

N. Korea - officially known as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea - is a country in Eastern Asia, bordering China and Russia to the North, South Korea to the south at the Korean Demilitarized Zone, the Korea Bay & Yellow Sea to the west, and the Sea of Japan to the east.



About 80 % of N. Korea is composed of mountains and uplands, separated by deep and narrow valleys. The highest point is the volcanic Paektu Mountain, which is considered a sacred place and has been incorporated in the elaborate folklore around the Kim dynasty. For example, a song about going to Mt. Paektu describes a symbolic trek

to the mountain singing in praise of the current Supreme Leader of N. Korea.



North Korean citizens paying respect to the statues of Kim Il-sung (left) and Kim Jong-il at the Mansudae Grand Monument

Kim Jong-un heads all major governing structures. His grandfather Kim Il-sung was the founder and leader of N. Korea until his death in 1994 and is known as "Eternal President." Il Sung was succeeded by his son Kim Jong-il who is now known as "Eternal General Secretary" and "Eternal Chairman of the National Defence Commission" since his death in 2011.

N. Korean Poet Jang Jin-sung (a pseudonym) wrote state poetry before he defected to S. Korea In 2004. While still state poet, he wrote "Ode to the Smiling Sun" about former leader Kim Il Sung:

*"All the tears that were to have been shed by his people,
our Supreme Leader took on himself alone to shed.
What smiles he had, he gave them all so that his people might smile.
When the Supreme Leader gave the people his gift of smiling,
it manifested as his Love;
when he sowed his gift on our lands, it manifested as rays of the Sun;
and as he left his gift for history, it manifested as Immortal Life."*

Juche is the official ideology of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, which postulates that "man is the master of his destiny", that the masses are to act as the "masters of the revolution and construction", and that by becoming self-reliant and strong, a nation can achieve true socialism.

SOME HISTORY

In 1910, Japan annexed and ruled Korea until after WW2. Then the Soviet Union and US divided Korea into two occupied zones, which became two sovereign states in 1948. A socialist state was established in the N. under the totalitarian leadership of Kim Il-sun., and a capitalist state with authoritarian leadership, the First Republic of Korea, was established in the south. Both governments claimed to be the sole legitimate government of all of Korea, and neither accepted the border as permanent.

N. Korean military invaded the South in 1950 in an attempt to unify Korea through military force. The People's Republic of China joined the war to fight alongside the N., and the US fought alongside the South. Approximately 3 million people died, with a higher proportional civilian death toll than World War II or the Vietnam War. N. Korea was the country most devastated by the war, which resulted in the death of an estimated 12–15% of the population.

Recovery from the war was slowed by a massive famine in 1954-55. Starvation threatened many and about 800,000 died. In addition collectivization was resisted; many farmers killed their livestock rather than turn them over to the collective farm.



Territory often changed hands early in the war, until the front stabilized.
North Korean, Chinese, and Soviet forces (red) and
South Korean, U.S., Commonwealth, & United Nations forces (green)

Industry was the favored sector after the wars, and it appears economic growth was improving similar to S. Korea until the late 80's when it stagnated and then nearly collapsed after Soviet aid stopped due to the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Again from 1994 to 1998, N. Korea suffered a famine. N Korea maintains that between 240,000 and 420,000 people died. Non-partisan sources say between 2 ½ - 3 ½ million people died, with complex causes that include N. Korea's extreme secrecy and defensiveness, the death of the first Supreme Leader, the regime's cruel policies including re-distributing rations, and inadequate international response.

Jang Jin-sung, the former state poet wrote the following after he defected to S. Korea, "Restrictions on nationalisms, inspiration, and language do not exist in the free world I live in now." But he lamented: "I keep telling myself inwardly: 'I mustn't be happy.' I feel guilty that I live a better life than the people I left behind in North Korea. That must explain why the main subjects, and who I wrote for in my poetry, are North Korea and its people."

He wrote a poem about the time called Spoons:

*Perhaps it was because there was no rice,
That no spoons could be found in the house.
Even the spoons had been sold
To put food on the table of ancestral rites.
Just as all wish for happiness,
Drinking watery rice gruel
The family of five, in that house
Had a single wish
That if ever so slightly the burden of poverty could be eased
The family jewels could one day amount to Not one spoon, but daresay
F
I
V
E*

And another poem, called Cold Rice.

Cold rice
How or where he had managed,
A dollop of cold rice
Was pushed back towards his wife
As the husband's kind voice reassured her -
I ate on the way.
Working in the fields all day,
Her in-laws returned from the mountains
A dollop of cold rice
Was pushed towards them, whilst feigning satiety -
This leftover rice is all we could offer.
Pregnant newcomer
Depriving her seemed like a sin incapable of atonement
That made the elderly couple's soul shrivel
They clasped their hands around it, like treasure -
This will last us till morning.
Even after that day
That cold rice went untouched.

The N. Korean population continues to suffer from malnutrition.