

Fish for the Elite: Seafood Restaurants and North Korean Watery Environmental Histories*

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The availability or lack of availability of food in North Korea as long been a subject of intense academic, political and public concern. It is a cliché and a truism to suggest that North Koreans lack food, and this lack has become a key feature for those seeking to demonstrate Pyongyang's developmental dysfunctionality, and a marker of a perceived lack of concern for its citizens.¹ Food unavailability has become a weapon in the de-legitimization of North Korea as a state, and the impacts on the bodies of North Koreans of want and deprivation a piece of both evidence and popular knowledge in the many critiques of its politics, its ideology and its economic system.² North Koreans are, so the popular consensus goes, thin and short because they have lacked food and sustenance throughout their lives, becoming much smaller than South Koreans since the separation of the peninsula in 1948.³ This paper does not mean to suggest that any of this popular and public narrative around food in North Korea is untrue, to cast aspersions on those that propagate it, or to denigrate any of the research and analysis behind it. North Koreans have certainly at times in their history since 1948 lacked food and calorific value. The period following the

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¹ Rhoda Howard-Hassman, "State Induced Famine and Penal Starvation in North Korea," *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal* 7:1 (2012), 147-165

² Christine Hong, "The Mirror of North Korean Human Rights: Technologies of War, Technologies of Liberation," *Critical Asian Studies* 45:4 (2013), 561-592.

³ Lee, S-K., S-Y. Nam, and Daniel Hoffman, "Growth Retardation at Early Life and Metabolic Adaptation among North Korean Children." *Journal of Developmental Origins of Health and Disease* 6:4 (2015), 291-298.

collapse of the Soviet Union and the wider Warsaw Pact of communist nations in the early 1990s, between 1994 and 1998 is known in North Korea as “the arduous march,” which although in homage to a particularly important period of anti-Japanese struggle in the 1930s, formative for North Korean politics, was revived to refer to the famine and extreme deprivation experienced at the time.⁴ North Korea being required to purchase all imported food and materials for agriculture such as fertiliser in foreign currency, instead of on credit-terms, as well as a series of highly unfortunate and damaging climatic and flooding events, meant a huge contraction in the amount of food the state could produce and obtain, and a dramatic decrease in food availability.⁵ Many thousands, perhaps millions of North Koreans succumbed during this period to famine and ill-health, and the impact of these years has marked the nation’s politics and geopolitical outlook for decades hence.⁶

It would not surprise the reader therefore to know that there is a certain politics of both the absence and presence of food and material goods in North Korea, both inside the nation and outside it. An abundance of food is something not often considered when it comes to North Korea, except when talking about the potentially grotesque abundances possessed by its ruling elite family.⁷ While recently much of the sense of moral distaste around the autocratic politics of Pyongyang, has revolved around the visibly swelling waistline of its young leader,⁸ such distaste and disgust also alighted on his father, Kim Jong-il, who was notorious for his love of a particular brand of expensive French cognac, to the extent that such drinks actually became sanctioned items for importation into North Korea.⁹ North Korea’s elites a little further down the political and ideological pyramid are much discussed in political science when it comes to their potential loyalty to the leadership, and position on any political ruptures and transformations should the Kim family lose power or the “division system” as Paik Nak-chung termed it,¹⁰ come unstuck. Perhaps some have visions of Pyongyang’s most elite citizens gorging themselves on lobster, cognac and expensively flown in junk food, but for the most part the landscapes these people

⁴ Heo, Sunhye, and Inhye Heo, “Discourses on the Natural Environment in North Korea: Changing Regime Dynamics in the 1990s,” *Asian Studies Review* 44:3 (2020), 533-552.

⁵ Marcus Noland, Sherman Robinson, and Tao Wang, “Famine in North Korea: causes and cures,” *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 49:4 (2001), 741-767.

⁶ Heonik Kwon and Byung-Ho Chung, *North Korea: Beyond Charismatic Politics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012).

⁷ Jason Bartlett, “Loyalty for Luxury: How the Kim Family Buys Support from North Korean Elites,” *The Diplomat* (April 21, 2022), <https://thediplomat.com/2022/04/loyalty-for-luxury-how-the-kim-family-buys-support-from-north-korean-elites/> (accessed on May 9, 2022).

⁸ BBC, “Kim Jong-un’s ‘Weight Problem’ and the Problem with Spy Briefings,” *BBC* (July 4, 2016), <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-36700765> (accessed on May 9, 2022).

⁹ Soo Kim, “Luxury Goods in North Korea: Tangible and Symbolic Importance to the Kim Jong-un Regime,” *On Korea* 7 (2014), 127-141.

¹⁰ Nak-chung Paik, *The Division System in Crisis: Essays on Contemporary Korea* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011).

inhabit have not been widely considered. Much has been written on the *Jangmadang* 장마당 “guerrilla markets” of the peripheries of North Korea and the role outsourced entrepreneurship has played in the supply and distribution of food following the famine period,¹¹ little has been written on the places and spaces in which North Korea’s favoured or lucky residents relax, eat and unwind.

This paper, from a Human and Cultural Geographer, connected to the field of environmental History seeks to explore these unknown spaces, building on developing work on leisure practices and terrains in North Korea, and more specifically the first glimpses of a leisure economy on the streets of Pyongyang which resolves around the eating of food and the consumption of drink for pleasure, rather than sustenance. The paper also seeks to bring in these terrains and spaces of leisure, privilege and entertainment into the wider body of work on environmental histories of North Korea specifically and the Korean peninsula more generally. Transformations of consumption practices and social and urban organisation brought on during the Japanese colonial period (1907/1910 - 1945), had profound future impacts on the environment and ecology of the Korean peninsula, moving it from a space of generally rural agriculture to an urban based industrial economy. Korea’s coasts, seas and ocean floor were as just as much a part of that transformation as Korea’s on shore territory, its ecologies profoundly changed by the advent of industrial fishing and aquaculture, undertaken for much of the colonial period at least by Japanese settler fishermen. Since 1945 and the separation of the peninsula in 1948, South Korea has gone on to be a global fishing nation, its fleets of fishing boats to be found in every ocean of the world. The rise of Chinese industry, together with onshore agricultural runoff from both South Korea and China, and overexploitation of maritime resources have profoundly depleted the waters local to it. North Korea on the other hand was never able to leverage its political-economic system to achieve such global impact at sea, but has been exposed to the degradation of its watery ecologies due to regional overfishing, pollution and rising sea temperatures off its eastern coast.

This spaces with which this paper is interested, are in part rooted therefore on environmental terrains that are substantially degraded, stressed and subject to great pressure historically, now and in the future. These damaged watery ecologies are what the maritime developmental geographies of North Korea, and its government’s aspirations to create “seas of gold” depend on.¹² They are also joined in North Korea by other forms of watery ecology, the fish farms, breeding stations, and research institutions focused on aquaculture, in which Pyongyang seeks to mitigate the impact of ecological and population decline and degradation at sea through the deployment

¹¹ Peter Ward and Christopher Green, “From Periphery to Centre: A History of North Korean Marketization” in Adam Cathcart, Christopher Green and Steven Denney eds., *Decoding the Sino-North Korean Borderlands* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021).

¹² “New Year Address,” *Rodong Sinmun*, January 2, 2015, http://rodong.rep.kp/en/index.php?strPageID=SF01_02_01&newsID=2015-01-02-0002. Accessed April 29, 2016.

of empirical and technological strategies to increase, bolster or provide alternative fish resources. Both of these provide the elements of the context for these new terrains of leisure, pleasure and consumption in Pyongyang, and the environment from which edible and potable goods will be drawn. An increase in such spaces would necessarily drive demands on the fragile watery ecologies North Korea relies on, given the extensive sanctions regime makes importing such edible goods impossible or prohibitively expensive. With all of this mind this paper explores the eating of seafood, and the experience of eating in the elite seafood restaurants of Pyongyang such as the Taedonggang restaurant from the place of both human and historical geography and environmental history. The paper envisages the place and history of such spaces of elite consumption as coupled with the political histories of Pyongyang's elite and their leisure practices (enabled by transformations in the urban geography of Pyongyang itself), and the wider environmental histories of North Korean aquaculture, fishing and maritime extraction.

Fish, food and eating in Korean and North Korean history

In the 2020's it is an understatement to say that Korean food is globally famous. While historically Korean food and cuisine were regarded either as unknown or as esoteric and a little alien, in 2022 Korean dishes are part of the globes' repertoire of food options.¹³ In particular the concept of Korean BBQ, and ingredients such as gochuchang paste 고추장 and kimchi have become familiar products and options in many countries.¹⁴ Even in the UK it is now possible to easily find a Korean BBQ restaurant and to find an outlet that serves bibimbap or kimchi. This is not and was not always the case, and some of Korea's dishes and ingredients are still challenging to foreigners.¹⁵ Korea itself has now become enmeshed in the consumption practices and frameworks of what are now known globally as "streetfood." Tteokbokki 떡볶이 and huraideu-chicken 후라이드 치킨 have become increasingly frequently seen on the streets of South Korea, a variety of spaces growing up around their consumption, including a huge number of street stalls known as pojangmacha 포장마차.¹⁶

Along with all the pork, beef, chicken, coffee and beer, fish and seafood in general have been key elements in the cuisine and dietary practices of the Korean peninsula

¹³ Francis Collins, "Of Kimchi and Coffee: Globalisation, Transnationalism and Familiarity in Culinary Consumption," *Social & Cultural Geography* 9:2 (2008), 151-169.

¹⁴ Kuan-Chi Wang, "Border as Assemblages: Rethinking the Border Politics of the Global Food Trade," *Geography Compass* 15:12 (2021), e12603.

¹⁵ Seo-Youn Choe and Jae-Hee Hong, "Can Information Positively Influence Familiarity and Acceptance of a Novel Ethnic Food? A Case Study of Korean Traditional Foods for Malaysian Consumers," *Journal of Sensory Studies* 33:3 (2018), e12327.

¹⁶ Robert Ji-Song Ku, Jungah Kim, and Hyunjoo Yu, "Beyond Pojangmacha: Edae Food Carts and the Future of Seoul's Social Gastronomy," *Food, Culture & Society* 24:1 (2021), 84-97.

since the beginning of its recorded history. Korean food frequently has fish, molluscs and cephalopods at its heart, from more common forms of jjigae stews 찌개, to the challenging san-nakji 산낙지 (live octopus). Fish is eaten everywhere on the Korean peninsula, though of course it is less frequently eaten in the interior and in mountainous areas.¹⁷ Fish and seafood products are also eaten across all social classes on the Korean peninsula and in Korean history. In particular miyeok 미역 or wind/beach dried kelp has long been a vital element in Korean cooking, and the drying of miyeok by coastal communities was a key element to many of those communities social and economic practices in previous centuries.¹⁸ Of course there were varieties of seafood and maritime products that only the rich and elite could afford, and places where such food could be bought and consumed naturally became rarefied and expensive places, and seafood became an important element in the rediscovered “Korean Royal Court Cuisine” (*Joseon wangjo gungjung yori* 조선왕조 궁중요리).¹⁹

Fish have long been of importance to North Korea, its politics and development. Fishing was vital to the developmental ambitions of Kim Il-sung from very early on in North Korea’s history, in part to both rebuild the economy and to remove Japanese colonial influence and settlers from the fishing industry.²⁰ Fishing development was delayed by the chaos and destruction of the Korean War, but soon after government focus returned to the sea, in close relation to North Korea’s important ally in its early years and technical supporter even in more complicated diplomatic times, the Soviet Union. Kim Il-sung even remarked on North Korean-Soviet interactions in 1957: “We invited Soviet scientists who were engaged on maritime research in the Far East. They came to our country under an agreement reached when our Government delegation visited Moscow last year.”²¹ While the Soviet Union may have influenced North Korea’s initial efforts on the seas and some of its first efforts at planning extractive goals, Stalin’s death in 1953 drove a geo-political turn towards Maoism and the People’s Republic of China.²² The implications of this for the wider strategies in

¹⁷ Suk-Heung Oh, Kye Won Park, James Daily III, and Young-Eun Lee, “Preserving the Legacy of Healthy Korean Food,” *Journal of Medicinal Food* 17:1 (2014), 1-5.

¹⁸ Soon Hee Kim, Myung Sunny Kim, Myoung Sook Lee, Yong Soon Park, Hae Jeong Lee, Soonah Kang, Hyun Sook Lee et al., “Korean Diet: Characteristics and Historical Background,” *Journal of Ethnic Foods* 3:1 (2016), 26-31.

¹⁹ Hae-Kyung Chung, Dayeon Shin, Kyung Rhan Chung, Soe Yeon Choi, and Nariyah Woo, “Recovering the Royal Cuisine in Chosun Dynasty and its Aesthetics,” *Journal of Ethnic Foods* 4:4 (2017), 242-253.

²⁰ Kim Il-sung, “Developing the Fishing Industry on a New Basis,” *Works* 4 (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1948), 304.

²¹ Kim Il-sung, “On the Development of the Fishing Industry,” *Works* 11 (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1957), 96.

²² Jan Prybyla, “Soviet and Chinese. Economic Competition within the Communist World,” *Soviet Studies* 15:4 (1964), 464-473.

North Korea's development have been also noted by analysts from the period.²³ The Chollima movement 천리마운동, North Korea's developmental movement and response to Maoist urgency, would generate statements on fishing such as; "We must intensify ideological education among the fishery officials and eradicate mysticism, empiricism and all other outdated ideas so that they will improve the fishing method zealously with the attitude of masters,"²⁴ and "Fish culture is a not a difficult job. A little effort and everyone will be able to,"²⁵ suggest that in these acute, urgent times, this was not a time for fishing "experts."

North Korea more generally quickly attempted to avoid the collapse of the Great Leap Forward and the famine period following it in the PRC, reconnecting more fully with partners in the Soviet Union, while exploring further afield for new contacts in non-aligned nations. In the fishing sector, North Korea's strategy focused on reconfiguring its goal setting and institutional structures in a more coherent manner, especially focusing on technical capacity and technologies.²⁶ Notions of catch and capacity were, as said in the previous section, and as relayed by Soviet scientists and technicians to North Korea, rooted in and predicated on notions of Maximum Sustainable Yield and optimum catch, as much as was the case in the United States.²⁷ Fish were there to be harvested, not conserved, and framed by Juche and other aspects of North Korean ideology, since man is the master of all things, a nation's aspiration must be to gather and extract as many fish as possible.²⁸

Aside from the theoretical construction of what scientifically driven or modern fishing was, North Korea has always been hampered by technical aspects as sea. The size, tonnage and capabilities of fishing boats and other fishing technology for North Korea has always been problematic. Pyongyang has always found it hard to manage the development of larger or more complicated fishing boats, as well as the infrastructure required to produce such boats. For many years, North Korea sought to

²³ Yoon Kuark, "North Korea's Agricultural Development during the Post-War Period," *The China Quarterly* 14:2 (1963), 82–93.

²⁴ Kim Il-sung, "On the Tasks of the Party Organizations in South Pyongan Province," *Works* 14 (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1960), 38.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 39.

²⁶ Kim Il-sung, "On Developing the Fishing Industry Further," *Works* 24 (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1969), 261.

²⁷ Finley Carmel, *All the Fish in the Sea: Maximum Sustainable Yield and the Failure of Fisheries Management* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2011).

²⁸ Juche (or Juché) as it is often spelt, is perhaps the ideological form North Korea is most famous for. Claimed to be the unique idea of Kim Il-Sung, it is an unsystematic melange of autocratic aspiration, metaphysical nationalism and a transcendental sense of collectivization. It has been frequently analyzed, and very heatedly debated as a concept for decades by scholars. Perhaps the most helpful if contradictory works on the subject and its analysis for the initiated are by Han S Park in his book *North Korea: The Politics of Unconventional Wisdom* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2002) and Brian Reynolds Myers polemical work *The Cleanest Race: How North Koreans See Themselves and Why it Matters* (New York, NY: Melville House, 2010)

obtain these from the Soviet Union and other fishing nations of the Warsaw Pact, but in the late 1960s this too became problematic: “The 450-ton trawler we are now producing has many shortcomings. [For example,] it can be used for fishing only in the Black Sea or the Baltic Sea... [and] it cannot be used in the Pacific Ocean where the waves are moderate.”²⁹ By the early 1970s, North Korea was engaged in reconfiguring its institutional framework and trying to carefully manage a few centers of maritime industrial excellence—for example, the Ryukdae Shipyard in the Komdok Island area near Sinpo city, South Hamgyong. This shipyard was to serve as such a center for the industry in the East Sea.³⁰ The primary site for this renewal of North Korea’s fishing fleet and accompanying infrastructure was located at Chongjin’s historically important port, where apart from Ryukdae’s efforts to build mid-range ships of some 600–1,000 tons, North Korea sought to construct much larger vessels of between 3,000 and 10,000 tons.³¹

From the perspective of 2022 it is possible to say that in fact North Korea never managed to reach these heights for its fishing industry. However North Korean efforts locally did have a huge impact on the populations of fish surrounding its eastern coasts, in particular stocks of Alaskan Pollack. Kosong county in Kangwon Province, had at one point been able to catch between twenty and thirty thousand tons a day in the winter season, a scale which soon disrupted the population and caused catches to crash to such an extent that Kim Il-sung in 1989 had to offer instructions to the industry to be more scientific when it came to estimating available catch.³² The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations would later even author a report which attributed the blame for the collapse in local populations of Pollack and sardines to insufficient management of fishing effort and stocks.³³ The Fishermen of Kangwon ultimately had to find new employment such was the lack of catch.³⁴

In the end it was not the collapse in fish local to North Korea that produced a catastrophic shrinking of its fishing effort, it was the lack of available fuel for fishing boats created by the economic crisis of the 1990s which saw the biggest impact on the capacity and availability of fishing fleets.³⁵ By 1998 it seems North Korea has sought to dramatically retrench its efforts at sea because of fuel and resource supply

²⁹ Kim Il-sung, “For Bringing about Rapid Progress in the Fishing Industry,” *Works* 22 (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1967), 55.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 57.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Kim Il-sung, “Regarding More Development of Fisheries Industries and More Production of Salt,” in *Regarding the Management Issues of Socialist Economy* 7 (1997), 160.

³³ FAO, “Democratic People’s Republic of Korea: Report of the Fisheries Development Programming Mission,” Working Paper 6 (Geneva: United Nations, 1998).

³⁴ Sungjun Park and Seonggul Hong, “Revisiting Changing Patterns of North Korean Fisheries Production: 1990s–2000s,” *International Journal of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries* 4:1 (2012), 110.

³⁵ FAO, “Democratic People’s Republic of Korea.”

issues, as well as the disappearance of markets in Japan for its shellfish and squid, reducing its deep sea fleet to less than hundred boats.³⁶ North Korean fishing efforts instead would become focused on shallow water fishing and coastal aquaculture, the various county scale fishing organizations and companies directed to develop their efforts towards this instead of the deep sea – the ideological magazine *Kulloja 근로자* (Workers or “Toilers”), even chastising fishing enterprises for “concentrating their efforts too much on fishing only.”³⁷ Park and Hong (2012) recount some of the early efforts to adapt to these changed priorities such as at Yanghwa on the east coast which in 2004 focused on breeding sea cucumbers and sea urchin, and Hongwon in South Hamgyong which specialised in scallop and kelp farming.³⁸

As is common in North Korean developmental policy, the change in policy and strategy is remembered by state media as having been sparked by a particular speech from the Supreme Leader, in this case the relatively newly acceded Kim Jong-il’s 1997 piece of on the spot guidance, “Regarding Strengthening Fish Farming” which addressed fish farming, the construction of new fish farms, the scientificization of fish farming, and leading role of the Korean People’s Army in the future development of the sector.³⁹ Under Kim Jong-il fish farming and aquaculture meant more than simply fish, including turtle and terrapin, sea cucumber, and crab farming, but catfish were of particular interest to him, and the various facilities related to their farming, harvesting and preparation were hailed extensively by North Korea’s media. The Pyongyang Catfish Farm which opened in 2002, and was inspected by Kim Jong-il in 2010, was held to be a demonstration of future potential for diversification of product and technology (it used recycled spent water from a nearby thermoelectric power plant), across the nation.⁴⁰

Kim Jong-il’s son and successor, Kim Jong-un, would also maintain an interest in catfish aquaculture, himself visiting the Pyongyang Catfish Farm soon after he became Supreme Leader,⁴¹ and the Samchon Catfish Farm in 2014 and 2015,⁴² but the Young Leader would place fishing policy more firmly in the list of national priorities than had been since the time of Kim Il-sung. 2014’s New Year Address, spurred on by the need to celebrate the anniversary of Kim Il-sung’s *Rural Theses* from 1964,

³⁶ Seonggul Hong and Oh Suntaek, “Future Tasks and Strategy for Inter-Korean Cooperation,” *North Korean Review* 8:2 (2012), 17-31.

³⁷ Park and Hong, “Revisiting Changing Patterns of North Korean Fisheries Production: 1990s-2000s,” 114.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 115.

³⁹ Kim Jong-il, “Regarding Strengthening Fish Farming,” *Chokuk* (Fatherland) 546 (2009), 6.

⁴⁰ Park and Hong, “Revisiting Changing Patterns of North Korean Fisheries Production: 1990s-2000s,” 116.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² KCNA, “New Catfish Harvester Developed in DPRK,” *KCNA*, December 26, 2017, <http://www.kcna.co.jp/item/2017/201712/news26/20171226-14ee.html> and “Pyongyang Catfish Farm,” *KCNA*, November 1, 2016, <http://kcna.co.jp/item/2016/201611/news01/20161101-23ee.html>.

found the young leader asserting that the state “should take measures to bolster up the fishing sector” and that the Korean People’s Army, now responsible for the fishing industry had achieved a “huge haul of fishes by carrying out the order of the Supreme Commander unto death.”⁴³ That January Kim Jong-un visited the construction site of the January 8 Fisheries Station and KPA Unit 534’s Aquatic Products Refrigeration Facility where he reiterated the “need to make the flames of the innovation drive in the fisheries field of the People’s Army rage furiously in the fisheries across the country.”⁴⁴ A little over a month later in 2014, on February 24 Kim Jong-un visited the January 8 Fisheries Station again, and on April 30, 2014 the new facility was opened.⁴⁵

2015’s New Year Address suggested that developmental sectors should create “seas of gold” and 2016’s demanded that; “fishing sectors ... should ramp up production as soon as possible and see to it that the fish farms ... built across the country pay off...,”⁴⁶ and while institutional interest seemed to have waned a little in 2016 North Korea certainly paid attention to fish farming and aquaculture in 2016, with a number of media and government announcements of new projects in Pyongyang and elsewhere.

2014–2017 was the peak period for the Byungjin Line (병진로선 or Byeongjin in Revised Romanization), North Korea’s strategy pairing technical development in the economy with nuclear capability and capacity. Amidst the heat of it all, North Korea still included fishing policy in its developmental agenda. 2017’s New Year Address, for instance, reminded readers of the difficulties North Korea has had historically with increasing the size of its fishing boats and developing their capabilities: “The fishing sector should conduct a dynamic drive for catching fishes and push perseveringly ahead with aquatic farming... It should build modern fishing vessels in a greater number...”⁴⁷ Previous writing by this author suggests that not only did such drives not result in a great number of larger fishing boats, or an expansion in North Korea’s overall catch, or its efforts at sea,⁴⁸ but they generated the enormous pressures which drove fishing communities to go to sea when they did not have the skills,

⁴³ “New Year Address,” *Rodong Sinmun*, January 1, 2014. http://www.rodong.rep.kp/en/index.php?strPageID=SF01_02_01&newsID=2014-01-01-0001&chAction=S.

⁴⁴ “Kim Jong Un visits January 8 Fisheries Station,” *Rodong Sinmun*, January 8, 2014, http://www.rodong.rep.kp/en/index.php?strPageID=SF01_02_01&newsID=2014-01-07-0012&chAction=S.

⁴⁵ “January 8 Fisheries Station Opens,” *Rodong Sinmun*, May 3, 2014, http://www.rodong.rep.kp/en/index.php?strPageID=SF01_02_01&newsID=2014-05-03-0009&chAction=S.

⁴⁶ “New Year Address,” *Rodong Sinmun*, January 2, 2016, http://www.rodong.rep.kp/en/index.php?strPageID=SF01_02_01&newsID=2016-01-02-0002 (accessed April 29, 2016).

⁴⁷ “New Year Address,” *Rodong Sinmun*, January 2, 2017, http://rodong.rep.kp/en/index.php?strPageID=SF01_02_01&newsID=2017-01-02-0001, (accessed on Jan 9, 2017).

⁴⁸ Robert Winstanley-Chesters, *Fish, Fishing and Community in North Korea and Neighbours* (Singapore: Springer, 2020) and Robert Winstanley-Chesters, “Ghost Ships as Spectral Geography:

resources or capabilities and created the “Ghost Ship” phenomena seen between 2011 and 2020 on the shores of Japan and Primorsky in the Russian Federation.⁴⁹

The skeletal remains of fishing boat crews who had aimed for the Yamato Bank in the East Sea/Sea of Japan and its rich hauls of Rainbow Squid in small wooden boats with 36 Hp engines, many of whom were from Chongjin, famously known in North Korea as “widows town” for the number of local men lost to the sea,⁵⁰ were not the people eating in fish restaurants in Pyongyang of course, but they are representative of an element of the nation’s environmental history. The sheer value of maritime resources at a moment in which North Korea is subject to heavy and complex sanctioning by the UNSC sanctions system and by unilateral sanctions from the United States and others means that extracting value from maritime ecology is vital for the continued functioning of the nation’s economy.⁵¹ This is despite the pressures on the ecosystems in nearby seas like the Bohai Sea/West Sea, and the geopolitical complexities of sea access for North Korea deriving from the post Korean War settlement like the Northern Limit Line demarcation boundary on its western coast. North Korea’s desire to easily catch fish and other maritime species has placed considerable pressure on the squid populations of the Yamato Bank, and prior to the outbreak of the Covid-19 global pandemic compromised efforts by the Coastguard of the Russian Federation to manage and conserve Pacific salmon populations and their migration routes from/to the coasts of Peter the Great Bay and the Sea of Okhotsk.⁵² As distant as these fishing concerns and their impacts on watery ecology might be from Pyongyang and the food habits of elite North Koreans, they are very much connected as products of the North Korean socio-economic system and its environmental impacts.

An Introduction to North Korean Necro-Mobilities,” *International Journal of Diaspora and Cultural Criticism* 10 (2020), 149-183.

⁴⁹ Robert Winstanley-Chesters, “Ghost Ships as Spectral Geography,” 150.

⁵⁰ Desmond Ng, “Why Ghost Ships with a Grim Cargo of Corpses are Washing up in Japan,” *Channel News Asia*, April 6th, 2019, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/cnainsider/why-north-korean-ghost-ships-grim-cargo-corpses-washing-up-japan-884306>, (accessed on May 9th, 2022).

⁵¹ Robert Winstanley-Chesters, “Taming the Seas: Empires of Fishing, Colonization and Ecological Collapse in the Western Pacific,” *Asia Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, June 15, 2021, Vol 19.12-1, <https://apjpf.org/2021/12/Winstanley-Chesters.html> (accessed on May 27, 2022).

⁵² Justin Hastings and Annie Young Song, “The Maritime Security Fallout from North Korea’s Fisheries Policy,” *Marine Policy* 136 (2022), 104915.

A Short History of Elite Dining in Pyongyang

“Koreans love eating out - as every long-time resident of Seoul knows from his or her own experience. Going to a restaurant is one of the most common leisure activities in the country. In this regard the North is not much different.”⁵³ Andrei Lankov long time an analyst of North Korea, and in the past a frequent visitor, produced one of the very first attempts in a genre now very familiar to academics, focusing on everyday lives in the nation in 2005 with his book *North of the DMZ: Essays in Daily Life in North Korea*. At a time when the material concerns and leisure practices of North Koreans were not widely discussed, and the famine period was not long over, Lankov found space to mention its citizens’ affection for dining out. The Pyongyang Lankov describes in 2005 is certainly not the Pyongyang of 2022, but restaurants in the city, when in North Korea, have a long history dating back to 1960. Others have written on the importance of mass entertainment and mass dining in the Soviet Union and other Warsaw Pact nations, but Pyongyang’s two most famous eating spaces derive from that history. The Ongnyugwan 옥류관 restaurant was built in 1960 on the banks of the Taedong river, the site of much of Pyongyang’s leisure architecture, and seats some 2,000 patrons over 12,000 square metres. It is built in a style which harks back to traditional Korean architectural forms, with a curving green tiled roof. Lankov records that Ongnyugwan is regarded as a guardian of traditional forms of Korean cooking, “as a type of living museum of culinary art,”⁵⁴ and particularly the custodian of Raengmyeon (랭면 or Naengmyeon in Revised Romanization), or Pyongyang cold noodle soup, a famous dish composing of buckwheat noodles in a beef or pheasant broth, topped with a boiled egg and salad vegetable garnish, yet sat on shaved ice. Historically, according to Lankov and others, access to a table at Ongnyugwan was only available if one had a ticket (obtained through one’s work unit for a particular reason, through a political connection, or on occasion through queuing for a very long time).⁵⁵ These tickets were only to gain entry, and diners had to pay extra for any food and drink ordered. It was a rare occurrence therefore for North Koreans to gain access to the culinary delights of the Ongnyugwan or its more recently built Chongryugwan 청류관 (also built on the riverbanks, but of the Pothong River, a tributary of the Taedong in Pyongyang).

⁵³ Andrei Lankov, *North of the DMZ: Essays in Daily Life in North Korea* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2005), 117.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 118.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 120.



Figure 1. Naengmyeon in Pyongyang

Image credit: Anonymous interviewee, used with permission

Whether the Ongnyugwan or the Chongryugwan were particularly busy during the famine period experienced by North Korea or even open is not clear, but when Lankov was writing in 2005 they had returned to popularity, and he even writes of a “restaurant boom” in Pyongyang that was the sign of changing times. Whether Lankov had envisaged that by 2009, as Cwiertka (2012) writes,⁵⁶ Patrick Soh a Singaporean franchise holder of the very minor US fast food chain Waffletown, and his two investors Quek Chek Lan and Timothy Tan would open the first fast food outlet in North Korea, Samtaesong 삼태성청량음료, or “Three Big Stars,” is not at all clear. Samtaesong took some time to develop its market in North Korea, but now has some thirty outlets across North Korea and has become owned by Kim Kyong-hui, the aunt of Kim Jong-un. Moon Sung Hui, writing for Radio Free Asia in 2010 reported

⁵⁶ Katarzyna Cwiertka, *Cuisine, Colonialism and the Cold War* (London: Reaktion Books, 2012), 142.

the words of a resident of Pyongyang, that: “Samtaesong was frequented only by people who had travelled overseas or those who wanted to try the food out of curiosity...[but] many Pyongyang residents are now fond of hamburgers, though the greasier taste of the food takes some getting used to...The third time you eat a hamburger, you really get to appreciate it. By the time you’ve had your fifth, you’re already addicted to the taste.”⁵⁷

With hamburgers costing the equivalent of two US dollars a day, Samtaesong and outlets like it (including a famously good Italian pasta and pizza restaurant), in Pyongyang are symbolic of the rise to prominence of a new sort of North Korean. Known as the donju 돈주, or “masters of money” a certain strata of North Korean society, entrenched in the elite echelons of the Workers Party of Korea, or the Korean People’s Army, were able to navigate the financial crises and challenges (such as currency revaluation of 2011 which sought to diminish the development of personal savings), of the beginning of the twenty first century to accumulate a degree of wealth.⁵⁸ They did so through extracting rents and fees through work units and party units, through trading in the jangmadang markets, through trade and exchange across the Chinese border (historically foreign travel was heavily restricted so that only the very highest echelons and diplomats might have opportunities to travel once or twice in their life time), especially with Jilin province and the ethnic Koreans who live there (known as Joseonjok 조선족 in South Korea), and through reinvestments in North Korea.⁵⁹ The donju and investment from the People’s Republic are said to be behind the huge boom in apartment complex building in Pyongyang, in tandem with capital from state enterprises, to the extent that the city has been jokingly called “Pyonghatten.”⁶⁰ Such people are behind the growth in the development in public amenities in Pyongyang, though Pyongyang was always better serviced for leisure and entertainment than other cities, including new leisure parks and the revitalisation of institutions like Pyongyang Zoo.⁶¹ They are also behind the growth of private enterprise or semi-private enterprises in the city, such as an abundance of taxi firms, petrol stations (some of them co-branded with Air Koryo, the national airline, which limited in destinations had to diversify), and a growing number of street stalls and

⁵⁷ Moon Sung-Hui, “Happy Meals in Pyongyang,” *Radio Free Asia*, October 15, 2010, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/burger-10152010151052.html>, (accessed on May 9, 2022).

⁵⁸ Soo-Ho Lim, “North Korea’s Currency Reform a Failure?,” *SERI Quarterly* 3:2 (2010), 115-119.

⁵⁹ Jae Cheol Kim, “The Political Economy of Chinese Investment in North Korea: A Preliminary Assessment,” *Asian Survey* 46:6 (2006), 898-916.

⁶⁰ Oliver Wainwright, “The Pyonghatten Project: How North Korea’s Capital is Transforming into a ‘Socialist Fairyland’,” *The Guardian*, September 11, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2015/sep/11/pyongyang-north-korea-capital-socialist-fairyland-kim-jong-un>, (accessed on May 9, 2022).

⁶¹ BBC, “North Korea’s National Zoo: Donkeys, Dinosaurs and Dogs,” *BBC*, August 24, 2016, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-37171963>, (accessed on May 9, 2022).

street food carts, though their number is not yet able to challenge Seoul's pojangmacha culture.⁶² As much as these new North Koreans desire burgers and tteokbokki, they also, like their more ideologically committed elders occasionally want something more formal and luxurious.

Elements of North Korean cooking and restaurant provision such as Ongnyugwan or the Chongryugwan have always been luxurious, and the food served in them will have been expensive beyond the means of normal people, at least beyond their means to eat frequently. North Korea has also found it complicated to service the needs of such luxury, and its ecology and environment is fragile. This is particularly the case when it comes to North Korea's maritime environment, as discussed previously, yet some of the most luxurious of all food products are fish and molluscs. Similar to Chinese cuisine and restaurant culture, often the most expensive things on the menu are crab, squid and lobster, as well as some of the rarer and larger species of fish. Frequent visitors to China cannot have avoided those social moments when a host trying to impress, orders a pile of very expensive Snow Crab for the hotpot. Frequent visitors to both China and Korea can also not have avoided the larger fish restaurants where one has to walk through an entrance tunnel or space filled with tanks and aquaria, the inhabitants of which you could well eventually eat. Despite the fact that North Korea's coastal and shallow sea ecology is highly fragile, and on the eastern coasts in the Bohai Sea extremely degraded (the last two decades has seen a collapse in the biodiversity of mollusc populations in that sea), it is from some of these waters that crustaceans, molluscs, fish and other species must be extracted in order to serve its elite.⁶³

⁶² Associated Press, "North Korea's Street Stalls Signal Small Scale Arrival of Capitalism," *NBC*, September 1, 2015, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/north-korea/north-koreas-street-stalls-signal-small-scale-arrival-capitalism-n419431>, (accessed on May 9, 2022).

⁶³ Lili Xu, Liang Cao, Wei Huang, Jinhu Liu, and Shuozeng Dou, "Assessment of Plastic Pollution in the Bohai Sea: Abundance, Distribution, Morphological Characteristics and Chemical Components," *Environmental Pollution* 278 (2021), 116874.

Dining on Sturgeon at the Taedonggang



Figure 2. The Sturgeon pool at the Taedonggang

Image credit: anonymous interviewee, used with permission

Joining the Ongnyugwan and the Chongryugwan in recent years on the banks of the Taedong, has been a new ostentatious, floating restaurant, the Taedonggang 대동강. Opened in 2018 and very quickly blessed by a visit from Kim Jong-un, the Taedonggang is the height of North Korean luxury dining.⁶⁴ Just along the river from the May Day stadium, the building is actually a collection of spaces dedicated to the

⁶⁴ “Kim Jong Un visits Pyongyang Taedonggang Restaurant,” *Rodong Sinmun*, June 9, 2018, http://rodong.rep.kp/en/index.php?strPageID=SF01_02_01&newsID=2018-06-09-0007, (accessed on May 9, 2022).

eating of fish, including a Korean specialties restaurant, a Sushi restaurant and a restaurant dedicated to European dishes. These are all on the second floor, below them is a ground floor dominated by an enormous pool filled with very large sturgeon. This pool is accompanied by a series of other smaller pools containing different species of fish, crabs and terrapins and other seafood. Similar to the famous Japanese restaurant Zauo (originally in Tokyo, but now a chain with 14 sites, including one in New York City), which requires diners to catch their own dinner in the pond over which they sit,⁶⁵ diners at the Taedonggang can catch their own fish or other species in this large ground floor pool with nets, either to take away or to have cooked on the premises. It is a charismatic sort of space, charismatic enough to be visited by Kim Jong Un on opening, but also charismatic and important enough to be the site of the final dinner of former South Korean President, Moon Jae-in's September 2018 visit to Pyongyang where Yoon Young-chan the secretary for public communication suggested: "The president and his entourage will eat dinner in the restaurant's Spring Room and North Korean citizens will naturally enjoy their meals at other tables in the same room."⁶⁶ It is expensive as a dining option, too expensive for the vast majority of North Koreans, but not beyond the means of wealthy citizens of Pyongyang looking for a treat, or beyond the means of party, army or government VIPs seeking to wine and dine senior colleagues or commemorate a particularly important event.

⁶⁵ Hannah Goldfield, "The Japanese Chain that wants you to Fish for your Dinner," *The New Yorker*, November 16th, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/11/26/the-japanese-chain-that-wants-you-to-fish-for-your-dinner>, (accessed on May 9, 2022).

⁶⁶ Yonhap, "Moon to Mix with Pyongyang Citizens in Farewell Dinner," *Yonhap News*, September, 19, 2018, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20180919005000315>, (accessed on May 9, 2022).



Figure 3. Eating at the Taedonggang

Image credit: Anonymous interviewee, used with permission

The species of fish available to eat in the Taedonggang were interesting to this author, particularly given the fragility of North Korea's maritime ecosystems, and the complexity of sourcing rare or unusual breeds for such a restaurant. The fact there are large and presumably very mature Sturgeon swimming around the focal pool on the ground floor, I thought did not necessarily mean that this rare species would be available to eat. However, having interviewed a series of academics and other visitors to North Korea for this paper, it became clear that Sturgeon definitely is on the menu at the Taedonggang. One interviewee remembered that the centre-piece of their dinner "was the fish for the caviar...they cut the head, and the fish was still moving. I asked was it still alive, and they said, of course, you just have to take the chopsticks and [makes a stabbing motion] do this in the brain..."⁶⁷ Such a fish is surely not for general consumption in North Korea, even farmed Sturgeon are notoriously complicated to raise and capturing and incarcerating wild Sturgeon, since they are by nature anadromous, migrating up and down stream in rivers and out into the ocean to breed, would be nearly impossible. *Acipenser sinensis*, the Chinese

⁶⁷ Quotation from anonymous interviewee interviewed for this paper, April 2022.

Sturgeon 中華鱈 or 철갑상어 in Korean, the nearest breed to Pyongyang are also critically endangered in the wild due to the hydroelectric dams on the Yangtze River restricting their migration, and noise disturbance and stress to the fish due to the volume of traffic in the water.⁶⁸ The population in fact became so fragile that various Chinese fisheries science bodies began a series of detailed studies of Sturgeon spawning in the early 2000's, to better understand the impact of the various dams and hydrological engineering projects on the river, as well as changes to water temperature which really impacts on spawning success.⁶⁹ The studies showed that ultimately Sturgeon migration and spawning patterns had been completely blocked by the completion of the Gezhouba Dam in 1981, requiring new spawning grounds to be created in 1982.⁷⁰ The number of infant Sturgeon and spawning events picked up again after 1982, but declined in the preceding years, until in 2013 and 2014 no infant fish were found and spawning was judged to have completely failed.⁷¹ While in 2015 four infant fish were found downstream, and a month earlier than the expected spawning time, to date the site of this spawning has not been discovered, and the population is regarded as extremely fragile.⁷²

The fragility of wild ecosystems and populations around China and North Korea such as in the Bohai/West Sea and Yangtze River may be at least part of the reason for the development of aquaculture projects and technologies in order to supply elite restaurants in North Korea. Sangchoul Yi and Wonkook Kim (2020) have written on North Korea's efforts to access and supply the global market for Atlantic Salmon (a market of nearly two hundred thousand tonnes in recent years⁷³) by the development of North Hamgyong's Sokmak Atlantic Salmon Pedigree Farm and the Raksan Offshore Salmon Farm, both of which are run by Unit 810 of the Korean People's Army.⁷⁴ North Korea, in response perhaps to declines in fish populations around the peninsula and ecological struggles, has engaged in extensive restocking of fish populations and spawning grounds. In tandem also with a long-standing tendency in North Korean developmental projects and approach to desire their organization on a "scientific and modern basis," its fisheries organizations and institutions have in particular sought to increase the volume and viability of fry hatched before and after

⁶⁸ Stefan Lovgren, "'Living Fossil Fish' Making Last Stand in China," *National Geographic*, August 15, 2007, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/article/giant-sturgeon-last-stand-china>, (accessed on May 9, 2022).

⁶⁹ Zhuang et al, "New Evidence May Support the Persistence and Adaptability of the Near-Extinct Chinese Sturgeon," *Biological Conservation* 193 (2016), 66-69.

⁷⁰ Zhuang et al, "New Evidence May Support the Persistence and Adaptability of the Near-Extinct Chinese Sturgeon," 68.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ United Nations, "UN comtrade database," <https://comtrade.un.org/>, (accessed on May 25, 2022).

⁷⁴ Yi, Sangchoul, and Wonkook Kim, "Potential for offshore aquaculture development in North Korea: Focusing on Atlantic salmon farming," *Marine Policy* 119 (2020), 104092.

release. North Korean institutions have also demonstrated that they are aware that fish farming, either at sea or in rivers, can produce pollution and sources of zoonotic disease risk, as well as potentially being impacted by pollution events or agricultural/industrial run off. The Sokmak Atlantic Salmon Pedigree and Raksan Offshore Salmon Farms have been very much integrated into research on the science of fry hatching and fry health,⁷⁵ as has Sinpho Distant-Sea Fishery Complex.⁷⁶ North Korea has also sought to engage in research on the saltwater acclimatization of fresh water species, Jikha Atlantic Salmon Pedigree Farm in particular has experimented with the cage farming in salt water of freshwater Rainbow Trout species.⁷⁷

When it comes specifically to Sturgeon, as far back as 2010, KCNA reports on developments at Ryongjong Fish Breeding Farm suggest that using water from the culturally significant Ryongjong Spring, North Korea had expended considerable effort in Sturgeon breeding.⁷⁸ This aquaculture facility had been computerized, so that the oxygen levels in the water and other water quality markers could be monitored in real time.⁷⁹ The facility also used tidal power for its electricity production, so that no extra power was required from the local grid.⁸⁰ Most importantly, research at the farm had focused on acclimatization of Sturgeon to saltier water than was normally thought possible, and so the facility had “realized the sea water breeding of sturgeon considered possible only in sea water with low salinity in sea water with salinity above 30 per cent.”⁸¹ Ryongjong’s 160 fish ponds had thus successfully bred ten species of sturgeon, and produced tens of thousands of fish.⁸²

Kim Jong-il made a visit to Ryongjong on November 22, 2010, ostensibly to celebrate the success of the facility in breeding sturgeon in saltier water. Kim is even quoted as having said during the visit “...if sturgeon and other species of fishes are bred in seawater, they are not only delicious and high in their nutrition but very high in their profitability...”⁸³ and KCNA suggests that Kim was “...very pleased to see very fat sturgeons each weighing at least one hundred kilograms and many rainbow

⁷⁵ “Kim Jong Un Inspects Fish Farms,” *Rodong Sinmun*, July 17, 2018, http://rodong.rep.kp/en/index.php?strPageID=SF01_02_01&newsID=2018-07-17-0007, (accessed on May 25, 2022).

⁷⁶ “Salmon and Founder Fries Released into Rivers and Seas,” *Rodong Sinmun*, May 28, 2020, http://rodong.rep.kp/en/index.php?strPageID=SF01_02_01&newsID=2020-05-28-0002, (accessed on May 25, 2022).

⁷⁷ “First Stage Project of Jikha Atlantic Salmon Pedigree Farm Completed,” *Rodong Sinmun*, April 13, 2020, http://rodong.rep.kp/en/index.php?strPageID=SF01_02_01&newsID=2020-04-13-0011, (accessed on May 25, 2022).

⁷⁸ KCNA, “Signal Success in Sturgeon Breeding,” *KCNA*, November 30, 2010, <http://www.kcna.co.jp/item/2010/201011/news30/20101130-22ee.html>.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ KCNA, “Kim Jong Il Inspects Fish Farm and Fish Breeding Ground,” *KCNA*, November 22, 2010, <http://www.kcna.co.jp/item/2010/201011/news22/20101122-01ee.html>.

trouts (sic), attractive chars and rare fishes that may serve as elixir in the clean fish ponds...”⁸⁴ This piece centres Sturgeon breeding amidst a nexus of practical applications in aquaculture revolving in particular around provision of clean water at lower cost, scientific and rational planning processes for the development of infrastructure, with as little impact on neighbouring or local ecologies as possible, and an increase in the value and availability of fish species like Sturgeon to “improve the standard of people’s living.”⁸⁵ Part of those improvements would be the availability of such large and luxurious fishes, and in 2009, the Taedonggang’s predecessor the Ongnyugwan restaurant had already been redesigned accordingly, a September 21, 2009 report suggested that “There are two aquariums standing on both sides of the hall of its main building, which are furnished with water-filters, automatic digital temperature controllers, oxygen blowing pumps, ultraviolet sterilizing lamps and other facilities necessary for fully meeting the ecological requirements of sturgeon. They house scores of sturgeons...”⁸⁶ Improving the standard of people’s living in North Korea, is one of those very familiar rhetorical tropes present throughout its various developmental sectors in recent years. Such improvement happens at home of course, but the availability of public amenities and restaurants are also frequently described as being part of such improvements.

Just as its predecessors had done the Taedonggang has continued to receive fish directly from fisheries research stations and the aquaculture facilities – it receives its Atlantic Salmon from the Raksan Offshore Salmon Farm for example.⁸⁷ Thus Taedonggang can be considered very much part of the environmental and scientific development of North Korea therefore, however intriguingly, for a high-end restaurant, interviewees also recounted another unusual aspect of eating in the Taedonggang, that “the food tasted like chlorine...because the fish stay in a little pool for months, and the fish tastes like chlorine...”⁸⁸ This perhaps reminds the reader, not just of the ecological impact of extracting the fish for this eatery directed at Pyongyang’s elite, but in spite of the various developmental efforts involved in the breeding and production of the Sturgeon and other fish involved also of the logistical issues involved in food supply in North Korea, logistical issues which have not been solved by the development of facilities such as Ryongjong and other efforts to make North Korean development more scientific or rational. One of the interviewees for this research commented that “a few times when we ordered raw fish, just like raw meat, when they bring it to you its frozen” Other research looking at North Korean food production considers the adoption or lack of adoption of functional hygiene standards in its

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ KCNA, “Sturgeon Aquariums Come into Being,” KCNA, September 21, 2009, <http://www.kcna.co.jp/item/2009/200909/news21/20090921-13ee.html>

⁸⁷ “Kim Jong Un Inspects Fish Farms,” *Rodong Sinmun*, July 17, 2018, http://rodong.rep.kp/en/index.php?strPageID=SF01_02_01&newsID=2018-07-17-0007, (accessed on May 25, 2022).

⁸⁸ Quotation from anonymous interviewee interviewed for this paper, April 2022.

preparation facilities and distribution,⁸⁹ and it is fascinating to see, even in a venue meant for the elite, and meant for the consumption of highly valuable and ecologically sensitive food, this was still the case.

Conclusion

There is much still to be written purely on the developing food and consumption culture in North Korea, what impact the various street stalls, fast food restaurants and foreign themed eateries will have on the urban landscape of Pyongyang. There is still even more to be written on the very common exporting of North Korean food culture through its network of Pyongyang Arirang restaurants and other outlets. This author has eaten North Korean food in North Korean owned restaurants in as far away as Kathmandu, Nepal and Bangkok, Thailand, and the Ongnyugwan has even spawned a chain with a number of branches in China and as far away as Dubai (and at one point, Amsterdam).⁹⁰ These restaurants in a way create very small pieces of North Korean territory, from the dishes available, to the dress of the staff, and the loop of patriotic music videos on the television, and like restaurant businesses everywhere they may have an environmental impact. Whatever this paper has done it can only be the most partial of considerations of its field, and can touch only lightly on North Korea's environmental history. It is clear from previous work from both environmental history and historical geography, that as societies develop and their consumption patterns change their impact on local and regional ecologies can reform and reconfigure them. Carl Sauer, the influential geographer in the first half of the twentieth century in his work on human agriculture and its impact on the landscapes of what is now New Mexico and the wider American southwest, theorised this as a "morphology of landscape."⁹¹ Mark Elvin has explored what social and economic expansion meant for the elephant populations of China over two millennia.⁹² While there are certainly no elephants involved, and the scale of social change and transformation in North Korea, especially for its elites, its donju and any developing middle class is unclear in the future, any kind of growth in their numbers and their ecological footprint will have an impact on its environment and the future of the landscapes on which that footprint depends.

⁸⁹ Yi Seul Kim, "The Case of Anticipating Changes in the North Korean Food Safety Regime," *Journal of Environmental Law and Litigation* 35 (2020), 299-238.

⁹⁰ Adam Taylor, "The Weird World of North Korean Restaurants Abroad," *The Washington Post*, April 6, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/04/08/the-weird-world-of-north-koreas-overseas-restaurants/>, (accessed on May 9, 2022).

⁹¹ Carl Sauer, "The Morphology of Landscape," (1925) in *The Cultural Geography Reader* (London: Routledge, 2008), 108-116.

⁹² Mark Elvin, *The Retreat of the Elephants: A History of the Environment* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004).

Such a fragility is particularly the case for North Korea's watery and coastal terrains, because they are so fragile due to historical overfishing and extraction, environmental crisis, climate change, sea temperature rises, and a huge drop in biodiversity, particularly in the Bohai Sea/West Sea...and that is not even to mention the geopolitical difficulties faced by Pyongyang and the impact of UNSC and other sanctions. As this paper has shown North Korea seeks to mitigate the collapse in biodiversity through research around achieving greater success or capacity in fish breeding or fry hatching, and releasing fry back into the seas to boost fish populations. Pyongyang has also sought to investigate whether it is possible to improve the acclimatization process for freshwater fish, including sturgeon, so they can be bred at sea in fish farms. Ryongjong Seaside Fish Farm and Ryongjong Fish Breeding Ground, Sokmak Atlantic Salmon Pedigree, Raksan Offshore Salmon Farm, and Sinpho Distant-Sea Fishery Complex have been particularly important in this work. There is a connection between the luxurious landscape of the Taedonggang restaurant and such aquacultural research spaces, as Ryongjong Seaside Fish Farm being used to breed sea water acclimatized Sturgeon, Raksan Offshore Salmon Farm also used to supply the restaurant with Atlantic Salmon and Jikha Atlantic Salmon Pedigree Farm will be used to supply seawater bred Rainbow Trout.

Ultimately while there is little to connect the poor unfortunate young men from Chongjin whose skeletal remains wash up on the coast of Honshu after months of drifting, who were forced to sea by political pressure and financial imperatives, and the elites of Pyongyang potentially dining out on Sturgeon at the Taedonggang, eating burgers at a branch of Samtaesong or snatching some tteokbokki from a street stall on the way home to their new apartment, they are part of the same consumptive pressure that marks the environmental history and present of North Korea. As North Korea's population increases over time, as its elites and middle class rise in number, as some of the "wicked" and knotty problems of the Division System and the frozen geo and regional politics of the peninsula become unwound or resolved perhaps at some point in the future, the pressures on the ecologies and environments on which it depends now and which it will depend in any future, can only grow, grow in an age of increasing fragility and instability, and require research generated centrally to find strategies to improve or increase the availability of particular species of fish, like Sturgeon, Salmon and Trout. As we consider the elites of Pyongyang, their leisure, their moments of relaxation and consumption therefore, we should try to maintain connections with the wider ecological webs of life in which they and those moments and practices are enmeshed.⁹³ This paper and its author at least hope to contribute to the understanding of those connections and processes.

⁹³ Jason Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capita* (London: Verso Books, 2015).

Abstract

Fish have long been of importance to North Korea, vital to its developmental ambitions, and through structures of division such as the Northern Limit Line, also to its politics. Fish and seafood in general have been key elements in the cuisine and dietary practices of the Korean peninsula since the beginning of its recorded history. Korean food frequently has fish, molluscs and cephalopods at its heart, from more common forms such as jjigae stews 찌개, to the challenging san-nakji 산낙지 (live octopus). Fish is eaten everywhere on the Korean peninsula, though of course it is less frequently eaten in the interior and in mountainous areas. Fish and seafood products are also eaten across all social classes on the Korean peninsula and in Korean history. In particular miyeok 미역 or wind/beach dried kelp has long been a vital element in Korean cooking, and the drying of miyeok by coastal communities was a key element to many of those communities social and economic practices in previous centuries. Of course there were varieties of seafood and maritime products that only the rich and elite could afford, and places where such food could be bought and consumed naturally became rarefied and expensive places, and seafood became an important element in the rediscovered “Korean Royal Court Cuisine” 조선왕조 궁중요리 *Joseon wangjo gungjung yori*, which harked back to the food practices of the Joseon dynasty. North Korea itself claims or aspires to be a classless society and a political space where there are no elites, and where the memory of the Joseon dynasty is dismissed as a feudal aberration. This paper explores an element of the reality of North Korea dining and food consumption and practices, particularly around seafood. Considering the vital importance of fishing and seafood to North Korea, particularly as a source of revenue and goods for export, and the role of fish and maritime products as a vital source of protein in Pyongyang’s conceptions of socialist developmental practice, the paper in particular considers the environmental and ecological histories of the seas around the north of the Korean peninsula in mind, as well as North Korea’s history of aquaculture, and efforts to farm particular species like Sturgeon and Atlantic Cod. Having done this the paper seeks to understand what the presence of elite fish restaurants and dining places in Pyongyang, and the research and logistics required to support them mean within the nation’s environmental and developmental history.

Keywords: North Korea, Fishing, Fish Restaurants, Elite consumption, Fishing history