionaries came to record his family origins:<sup>25</sup>

*“I have a memory from when I was in 1<sup>st</sup> grade [in primary school]... There were people who got mobilized to conduct the registration process, they came looking for us at home... The whole basis of the process was the chokpo [traditional Korean family tree] going back to the Japanese imperialist era. They would go around to families and tell them to write down their family going back to your grandfather... They would ask: who was your grandfather?, what was he up to?... Later they started verifying all the details, and even if it was all lies, it didn't matter as long as there were no witnesses [to correct the record]... All in all, they came by not just once, but around ten times in the early- to mid-1960s.”<sup>26</sup>*

In truth, the government already had much of this information gathered about people who applied for Worker's Party (WPK) membership, since their family backgrounds were investigated from much earlier on.<sup>27</sup> The emphasis on weeding out improper elements also came before the formal creation of songbun classes. In 1957, the standing committee of the Party adopted a formal decision to launch a large-scale hunt for counterrevolutionary elements, and search out, for example, those with a history of anti-communist activities. One year later, in 1958, management of the task centralized under the powerful Organization and Guidance Department (OGD) of the Worker's Party.<sup>28</sup>

In the late-1950s, stories abounded of people having their pasts “uncovered”.<sup>29</sup> Wartime activities were of special interest in these investigations, and the state was especially suspicious

against those whose families fled south or cooperated with the enemy.<sup>30</sup> In February of 1964, the Party's Central Committee decided to formally divide the population into three categories of political loyalty, marking the final creation of the songbun class structure.<sup>31</sup>

Since then, the state has launched several new, targeted investigations of the people's family background, particularly at times of social change. In the late 1950s until early 1960s, around 70,000 people (15,000 families) were deported to forced labor camps and penal labor colonies in the countryside as a result of the investigations.<sup>32</sup> The state deemed some three million deemed part of potentially hostile class and placed them under special surveillance.<sup>33</sup> Between 1967 and 1970, the state further refined the categorical divisions to add 51 sub-divisions to the three main class categories. The purpose was to keep especially close track of the so-called enemy share of the population and pre-empt any potential resistance.

Between 1973 and 1976, when Kim Jong-il became director of the OGD, he began a purge of WPK members based on songbun.<sup>34</sup> During the time, around 300,000 people lost their Party memberships and 500,000 were deported within the country, generally from urban centers to the less hospitable countryside.<sup>35</sup> In 1980, the state re-investigated relatives of defectors to South Korea and other countries (then much fewer than in the 1990s and 2000s), and in 1981, ethnic Korean immigrants from Japan were targeted for special investigation.

In theory, Kim Jong-il was a staunch critic of the songbun system. In a 1971-speech, he severely criticized Party officials for discriminating people based on family background, calling it a vestige from Japanese colonialism.<sup>36</sup> Many whose background was classified as "complicated" did not even know what wrongs their grandparents had committed, Kim rightly pointed out, and at any rate, most had come into the embrace of the Party.<sup>37</sup> Kim stated outright that "songbun and family background environment cannot be the basis for evaluating a

person,”<sup>38</sup> and said to grab the hands of people whose grandparents may have committed wrongs, and go forward together.

In practice, however, there is little evidence that Kim’s words were sincere. There is reason to believe that the leadership tried to de-emphasize the importance of songbun in cadre recruitment in the 1970s and 80s to enhance efficiency.<sup>39</sup> However, in all likelihood, speeches such as Kim was first and foremost an attempt to appear benevolent in the eyes of the public by criticizing songbun-based discrimination, and shift any negative public sentiment from the leaders, onto lower-level officials. The system continued to operate and evolve. Throughout the 1980s, investigations became more rigorous and intensive as Kim Jong-il ascended to power in the North Korean state, and any potential or imagined enemies had to be outrooted. The state made songbun records digital in 2003.<sup>40</sup>

The Ministry of People’s Security (MPS), North Korea’s police bureau, is in charge of fixing and keeping up records of the citizen’s songbun. All records are kept secret and people are registered from birth. Dedicated departments for songbun exist both at the central ministry, as well as at each province (*do*) and special city level (*t’ŭkpyŏlsi*), and at each city (*si*)-, county (*kun*)-, and ward (*kuyŏk*)-level MPS headquarters.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, each village (*ri*)- and neighborhood (*dong*)-levels police office (*punjuso*) has an officer in charge specifically of the personal files of people living within the district, though the information they handle is mainly administrative.<sup>42</sup> Songbun files are kept at the MPS offices both at the city- and province-levels.<sup>43</sup>

The personnel in charge of actually conducting investigations, *tŭngnok poanwŏn*, are agents from the county-level MPS bureau for songbun registrations. They solicit information from local *punjuso* officers, as well as from the neighborhood People’s Unit heads

(*inminbanjang*),<sup>44</sup> the security officer (*poanwǒn*) (North Korea's police equivalent) at each person's workplace, other security officers of similar rank, among others.<sup>45</sup> As all these functionaries in turn have informant networks of their own, the total number of people involved in the process is vast.

Each person's songbun is supposedly fixed at age 17 when they first receive an ID-card, and later re-scrutinized upon release from army service.<sup>46</sup> The ledger is routinely checked and updated every year. Cases where re-examination of someone's songbun leads to upward advancement are extremely rare. Instead, the main purpose of the re-examinations is to ensure that new criminal or otherwise suspicious acts by relatives are noted and reflected in each person's songbun ledger, such as defections to South Korea.<sup>47</sup>

### *Songbun as State-Building*

From the point of view of the state, classifying the population along lines of socio-economic background was not an oppressive endeavor. Rather, the design of the system shows that the state's intention was to euphemistically create a map of sorts of the population and make it easier to read. During the Korean War, people moved across the peninsula to such a great extent that both North and South Korea faced, at the end of the war, a population it knew relatively little about.<sup>48</sup> In order to govern and mold the people, the state needed first to know, understand and register it. Songbun is, from the government's point of view, a highly rational and scientific system.

North Korea is one of many countries in modern history that have attempted to catalogue and make the population legible. Indeed, the ability to gather information about the population has generally been part and parcel of modern state-building and governance. Contrary to the case

of North Korea and songbun, enhanced capacity to gather information has often come in *parallel* with democratic developments such as the extension of the franchise.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, legibility is a central tenet of social and economic development, as any state that wishes to collect taxes has historically needed to keep some sort of records of the makeup of the population.<sup>50</sup>

Scott, however, points to a few crucial differences that distinguish authoritarian or totalitarian states that seek to make society legible. Such regimes often come into power with a self-perceived mandate to radically transform society along utopian lines.<sup>51</sup> These regimes have often harbored a belief in the potency of rational science and technology to achieve almost any social goal, and officials have been able to launch devastating projects of social transformation thanks to their largely unfettered power.<sup>52</sup> In this context, it is not surprising that the North Korean government's songbun manual calls investigation methods "scientific."<sup>53</sup> Constructing the songbun system was one way of organizing the population, just like economic resources, along more rational and ideologically correct lines.

Chu Sin-il, a former employee of the MPS, provided an enlightening example of the reasoning behind the songbun system. He was of relatively privileged songbun stock in 1954 and was a soldier for most of his life. Both his parents were Party members, and often served in positions of confidence, such as leaders of mass organization units and work teams.<sup>54</sup> Unlike other interviewees, Chu did not portray the process of joining the Party as corrupt. Others highlighted the role of bribery and contacts, but Chu spoke about studying hard and being loyal. He worked for several years in the 1980s in the extended military unit in charge of the safety of the North Korean leader, which comprises several military bases around the country tasked with seeing to security whenever the leader would visit or travel through the area. Positions there require almost perfect songbun, and Chu was thoroughly vetted.<sup>55</sup>

In our conversation, Chu explained the songbun system as reasonable and necessary. You cannot know who someone really is, deep-down, only by talking to them, Chu reasoned. Unless you thoroughly investigate someone's background and social environment, you cannot really know if someone may be a spy. Chu's reasoning likely reflects of broader view that exists in North Korea, that a person's social environment *does* reveal, or at least indicate, their political loyalty. The most central task of the songbun system is to root out spies, and to that end, it is a necessary structure.<sup>56</sup>

The government's manual for songbun registration reflects similar thinking. It was published by the MPS in 1993, around the time that North Korea lost crucial financial subsidies from the Soviet Union and China, and regime credibility was perhaps under greater threat than ever due to widespread social disorder and starvation.<sup>57</sup> By reading the manual "backwards", however, we can glean information about the system earlier as well. The problems that the manual describe were likely not exclusive to the early-1990s. Most had little to do with the changing circumstances at the time but, rather, stem from the organization and mission of the system itself.

The manual states that the "citizen registration project" is the foundation of a safe society, and integral to the class struggle. Class basis, family bonds, the individual's socio-political environment and position are all factors that automatically determine how reliable someone is in the present.<sup>58</sup> This is what the manual means when it calls the endeavor "scientific."<sup>59</sup> Because of the emphasis on social environment, it is only logical that class foundation should be automatically passed on from parents to children.<sup>60</sup>

The manual's view of two demographic groups, ethnic Korean immigrants from Japan and people with roots in the southern part of Korea (prior to the division), illuminates this

rational, “scientific view” with particular clarity. Both groups are singled out for special scrutiny by the manual.<sup>61</sup> It is well known that the government regarded both groups with a great deal of suspicion from the earliest days of North Korea’s state, and the manual confirms this.<sup>62</sup> These suspicions are best understood as scientific in the North Korean sense. If socio-political environment determines the worldview and attitudes of a person, then surely those with experiences from other societies posed especially large threats.

The publication of the manual is itself significant. North Korea’s international environment also went through massive changes, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, and China’s establishment of diplomatic relations with South Korea.<sup>63</sup> Indeed, on the very first written page, the authors hint at such difficulties when they emphasize “the struggle against powerful enemies (*taejökt'ujaeng*)” in the conditions and “demands of development in the present (*hyönsilbaljönüi yogu*)”.<sup>64</sup> As the economy broke down, it became all the more crucial for the state and security agencies to guard against social instability.

Moreover, the publication of a standardized, detailed manual suggests that the process was not standardized enough in the past. As several interviewees for this article attest to, the process was often arbitrary, messy, and inconsistent. Individual state agents in charge of the process had enormous power and the process left much room for abuse. Reading the manual as an historical document sheds light on a number of problems that the state sought to remedy.

First, the manual gives detailed instructions for how people should be sorted into categories such as poor farmer background on the one end, or land or capital owner stock on the other end. This background division, in turn, determines the “class foundation”, or background, of each person.<sup>65</sup> Historically, it has always been immensely difficult for socialist regimes to



determine differences between propertied and oppressed classes, not least in agriculture, because such categories often could not be applied uniformly across countries.<sup>66</sup>

The manual is remarkably specific, and often specifies detailed numbers to help with proper classification. For example, someone's songbun will be classified as a "wealthy farmer (*punong*)" if they came from a household that,

*"[L]eased over two but under five chǒngbo (between 19,835 and 49,587 square meters) of land while running an enterprise, or worked for an administrative institution while living off of land rental fees as [his] primary source of income..."<sup>67</sup>*

Or:

*"Someone held 4 chǒngbo (about 39,669 square meters) and farmed it within the family, and then after [his] grandfather and father passed away, could not make the effort and gave one chǒngbo to his in-laws and two to his uncle, and continued farming without receiving land rent, and then after liberation, had 3 chǒngbo (about 29,752 square meters) confiscated. The songbun of such a person, taking into consideration his standard of living, the extent of his exploitation, shall be classified either as a wealthy mid-level farmer (*puyu chungnong*) or mid-level farmer (*chungnong*).<sup>68</sup>*

This all seems virtually impossible to determine. How could citizen registration officers, several decades after colonial rule ended, be certain about the extent of a person's land ownership? How could, for example, someone seeking a more favorable status prove, with 7

witnesses to back them up, that their grandfather in fact did not own four chǒngbo of land, but merely three? Or how could one demonstrate, with certainty, the specific form of labor that their grandparent performed in the 1930s or 1940s, to make them “worker” stock in the songbun registry?<sup>69</sup>

On the one hand, the criteria had to be specific to make the process less arbitrary. Only with exact measurements could the state accurately categorize people with little room for errors in judgment. On the other hand, this sort of information was likely impossible to verify fully ten to fifteen years after the fact, and even more so when several decades had passed. Still, in many cases where people had their songbun re-evaluated and downgraded, the government claimed to have verified and discovered information about conditions several decades prior. The process set standards that simply could not reasonably be upheld. In many cases, although no interviewees knew for sure certain, people likely had their songbun status downgraded based on testimonies by people who could not reasonably be fully confident about such details so many decades after the fact, and who may have had ulterior motives of their own, such as jealousy or other personal motivations.

Second, the manual suggests strongly suggests that registration officers and others involved in the process routinely abused their positions of power. It states, for example, that interviewing a subject is one of the most important ways of gathering information. At the same time, it warns agents not to question the subject in an abusive manner using foul language. Of course, had abuse not been a problem to begin with, none of this would have needed pointing out.

Agents, moreover, should not meet with people from “complicated” class backgrounds without first speaking with a representative of the Party organization in charge of them,

presumably the Party cell at their workplace or the equivalent, and studying their personal files closely. When meeting a female subject, agents must do so together with a high-level cadre, or a trusted member of the core class, presumably to avoid sexual harassment or other unseemly behavior.<sup>70</sup>

Reading the manual backwards, a picture emerges of a highly dysfunctional system with a great deal of abuse by its functionaries. Corruption and arbitrary state abuse are behaviors usually associated with famine- and post-famine era North Korea, but the manual bears clear evidence that such behavior was rife also at a time of relative stability.

Third, it seems that in the decades leading up to the manual's publication, the bureaucratic and administrative routines for record-keeping were also messy. The manual goes into great detail about which forms to use for what specific part of the registration process, and even specifies that the citizen registration ledger of each person must be filled out by pencil, presumably so that details can easily be altered.<sup>71</sup> It details everything from how and where the materials should be stored, to how files should be indexed and catalogued.<sup>72</sup> This suggests that bureaucrats often followed administrative routines – crucial for the system to function at all – poorly in the past.

### *Songbun in Flux: State Ambitions and Bureaucratic Mistakes*

The interviewee's stories painted a chaotic picture of the songbun system in the pre-famine era. Several recalled how the state downgraded their songbun by mistake, an experience that stood out as particularly common. People with such experiences may well be overrepresented both among the informants for this article, and in the North Korean defector community in South Korea overall. Being subjected to unfair treatment due to bureaucratic slip-

ups could easily predispose a person to seeing little future in this environment. One interviewee claimed, for example, that her decision to eventually leave North Korea was partially spurred by the bitterness of having her songbun status downgraded for faulty reasons.<sup>73</sup>

Given how gargantuan a task it was to register every family connection, socio-economic background and conditions, as well as attitudes of the entire North Korean population, it would have been very surprising had not some investigations been conducted erroneously. In addition to the testimony from informants, the government's songbun manual also tacitly confirm that mistakes occurred.

Because the process was relatively decentralized from the beginning, there could not but be differences in implementation. Although the state centralized songbun investigations management under the OGD in 1958, the task must, by nature, be handled locally. A vast number of people are involved in gathering the information that eventually determines the songbun of an individual. Whether intentionally or unintentionally, some proportion of the witnesses solicited by the state for each person must have given inaccurate information. Some interviewees blamed their downgraded songbun on jealousy and spite on the part of these so-called witnesses that the state relied on for information. Even a witness with the best of intentions may not correctly remember the sort of detailed information that the songbun manual tells functionaries to rely on for classifications. As previously noted, the manual is remarkably specific on criteria for classification, down to the precise size of a person's farmland prior to liberation, or the number of the employees in their factory.<sup>74</sup> If witnesses harbored ill-intent or jealousy toward the person or family in question, lying would be easy and carry few negative consequences for the person in question, since it was virtually impossible to find fully solid proof.

In theory, there are recourses for rectifying mistakes. But in reality, for most who could not bribe their way, formal recourse was never practically feasible. To alter songbun that was assigned by mistake required a person to go down the same route of historical investigations into conditions several decades before and find exactly seven witnesses to testify that their relative in fact did have a “clean” background. The manual instructs officers to note down both the age and the residential locality of each witness and does not specify why the number seven is so crucial.<sup>75</sup> The Party official assigning songbun had (and still has) the ultimate authority to make the final judgment call on what information to trust in the registration process, with no accountability or possibility of appeal.

Pak Jang-ri’s case is instructive. Her family always thought their background very good in the eyes of the government. Her maternal great grandfather did in fact own significant amounts of land on the small island of Baengnyŏngdo in the archipelago of present-day South Korea, and her grandfather was educated as a doctor at a Japanese university.<sup>76</sup> After he returned from Japan, he operated a hospital on what later became the northern side of the 38th parallel, in Hwanghae province just north of the boundary.<sup>77</sup> When the communists took over, the family gave up their property to the state, precisely as they were supposed to do.

None of this would alone be problematic for the family’s future songbun. The songbun manual confirms that landlords and capitalists who supported the revolution should be assigned a favorable songbun status.<sup>78</sup> Pak’s family should have been of solid songbun since her father had indeed done what Kim Il-sung demanded of the citizens of the new state.<sup>79</sup>

Things changed when the government claimed after a new round of investigations in the late 1960s that Pak’s grandfather fled to South Korea during the war. Their family narrative held that when the Americans moved across the Korean Peninsula during the war, they took the

grandfather with them to serve as a doctor in the army, along with two of his brothers. The family thought the father and his brothers were killed in the process, but they now found out that the grandfather had been registered as a wartime defector to the south.<sup>80</sup>

The family had an acquaintance who worked in the MPS, who told them that they could have their old, better songbun reinstated if, as the manual states, they could find seven people to testify that Pak's grandfather did not defect to the south.<sup>81</sup> Pak's mother tried in vain to find people who could vouch for her father. It is almost inconceivable how the authorities imagined that one would be able to find seven witnesses to testify about someone's circumstances several decades earlier, at a time of war and social chaos. The family eventually gave up, after Pak's mother had traveled around the country for an extensive period of time looking for the right people. There was no other recourse for appeal. In reality, as Pak told the author later, the only realistic option at hand is to bribe seven people to testify in favor of someone's most likely long-deceased relative.<sup>82</sup>

Ri Young-hee's family went through a similar ordeal. In her family's case, no specific event prompted their status getting downgraded, at least not that she was aware of or conveyed during the interview. Ri described her life and childhood in Pyöngyang as generally comfortable and happy, perhaps colored by the rosy glasses of hindsight. She lived in a rugged part of North Hamgyöng province for most of her life in North Korea, but still called Pyöngyang her hometown.<sup>83</sup> She described her father as a law-abiding, loyal, political believer, and overall earnest person.<sup>84</sup>

In Ri's case, the problem was her maternal grandfather's background. He had been involved in political groups later condemned as reactionary by the North Korean government. The family's fall was all the greater because of their relative privilege. Her family was handed a

red slip of paper called a “dispatch order (*p'agyŏnjang*) sometime in 1983.<sup>85</sup> Ri said that the Party never portrayed this relocation order as a punishment.<sup>86</sup> Her parents were Party members of good political standing, and no one claimed that they had done anything wrong themselves. The family immediately began to prepare for their return to Pyŏngyang, certain that the relocation order was a mistake. They sent letters appealing to the Party, and one of her brothers went to Pyŏngyang himself to deliver them. According to Ri, such decisions were indeed changed on occasion, though it was rare.<sup>87</sup> The Party claimed, however, that they had not been sent away as a punishment, but just to spread revolutionary values as a loyal, earnest family up in the north.<sup>88</sup>

The manner in which Ri spoke about the event was itself significant. She said that at the time, she knew that these things happened to other people, people whose backgrounds were actually problematic, or who had really done something wrong to get deported. But her own family had done everything right. Her mom even left her home region in present-day South Korea (although she was born long before division) to live in the North and help build the country.<sup>89</sup> Ri said that the Party recognized that their deportation may have been a mistake, but that they could not simply reverse it. Only formerly high officials could be called back after political purges, she said, and this does happen intermittently in North Korea (as it did in other communist countries).

In a way, Ri did not first and foremost argue that purges and internal deportation are unjust or immoral forms of punishment *per se*. Rather, the problem was that their family was targeted unfairly and unjustly.

Pak expressed similar thoughts in our interview, suggesting that perhaps unfairness is often considered worse than oppression. The big injustice was not only the system itself, but that

other people could bribe themselves out of hardship although their backgrounds were truly problematic. Some of the events Pak spoke about took place long before the famine of the 1990s, and show that corruption was chipping away at the North Korean system much earlier than scholars commonly claim:

*“There are people who are truly bad... they’re bad people, but they give bribes and disguise themselves. From the bottom to the top, people give money and manage to alter their documents...So there are people who are actually supposed to be punished for their involvement with anti-communist movements, but who hide it and go on, and make it all the way to Pyöngyang...”*<sup>90</sup>

However, there is another way to read Pak’s words. As Scott notes, people in situations of oppression perhaps speak of the system itself as a natural, unchangeable order, simply because radical change lies outside the realm of the realistically imaginable.<sup>91</sup> Inevitable does not necessarily mean legitimate. Although we met in South Korea, interviewees often spoke about facets of life in North Korea as they recalled experiencing them directly. Indeed, had Pak and others seen the songbun system as part of an order that could feasibly change, perhaps they would have expressed stronger criticisms of the system itself.

### *Songbun and Social Mobility*

Even with the dynamic, chaotic nature of the registration process, once the dust settled for the individuals under scrutiny, upward social mobility became virtually impossible. Falling downward was common, while moving upward was almost unheard of. Many interviewees



described the songbun as putting up a form of social glass ceiling, defining people's life trajectories in North Korea from the 1960s and onward. By virtue of having left the country for good, those interviewed for this project are perhaps more likely than other North Koreans to be critical of the society and system they left behind. Even so, in conversation, few people made outright critical, normative statements about the songbun system during our interviews, seemingly taking it for granted as an inevitable fact of life.

Ri Jae-min's story is illustrative. He came to South Korea in 2004 and is involved with an organization for North Korean writers in exile. At the time of the interview, he had recently left a small apartment in Seoul and moved to the countryside.<sup>92</sup> He has a small patch of farmland on his property, in front of the old house where he lives, growing both chili fruits and corn. He spends most of his time writing novels and essays for South Korean publishing houses and newspapers.

Ri's life changed dramatically during his army service. The political officer (*chǒngch'ijidowǒn*) of his army unit called him to a meeting, after he had found a diary Ri had kept in secret. "He told me I was a talented writer, and that I should be doing more of it in the future. He offered to make the necessary connections, and that's when I wrote my first play". It was about a familiar theme in North Korean culture: the relative poverty and deprivation of the Chǒson era. Ri's work was submitted to a literary competition within the army.<sup>93</sup> Remarkably enough, Ri claims, one of his works even received praise by the Great Leader, Kim Il-sung, and Kim supposedly ordered that Ri be "treated well".<sup>94</sup>

Later, Ri was selected to try out for the prestigious Pyŏngyang College of Film and Theater (*Yǒnghwayǒndaegŭk Daehak*). He made it into the Department of Creation and Composition (*ch'angjakhakpu*) but after only one month, he was recalled to his army base.

It turned out that the university had not properly scrutinized his documents for his application. When the authorities discovered that Ri's father had been what the North Korean state classified as a wealthy landowner, his acceptance to the college was rescinded. Ri might have been allowed to stay if his father had only owned enough land to end up with the middle-class farmer label, as he pointed out during our interview. But the son of a former "wealthy" landowner – a *punong* – could never be allowed in such a prestigious environment.<sup>95</sup> Instead, Ri was sent to work in a coal mine. Only later, through personal connections, was Ri able to attend college and eventually to work as a government propaganda writer.

Ri's case reveals several interesting facts about the application of songbun in the 1970s. The government's background checks had clear and significant flaws, as revealed by the fact that Ri could slip through the cracks at first and be chosen for the prestigious college. Moreover, it shows that bad songbun, although highly inhibiting, was not a sentence to a life of permanent depravation. Ri, after all, did manage to gain Party membership during his time in the army and worked as a writer for most of his adult life in North Korea, albeit after several very difficult years of hard work in a coal mine. There was, however, a glass ceiling that he could never rise above. Ri even specifically claimed that it runs at medium-level administrative roles.<sup>96</sup>

He may have gotten away easier because his father passed away in the mid-1960s. The original sinner, in other words, was not around for most of Ri's life. He said that had his father been alive during the late-1960s and 1970s when songbun investigations intensified, and more and more people were newly "discovered" as the sons and daughters of traitors, things could have become a lot worse. The social structures were still in flux, nothing was fully settled.

Kang Kyōng-ha's story shows songbun both as glass ceiling and social stigma. She was born in 1978 in South Hamgyōng province, with family origins that were problematic for several

reasons. Her maternal grandfather went over to the south during the Korean War. Therefore, her family background was classified as *wolnamja* – defector to the south.<sup>97</sup> Moreover, her paternal grandfather worked as a farmhand (*mōsūm*) until liberation. Ordinarily, this would have given Kang's family good songbun, but her father had joined the Democratic Party led by nationalist Cho Man-sik, later suppressed by the North Korean government.<sup>98</sup>

Kang's songbun shaped her life from early childhood. During her school years, some of her classmates would tease her for her deficient family background.<sup>99</sup> Because of her songbun, she said, she always felt that she had to do better than others, to overcompensate and prove herself despite her family background.<sup>100</sup> She was the top students of her class.<sup>101</sup> Thanks to her achievements, she got to participate in the induction ceremony for the Kim Il-sung Youth League, the mandatory mass organization for students and young people, on the day usually reserved only for those of good songbun stock.<sup>102</sup> The other children present, however, never had to work as hard as she did to earn such rewards.

Her family's case also shows that poor songbun would not necessarily lead to a life of deprivation, but that it put up limits that were very hard to overcome. Her father had a relatively good and trusted job at a fuel distribution site, an assignment normally reserved for Party members, according to Kang. Her father was also an informant for the police, as a significant proportion of North Koreans are at some point in their lives.<sup>103</sup> Even so, he was never allowed to join the Party, which Kang felt a great deal of embarrassment for, particularly as such information was often public.<sup>104</sup>

Kang's brother, however, was able to join later in life, after a long and tough 13-year service in the military. The third generation is supposed to not be impacted by the poor songbun of their parents, at least in theory, and army service can be a vehicle for social advancement.<sup>105</sup>

Kang's father's good connections with Party functionaries also helped, but the family still had to bribe their way through parts of the brother's process.<sup>106</sup> Kang also managed to have the personal records of her siblings illegally changed, to erase the fact that one of their relatives had been deported to a political prison camp.<sup>107</sup>

Kang, like Ri, was first able to bypass the songbun glass ceiling, only to be cast down again once the Party discovered its mistake. Kang successfully gained admission to a prestigious training college for Party cadres. She studied there in the early 2000s. Apparently, someone had mixed up her name with another person who should have gotten properly admitted, with the exact date of birth as Kang's.<sup>108</sup> Kang did not state explicitly that this was related to her songbun, but another job she held, working in the local police office, was taken away from her after she was about to switch duties, and her songbun was re-checked in the process.<sup>109</sup> For reasons that were unclear in the interview, she could not get rid of the information from her own file about the prison camp inmate relative. With such family ties, people told her, she should just give up any pretenses of social advancement.<sup>110</sup>

Pak Jang-ri also saw her opportunities for social advancement suddenly vanish after the state "discovered" that she had problematic songbun. She was born in Chongjin, in the northeast of North Korea, and lived there until she left for South Korea in the early 2000s. Since her mother was an academic, Pak said, she always assumed she would also go to college.

Her outlook changed drastically in the mid-1970s. Born in 1966, she was only around ten years old when her family's songbun status changed as her father applied for Party membership. In a re-investigation of her family's songbun, a claim had been made that her maternal grandfather fled to the South during the Korean War.<sup>111</sup> According to Pak, people did not

generally know their songbun at the time, and North Koreans themselves would not commonly use the specific term.

Because the family had previously been of good songbun standing, the fall was harder than it otherwise might have been. Like Ri, Pak's entire life did not necessarily crumble when her family's status changed. She could still go visit her aunt in Pyöngyang, for example, and traveling to the capital city was a privilege that those considered to be the worst traitors would never receive.<sup>112</sup> Still, the change was a massive blow to her family. She recalled that her parents fought a lot at the time. Her father said he regretted marrying her mother and considered filing for divorce to escape the stigmatizing status.<sup>113</sup> After high school, Pak was allotted a physically taxing job in construction.<sup>114</sup>

The songbun system never truly settled down into a stable state. Both Ri and Pak claimed that it wasn't unusual for the state to suddenly change people's songbun status at the time. Given what we know about the songbun system, this not surprising. Time and time again, the state launched campaigns to "uncover" all the more traitors, pull their descendants down on the class ladder, and purge the capital city of politically impure elements. Despite this, most people interviewed for this project tellingly spoke in a resigned manner about the role of songbun in society and in their lives, as a mere fact of life that could not be changed.

As in every culture, codes in language often speak louder than straightforward, literal definitions and categories of social and political status. Several interviewees attested that North Koreans themselves, inside the country, would not typically use the term "songbun" when talking about family background.<sup>115</sup> It is simply a social fact, one so obvious and culturally embedded that it is not even spoken about outright.

One time when the present author met two interviewees together, for example, they made self-deprecating jokes about each other's bad background and socio-political standing, laughing about how much of a political loyalist one of them used to be in North Korea.<sup>116</sup> In another conversation, one woman explained why it was especially dangerous for people like her to violate domestic travel permit restrictions in the 1980s. She referred to herself and her friends as "the worst possible people"<sup>117</sup> because of their bad songbun, always under stronger scrutiny than others.

The resigned, almost self-explanatory manner in which interviewees spoke about their poor songbun status speaks loads about the role and function of songbun in North Korean society. It is not merely as a tool to keep the suspected enemy class in check, but as a social hierarchy as well.

### *Conclusion*

The 1960s, 1970s and 1980s were turbulent and painful decades for a significant proportion of the North Korean population. The state "uncovered" a never-ending stream of enemies in messy family background investigations, in the construction of the songbun system. The songbun system's implementation was never static or perfectly smooth. Rather, for countless North Koreans, the system created disruption and chaos. This article demonstrates that for countless North Koreans, these decades were not the "golden era" they may appear to have been in contrast with the social decay that followed the collapse of the economy. This should cause us to re-think the general narrative of North Korean social history and recognize that it was always more or less tumultuous.

Songbun was never a fully finished project, but rather a lengthy and still ongoing process. Though the emphasis specifically on family background may have diminished somewhat over the past few decades, the state still examines each person's songbun intermittently, at junctures such as evaluations for Party membership and employment. Zbigniew Brzezinski argued in 1956 that a totalitarian regime must constantly purge enemy elements, real or imagined, to keep cadres on their toes and sustain the political apparatus.<sup>118</sup> North Korea provides a case where this applies not just to political cadres, but to the population as a whole.

Songbun investigations were often messy and riddled with errors and mistakes. Given the size and scope of investigating the family background of each citizen, it was inevitable that the process would run far from smoothly. To be sure, some citizens did successfully manipulate the powerful state system, and were able to use cracks in the bureaucracy to their advantage.

In this sense, the songbun system starkly illuminates the difficulties involved in realizing ambitious projects of state-building. It shows that there is far more nuance to the process than binaries of resistance and stability can do justice. On the one hand, the conclusions of this article reinforce Kotkin's description of Stalinism as an entire culture and civilization rather than merely a structure of governance.<sup>119</sup> Indeed, the ways in which interviewees spoke about their own songbun status and that of others shows the extent to which the language of a bureaucratic system successfully entered everyday parlance. While the North Korean state's songbun registration manual inadvertently serves as proof of the difficulties involved in the process, it also shows that the state was regardless determined to continue and perfect the endeavor.

On the other hand, this did not constitute resistance against the state in any concrete sense. For most people who fell victim to sudden changes of songbun status, through no fault of their own, the only realistic option was to accept their new conditions and clench their fists in

their pockets. The North Korean state was never a perfectly functioning Leviathan, but the operational errors often worked to the citizen's detriment rather than the other way around.

Thus, as a process of state-building and making society legible, songbun shows that such state projects are often complex and contested by the citizens. At the same time, the cracks in the bureaucratic façade do not constitute examples of social resistance. Citizens could try to fight the state apparatus, but as the interviewees for this article attest to, the state usually won out.

At the same time, as Scott's *Weapons of the Weak* suggests, we should not be too quick to disregard the potential that more active forms of resistance against the system have existed, and still do, only because the interviewees expressed little desire to do away with the system itself. Indeed, the very fact that North Korean leaders have deemed it necessary to speak out against unfairness and excessive emphasis on family background suggests that discontent with practices emanating from the system were widespread enough for the state to react, albeit only in rhetoric. Like the Malaysian peasants in Scott's study, North Korean grassroots have an understanding of their own situation and place and have attempted – although often not successfully – to manipulate the bureaucratic system in a way that serve their interests.<sup>120</sup> This hitherto never turned into widespread collective action for radical change of the songbun system, but one should not ignore the possibility that discontent among the grassroots have impacted state policies in the past, and continues to do so today.

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<sup>1</sup> Most interviewees were highly concerned with their identities not being revealed, and all names in this article are pseudonyms. IRB protocol: #833086.

<sup>2</sup> Scholars of totalitarian societies have often striven to find narratives of resistance, in order to show that the state's nature could not be truly totalitarian. For an overview and discussion of this issue, see Michael David-Fox, "Whither Resistance?" as well as other articles in the same issue.

<sup>3</sup> Scalapino and Lee, *Communism in Korea*; Suh, *Kim Il Sung*; Suh and Lee, *North Korea after Kim Il Sung*..

<sup>4</sup> Ryang, *Reading North Korea*; Kwon and Chung, *North Korea*, 5.

<sup>5</sup> Cumings, *North Korea*; Kim, *Everyday Life in the North Korean Revolution, 1945-1950*.

<sup>6</sup> For an overview and discussion of the focus on the state in North Korean historiography, see Schmid, "Historicizing North Korea: State Socialism, Population Mobility, and Cold War Historiography". Schmid's work is a notable exception in the literature, giving these decades serious treatment.



<sup>7</sup> There is considerable debate about how to properly classify the North Korean system. Particularly during the Cold War, many scholars saw North Korea as merely a Soviet satellite state with a system similar to the Soviet Union under Stalin (such as Lee, “Stalinism in the East: Communism in North Korea”). Later works often question whether North Korea should really be termed as “Stalinist.” Bruce Cumings, for example, has called the North Korean system “[...] Asian corporatism deeply influenced by the Confucian Past” (in Cumings, “The Corporate State in North Korea,” 203). BR Myers has argued that North Korean ideology has inherited its most central traits from Japanese race-centered militarist ideology dating back to Japan’s colonial rule over the peninsula (Myers, *The Cleanest Race*). Adrian Buzo has demonstrated how the guerilla tradition of Kim Il-sung (1912–1994), North Korea’s first leader, has formed ideology and state-building (see Buzo, *Politics and Leadership in North Korea: The Guerilla Dynasty*). As Erik van Ree has demonstrated, North Korea’s state structures were modeled along Stalinist lines from the very earliest days of state-building under Soviet tutelage. See Ree, *Socialism in One Zone*.

<sup>8</sup> Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, 6–7.

<sup>9</sup> Mimura, *Planning for Empire*, 4.

<sup>10</sup> Scott, *Seeing Like a State*.

<sup>11</sup> Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, xvii.

<sup>12</sup> His father came from South Korea before the war, and was mistakenly listed as a foreman during the Japanese occupation before it being corrected.

<sup>13</sup> Hyŏn In-ae, “Pukhanŭi Chumindŭngnokchedoe Kwanhan Yŏn’gu.”

<sup>14</sup> Byŏng-no and Kim Sŏng-ch’ŏl, “Pukhansahoeŭi Pulp’yŏngdŭng kujowa Chŏngch’isahoejŏk Hamŭi.”

<sup>15</sup> Collins, *Marked for Life*.

<sup>16</sup> Almost no communist systems attempted social classification with the level of detail and rigidity pursued by North Korea, though a handful of other non-communist authoritarian regimes and ruling parties have engaged in intensive classification schemes for regime security purposes. In Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, the Ba’th Party screened the backgrounds of membership applicants, checking for their circumstances and behavior around the Iraq coup d’état in 1963. During the war with Iran, the Party rejected applicants who had Iranian origins even far back in their family histories. See Sassoon, *Saddam Hussein’s Ba’th Party*, pp 26 and 44.

<sup>17</sup> Alexopoulos, “Stalin and the Politics of Kinship.”

<sup>18</sup> Kovacs, Korean Worker’s Party Central Committee (KWP CC), and Pak, “Report, Embassy of Hungary in North Korea to the Hungarian Foreign Ministry.”

<sup>19</sup> Brown, “Moving Targets,” 53. I am grateful to Puck Engman for pointing me to the literature on this topic.

<sup>20</sup> Brown, “Moving Targets,” 52.

<sup>21</sup> Brown, “Moving Targets,” 75–76.

<sup>22</sup> Much of this elite even hailed from the same families as those who ruled the preceding Koryo Dynasty. See Park, *Between Dreams and Reality*, 17; Duncan, *The Origins of the Chosŏn Dynasty*.

<sup>23</sup> Hyŏn, “Pukhanŭi Chumindŭngnokchedoe Kwanhan Yŏn’gu,” 13–14.

<sup>24</sup> This name, as all others of the interviewees for this article, is a pseudonym.

<sup>25</sup> Kim Kwan-il, interview by author, Seoul, Republic of Korea, March 5<sup>th</sup>, 2019.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. The quote is truncated from the original.

<sup>27</sup> Hyŏn, “Pukhanŭi Chumindŭngnokchedoe Kwanhan Yŏn’gu,” 11–12.

<sup>28</sup> Hyŏn, “Pukhanŭi Chumindŭngnokchedoe Kwanhan Yŏn’gu,” 13. I wish to stress that we know very little about the nature of the task at this point in history.

<sup>29</sup> Hyŏn, “Pukhanŭi Chumindŭngnokchedoe Kwanhan Yŏn’gu,” 13.

<sup>30</sup> Kim and Kim, “Pukhansahoeŭi pulp’yŏngdŭng kujowa chŏngch’isahoejŏk hamŭi,” 24–25.

<sup>31</sup> Hyŏn, “Pukhanŭi Chumindŭngnokchedoe Kwanhan Yŏn’gu,” 14. According to Kim and Kim, the structural division was merely altered at this time, not created. See Kim and Kim, “Pukhansahoeŭi pulp’yŏngdŭng kujowa chŏngch’isahoejŏk hamŭi,” 27.

<sup>32</sup> Kim and Kim, “Pukhansahoeŭi pulp’yŏngdŭng kujowa chŏngch’isahoejŏk hamŭi,” 26–27.

<sup>33</sup> Pukhan Yŏn’guso, *Pukhan Baekkw’a Sajŏn* (Seoul, Republic of Korea: Pukhan Yŏn’guso, 1983), 317–318.

<sup>34</sup> Another source gives 1979 as the final year for the project and claims that specifically Pyŏngyang residents had their Songbun re-investigated. This makes sense since the regime has always been especially concerned with the loyalty of the power base in the capital city. Moreover, this same source instead gives 200,000 as the number of people moved out of Pyŏngyang; perhaps 500,000 is the total figure for deportations and 200,000 the number of people moved specifically from Pyŏngyang. See Kim Byŏng-yŏn, Pak Myŏng-gyu, and Kim Byŏng-no, *Kaesŏng Kongdan*, chap. 9.

<sup>35</sup> Collins, *Marked for Life*, 43.

<sup>36</sup> Kim Jong-il, “Pukchaphan Kunjunggwaŭi Saŏbŭl Charhalde Taehayŏ.”

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- <sup>37</sup> Ibid,” 235.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid, 236.
- <sup>39</sup> Kim and Kim, “Pukhansahoeüi pulp’yöngdüng kujowa chöngch’isahoejök hamüi,” 34–35.
- <sup>40</sup> Hyön, “Pukhanüi Chumindüngnokchedoe Kwanhan Yön’gu,” 30.
- <sup>41</sup> Chön, *Pukhanüi Sahoet’ongje Kigu Koch’al*, 32–34. For a more detailed institutional map that includes the level of city police station, see Hyön, “Pukhanüi Chumindüngnokchedoe Kwanhan Yön’gu,” 19.
- <sup>42</sup> Hyön, “Pukhanüi Chumindüngnokchedoe Kwanhan Yön’gu,” 19. The system for Songbun registration – *chumindüngnok* – is separate from the system registering and handling personal information such as residence address, workplace, family linkages, and so on, known as *kongmindüngnok*. The systems are, however, not entirely separate. The latter information is central for investigating Songbun, and such investigations build upon the *kongmindüngnok* information. Moreover, according to interviewees who have done administrative work involving information available in these administrative, personal file ledgers at the punjuso level, a person’s Songbun status shows up among this administrative information as well.
- <sup>43</sup> Some people’s files were kept separately, such as those of employees in sensitive security organs. See Kim and Ri, *Chumindüngnoksapch’amgosö*, 116.
- <sup>44</sup> The *inminban* is an institution made up of 20–30 families in a given neighborhood, with one person, the *inminbanjang*, in charge of neighborhood upkeep as well as surveillance and mobilization of labor when ordered to. The *inminbanjang* is regularly in contact with police and security authorities. For an excellent overview of the system, see Ch’ae, “Pukhan ’Inminban’e Kwanhan Yön’gu.”
- <sup>45</sup> Hyön, “Pukhanüi Chumindüngnokchedoe Kwanhan Yön’gu,” 22.
- <sup>46</sup> Ibid, 31.
- <sup>47</sup> The present author has never come across a case in the literature of someone’s songbun status being unexpectedly upgraded. This may theoretically happen, but it is rare.
- <sup>48</sup> For more on this demographic change, see Kim and Kim, 23.
- <sup>49</sup> Brambor et al., “The Lay of the Land.”
- <sup>50</sup> Lee and Zhang, “Legibility and the Informational Foundations of State Capacity.”
- <sup>51</sup> Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, 89.
- <sup>52</sup> Ibid, 4.
- <sup>53</sup> See, for example, the very introduction to the manual in Kim and Ri, *Chumindüngnoksapch’amgosö*, 6.
- <sup>54</sup> Chu Sin-il, interview by author, Seoul, Republic of Korea, July 11<sup>th</sup>, 2019.
- <sup>55</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>56</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>57</sup> For an overview of North Korea’s economic collapse, see Haggard and Noland, *Famine in North Korea*.
- <sup>58</sup> Kim and Ri, *Chumindüngnoksapch’amgosö*, 6–8.
- <sup>59</sup> Ibid, 6.
- <sup>60</sup> Ibid, 17.
- <sup>61</sup> Kim and Ri, *Chumindüngnoksapch’amgosö*, 17.
- <sup>62</sup> See, for example, Kim and Kim, *Choguk*, 276.
- <sup>63</sup> For an overview of these international changes, see Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas*, chaps. 9–10.
- <sup>64</sup> Kim and Ri, *Chumindüngnoksapch’amgosö*, 6.
- <sup>65</sup> Ibid, 17.
- <sup>66</sup> For the case of China during land reform under communism, see Strauss, “Morality, Coercion and State Building by Campaign in the Early PRC.”
- <sup>67</sup> Kim and Ri, *Chumindüngnoksapch’amgosö*, 129.
- <sup>68</sup> Ibid, 130.
- <sup>69</sup> Ibid, 18.
- <sup>70</sup> Ibid, 27.
- <sup>71</sup> Ibid, 13.
- <sup>72</sup> Ibid, 112; 116.
- <sup>73</sup> Pak Jang-ri, interview by author, Seoul, Republic of Korea, February 26, 2019.
- <sup>74</sup> See, for example, Kim and Ri, *Chumindüngnoksapch’amgosö*, 125–127.
- <sup>75</sup> Ibid, 30.
- <sup>76</sup> Pak Jang-ri, interview by author.
- <sup>77</sup> Pak Jang-ri, pers. comm., December 30, 2019.
- <sup>78</sup> Kim and Ri, *Chumindüngnoksapch’amgosö*, 123.
- <sup>79</sup> Pak Jang-ri, interview by author.

- <sup>80</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>81</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>82</sup> Pak Jang-ri, pers. comm.
- <sup>83</sup> Ri Young-hee, interview by author, Seoul, Republic of Korea, July 12, 2019.
- <sup>84</sup> Ri Young-hee, interview by author.
- <sup>85</sup> Ri Young-hee, interview by author.
- <sup>86</sup> It is possible that the order was not intended as punishment. It is not unheard of in authoritarian or totalitarian states for the government to order more loyal, politically trustworthy elements, to go live among less reliable elements in the population. For the example of Iraq, see Sassoon, *Saddam Hussein's Ba'th Party*, 63.
- <sup>87</sup> Ri Young-hee, interview by author.
- <sup>88</sup> Ri Young-hee, interview by author.
- <sup>89</sup> Ri Young-hee, interview by author.
- <sup>90</sup> Pak Jang-ri, interview by author. This quote has been edited for clarity.
- <sup>91</sup> Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, 324.
- <sup>92</sup> Personal field notes.
- <sup>93</sup> Ri Jae-min, interview by author, undisclosed location, South Korea, July 16, 2019.
- <sup>94</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>95</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>96</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>97</sup> Kang Kyōng-ha, interview by author, undisclosed location, South Korea, June 6, 2019, 5.
- <sup>98</sup> Kim and Lee, *Pukhanūi Yōksa*, 61–62.
- <sup>99</sup> Kang Kyōng-ha, interview by author.
- <sup>100</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>101</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>102</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>103</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>104</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>105</sup> Ibid. Other informants have also said that extensive army service is a common way to join the Party.
- <sup>106</sup> Kang Kyōng-ha, interview by author.
- <sup>107</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>108</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>109</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>110</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>111</sup> Pak Jang-ri, interview by author, Seoul, Republic of Korea, February 26, 2019.
- <sup>112</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>113</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>114</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>115</sup> Several interviewees attested to this, though some claimed that the term is used even in North Korea.
- <sup>116</sup> Ch'ae Kyōng-wōn and Kim Yōng-suk, author's interview, undisclosed location, South Korea, July 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2019.
- <sup>117</sup> Yi Seul-gi and Han Mi-sun, author's interview, Seoul, Republic of Korea, February 24, 2019.
- <sup>118</sup> Brzezinski, *The Permanent Purge*.
- <sup>119</sup> Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, 14.
- <sup>120</sup> Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, 304.

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