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Everyday Bribery in North Korea as Moral Economy

ABSTRACT This study investigates how bribery is defined, negotiated, and practiced in the everyday lives of ordinary North Koreans. Reflecting on interviews spanning over two decades with North Korean migrants in South Korea and China, a team of North Korea experts has identified the patterns of micro-level bribery in everyday life in North Korea that differ, to some extent, from those of other post-communist states in Eastern Europe and Asia. By carefully examining the accounts of ten former North Korean residents, the researchers find that the traditional socialist economy, once prevalent in workplaces, schools, and hospitals, has now been supplanted by individual-to-individual private market interactions. Moreover, bribery serves not only as an informal practice but also as a "moral economy," which differs from the more organized forms of corruption seen at the elite and enterprise levels.

KEYWORDS everyday bribery, moral economy, North Korea, marketization, North Korean defector testimonies

INTRODUCTION

North Korea is considered one of the most corrupt countries in the world ranking 174th out of 180 countries in the Corruption Perceptions Index (Transparency International 2022). The existing literature on bribery in post-communist states focuses mostly on its role in economic transitions to market economies, its function in informal economies, and how its incidence may be correlated with economic productivity. There are several case studies from Eastern Europe and Asia where post-communist states are found to have embraced market mechanisms in their domestic economic transition to market economy (Beesley 2015; Cao, Li, and Xia 2021; Carrier 2021; Chiweshe and Mahiya 2021; Heinzen 2020; Ivlevs and Hinks 2018; Morris and Polese 2015; Listrovaya 2021; Nystrand 2014; Reisinger et al., 2017; Wu and Meeks 2020). In these transitional economies, bribery and other forms of corruption take place on a large scale in business enterprises. In China, for example, party officials are often the ones engaged in bribery and diverse illegal economic activities (Ang 2020; Cao, Li, and Xia 2021; Wu and Meeks

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2020). Ang (2020) categorizes four types of corruption, with the most distinctive form in China being “access money” operated by elites in exchange for benefits. Sarah Chayes (2015) characterizes corrupt governments in underperforming countries like Zimbabwe or Afghanistan as “vertically integrated criminal organizations,” a description that is also applied to corruption in North Korea (Carothers 2022).

In post-socialist countries, however, bribery may function not only as a means of corruption but also as a survival strategy in the everyday practices of ordinary people. As noted by Ang (2020), petty corruption by non-elites, involving material and/or social exchanges, such as the “speed money” phenomenon observed in China, may also be prevalent in other post-socialist countries, including our case study on North Korea. Furthermore, considering bribery’s characteristics as a grassroots survival strategy, this study takes a step further to argue that micro-level everyday bribery among ordinary North Koreans can be viewed as a form of “moral economy,” not unlike a recent study on Zimbabwe (Chiweshe and Mahiya 2021). North Korea is yet to enter a stage of post-communist and has, in principle, remained a socialist state in its constitution and state ideology. North Korea’s planned economy has, nevertheless, undergone repeated transformations toward a more hybridized form, blending socialist ideology with market mechanisms, particularly after the *Arduous March* in the 1990s, known as the worst famine in North Korean history. While the regime has formally upheld a socialist planned economy since its establishment in 1948, only limited market activities have operated within North Korea and as border trades along its borders with China, particularly since the beginning stages of marketization in the 1990s (Han 2021; Kim 2010; Park 2018; Yang 2016). The acceleration of marketization in the 2000s has, however, resulted in an increase in economic activity nationwide, with widespread engagement among the North Korean people. Within this context of North Korea, however, the working mechanism of bribery among ordinary people in everyday life remains largely unknown.

In this study, we define bribery as “the act of offering cash or valuable material goods from one private individual to another, typically in a public position, with the expectation of receiving a favor in return” and a moral economy as “the practice of grassroots reciprocal exchanges involving small amounts of cash or items among non-elites, driven by moral and ethical intentions.” In the following sections, we first review existing literature and presenting our theoretical framework, which utilizes the concept of “moral economy” to explain the functioning of everyday bribery. Then we detail our data and methodology, along with a brief overview of the latest anti-corruption laws in North Korea. Subsequently, we explore how ordinary North Koreans’ perceptions of bribery have evolved over time and in different contexts. Our particular focus is on three sectors closely related to essential services: the workplace, education, and public health. Based on in-depth interviews, we have observed that bribery in post-famine North Korea takes on various forms to secure favors, such as obtaining privileged positions, accessing competitive services, or obtaining exclusive goods and services. We conclude that North Korean views on bribery have been diverse in post-famine North Korea, with some recent arrivals in South Korea even associating bribery

TABLE 1. Profiles of Interviewees

	Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Residential Province in NK	Profession in NK	Year of Defection	Entry into SK	Date of Interview
1	Heejin	F	37	North Hamgyong	Teacher	2001	2003	7/17/2004
2	Miok	F	82	North Hamgyong	Medical doctor	2003	2004	11/10/2013
3	Eunhee	F	58	South Pyongan	Teacher	2015	2016	10/16/2016
4	Chongnam	M	33	Ryganggang	Forestry labor	2017	2017	8/19/2017
5	Haesung	M	46	Chagang	Foreign currency dealer	2019	2019	12/14/2020
6	Bobae	F	45	Pyongyang	Accountant	2019	2019	7/27/2020
7	Jimin	M	43	Ryganggang	Forestry management	2019	2020	12/31/2020
8	Gangnam	M	50	Pyongyang	Diplomat	2019	2020	8/13/2020
9	Arum	M	41	Ryganggang	Law enforcement	2019	2020	6/5/2021
10	Dongbae	M	42	South Pyongan	Law enforcement	2019	2020	6/16/2021

positively as a form of “virtue” and “mutual aid.” This suggests that bribery operates as a “moral economy” that cannot be fully explained solely by economic principles or state–society relations.

BRIBERY AS A “MORAL ECONOMY”: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Bribery as Informal Economy

Most existing studies on bribery are from applied economics, business ethics, and public policy. Jeremy Morris and Abel Polese (2015), for example, collect cases of informal economies in post-socialist states, their practices, institutions, and networks. Informal economy, by definition, is economic activities that are not permitted by any form of government. Informed by in-depth case studies focusing on a wide spectrum of micro and macro post-socialist realities from Lithuania to Kosovo and from Ukraine to China, Morris and Polese (2015) demonstrate the multifaceted nature of informality and suggest that it is a widely diffused phenomenon, used at all levels of societies in post-socialist transition. For this study, while we critically engage with broad concepts such as corruption, nepotism, and illegal transactions, we focus on how bribery is entangled in the everyday lives of North Koreans as a reality, thus moving beyond a simple functionalist approach. In transitional economies, informal economy existed in Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Georgia (Morris and Polese 2015). Informality was reproduced in the democratization process in Bosnia (Koutkova 2015).

The role of informal workers during the financial crisis in Lithuania (Knudsen in Morris and Polese 2015) and the culture of informality in Kosovo (Danielsson in Morris and Polese 2015) are highly insightful for the current study. These cases offer insights into how bribery was understood as an informal economy that replaced formal economy in

post-socialist states. The importance of personalized relationships in post-socialist rural Bulgaria (Giordano in Morris and Polese 2015) and informal payments for healthcare services in Lithuania and Ukraine (Stepurko et al. in Morris and Polese 2015) also provide empirical evidence to understand how micro-level everyday bribery operated in post-socialist states in Eastern Europe. In Asia, there are detailed records of similar practices of informal payments in healthcare in China (Yang 2016) as well as in the various informal practices of Kyrgyz police (O’Shea 2015).

Economists have attempted to comprehend the interactions between parties engaged in giving and taking bribes by employing game theories (Zheng and Liao 2019), with their primary focus revolving around understanding the impact of corruption on productivity. Employing data from the Business Environment and Enterprise Survey by the World Bank on Central Asia and Eastern Europe, Wu and Meeks (2020) examined whether bribery “greases” or “sands” the growth of private enterprises in post-socialist states. They found that bribery could increase a firm’s output and employment growth significantly while deterring firms’ productivity and innovation. The problem with these economic theories is that they focus on firm-level analysis or what bribes mean for firms’ productivity and a state anti-corruption policy. What is more interesting and insightful for the current study are the various forms of informal market practices.

In the context of North Korea, Joo (2010) analyzed the functioning mechanisms of the shadow economy, although the focus was on market activities and did not specifically delve into bribery or corruption. On the other hand, Choi (2013) shed light on bribery as a common practice in North Korea’s everyday politics, arguing that bribery has become widespread and more organized over the years, citing the works of Lankov (2006) and Lee (2009). Bribery in this context does not necessarily render more marketized enterprise-level or institutionalized state-level corruption as “crimes,” as understood in some of the latest US-based literature on the subject (Yeo 2021; Greitens and Silberstein 2022). Yeo (2021), in his study on changing state–society relations in North Korea, finds increased private market activities and concludes that Pyongyang has institutionalized market mechanisms while strengthening political control over market activities.

While existing studies are valuable when examining bribery, corruption, and market activities from a state or institutional perspective, our study focuses more on everyday working mechanisms of bribery for ordinary people on the ground as in Ang’s “speed money.” In North Korea, socialism is still ongoing, at least in theory. Both Korean Workers’ Party members and most ordinary citizens have been involved in gifting items in return for favors in one way or another. The main objective of the current study is to examine the prevalence of everyday bribes in workplaces, schools, and hospitals as survival strategies used by ordinary North Koreans within the context of the highly controlled state economy.

In this context, bribery can be seen as an indication of increasing agency within the middle class and corresponding survival tactics adopted from the grassroots level. Moreover, everyday bribery is not viewed negatively but rather considered virtuous, normative, or even polite behavior within North Korean society. It serves as a way of “saving face” for those who receive bribes, as highlighted in Bronwen Dalton’s (2005) cultural analysis

of corruption practices in North Korea. However, this cultural and moral aspect of micro-bribery among non-elite North Koreans is not adequately reflected in the existing literature.

Bribery as “Moral Economy” in North Korea

The way bribery is perceived in society is important in understanding public trust in political leadership. If the public sees their leaders as corrupt, greedy, and self-interested, they will lose their confidence in the system and loyalty to the party. On the contrary, if people view bribery as a culturally acceptable practice or even “virtuous,” as is the case in North Korea, public trust will remain stable. W. M. Reisinger et al. (2017) studied the relationship between the perception of everyday corruption and the public attitude toward political leadership in Russia. They focused on small-scale corruption by employees of service-providing organizations, drawing from a 2015 survey on the links between personal corrupt behavior and political attitudes. They found that participation in everyday corruption lowered a person’s support for the political regime and that bribery did not help citizens pursue their needs in the face of inefficient state institutions and less developed economies. In Russia, those who frequently encounter corruption are less happy with the regime. Would this be true for North Korea? The answer is mixed as we will demonstrate in the following sections.

Academic discussion about bribery in North Korea has been limited to observations relating to increased corruption and state control over the past two decades. Earlier work suggested that bureaucratic corruption destroyed the socialist system during the famine in the 1990s and that it was accompanied by a rapid deterioration of state control (Kim, 2008), and saw rampant bribery as a form of simple *pocket-filling* bad bribes as opposed to *production-oriented* good bribes that may contribute to systemic stability (Kim 2010). Some scholars capture positive and supplementary aspects of bribery in place for the failing state economy. Hyungjoong Park et al. (2012), for example, identify a close relationship between bribery and the non-operational public distribution system. They argue that although the government often purges high-ranking officials to give a warning against corruption, bribery is tolerated and generally fills the void in the public distribution system. Similarly, Dongho Jo and Jiyeon Park (2014) note that bribery was accelerated by unusually loose regulations in the planned economy and the post-recovery from the interruption of the public distribution system. Mikael Weissmann (2014) even notes the benefits of bribery and the shadow economy for the survival of both the regime and, more importantly, ordinary citizens. As such, these studies suggest that rampant bribery could be an internal threat factor in the context of a possibility for regime collapse or transition to market economy.

Min Hong (2005) uses the concept of “moral economy” to explain the changing face of post-1990 North Korean society. The complexity of change in the politics, economics, and society of North Korea cannot be fully understood by solely schematizing it through the regression of planned economy and the expansion of markets, political control, and defection. To grasp the true composition of change emerging from the organic present in North Korea, a more nuanced and comprehensive approach is required. Referring to

E. P. Thompson (1963), John Fairbank (1992), and James C. Scott (1979), Hong (2005) compares the current state of North Korea with the 18th-century British food riots that were not simply violence from starvation, but a “moral economy” (Thompson 1963) whereby anger was directed at the immoral nature of the state’s economic system. According to Thompson (1963), the relationship between the “crowd” and the state should be investigated not simply through economic structures and activities, but from a moral dimension. The relationship does not halt at the logic of a capitalist market economy; it is a system whereby the community acts together in reciprocity to safely ensure its livelihood. From this point of view, there is a standardization of behavioral principles that follow the ethics of survival.

Karl Polanyi (1944, 1977), too, opposed the idea that human society only follows economic principles. No one can survive in isolation without relying on others. In a society where mutual assistance is crucial for survival, bestowing favors upon others contributes to stabilizing the community. Such acts enable the redistribution of benefits, ultimately fostering the survival and well-being of the entire community. Polanyi (1944, 1977), through his research on the economy of ancient Greece, explains that the exchange of gifts, trade, and process of redistribution in human society, through various routes, leads to concrete institutionalization rather than simply halting at reciprocity. Hong (2005) argues that there is a need for microanalysis of the cooperation for survival seen among ordinary North Korean people in their daily lives. Indeed, in some recent studies on bribery in developing states, bribery is associated with an increase in relative income share among the poorest, mitigating disposable income inequality (Nel 2020).

Boyoung Yoon (2021) goes further and argues that bribery functions as “mutual aid” and that, since the 1990s, it has become indispensable in the operation of the North Korean economy, with the collapse of the public distribution system. In essence, bribery is perceived to compensate for the lack of sufficient state-provided resources and benefits, effectively acting as a substitute for outstanding labor costs.

Jaehoon Han (2021) points to the Soviet equivalent of *blat* or “brift” (see, for example, Listrovaya [2021] on post-Soviet Russia and Sypniewski [2021] on post-Soviet Poland). The reciprocal nature of bribes is accompanied by warm sentiments akin to a membership. Such reciprocity may appear to embody friendship and camaraderie but, at the same time, can require gaining an upper hand over others whether it be through material assets or job opportunities. With this aim in mind, our study seeks to provide an insight into the current and historical perspectives of bribery within the everyday life of North Koreans, particularly in the workplace, education, and health sectors.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The data for this study are from ten carefully selected former North Korean residents: eight who left North Korea as late as 2019 and now live in South Korea, and two who left North Korea in 2001 and 2003, respectively. Four are women and six are men, aged between 33 and 82 at the time of their respective interviews. The rationale for choosing this selective sample is to demonstrate the changes in perceptions toward bribery and how

bribery has become everyday practice in North Korea over the past two decades. Those who left North Korea in the 1990s close to the period of famine and economic turmoil known as the *Arduous March* described bribery negatively as a social evil. In contrast, recent North Korean migrants presented rather positive views toward bribery as *todök* (virtue) necessary for compensating the costs involving exchanges of goods and services that the North Korean state cannot provide.

The first criterion for selecting interviewees was individuals who were former North Korean residents and had direct experiences with either giving or receiving bribes. The lead author searched through her private collections of interviews with North Korean migrants and selected two of the most relevant interviews containing mention of bribery. The two interviewees had left North Korea in 2001 and 2003, respectively, and shared their experiences working as a teacher and a doctor in North Korea. During conversations, interviewees mentioned how “*noemul* (bribery)” was being received in public services, including schools and hospitals, in the 1990s when the public distribution system first started breaking down.

The lead author has been conducting qualitative and longitudinal interviews with these two North Koreans who now live outside the Korean Peninsula. These in-depth interviews often necessitate multiple sessions with the same individuals, each lasting several hours. The other eight interviews were conducted by the second author, who has also been involved in extensive interviews with North Korean migrants in China and South Korea. These interviews took place between 2016 and 2021. The data were selected based on the informants’ direct experiences with bribery, and no secondhand accounts were included. The first interview did not have any institutional support for ethics or data management at the time it was conducted. The rest of the interviews, however, have cleared ethics approvals from the first and the second authors’ respective institutions for various research projects funded by governments.

We also selected interviewees who worked or were involved in the three sectors that are critical for a socialist state to maintain its legitimacy, namely, the workplace, education, and health services. Work is related to basic subsistence as it brings income to sustain individuals and their families financially. Schools provide basic education and survival skills for future generations. Hospitals treat members of society to maintain a healthy population. Work, education, and healthcare are not only fundamental socio-economic human rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, but also in socialist states where these essential services are considered the state’s core responsibilities. In North Korea, however, since the *Arduous March* in the mid-1990s, the state has not been able to provide such necessities. These essential services have been provided by private actors and often involve petty bribery in everyday practice. Our interviewees had been engaged in law enforcement, accounting, forestry, education, health, diplomacy, and foreign currency business as mid-ranking workers. They are not particularly considered high-ranking elite officials in North Korea. In this regard, our dataset considers non-elite ordinary citizens involved with petty cash or petty item “speed money,” according to Ang’s (2020) four categories of corruption.

The ten in-depth interviews particularly focus on the contextualized understanding of everyday bribery and the changing perception toward it. In contrast to the interviews conducted in the 2000s, where bribery and corruption were mostly viewed negatively and considered unethical behavior, our recent informants who have left North Korea reveal a shift in perception. They highlight the moral aspect of bribery and its increasing prevalence as a replacement for the formal economy on the ground, if not entirely replacing the socialist planned economy.

This is not to praise or positively assess the role of bribery in North Korea but to recognize its function as a moral economy, operational while people do not have enough power to challenge the political leadership. The selected interview excerpts, therefore, were specifically intended to validate the very function of everyday bribery and North Korean perception of it from a moral lens.

We do not attempt to argue that our small sample of ten former North Korean residents represents the entire North Korean population, nor that of the North Korean migrants in South Korea. Existing scholars in North Korean studies have identified issues with using North Korean defector testimonies as valid data (Song and Denney 2019). One way to mitigate the problems with verifying defector testimonies is to cross-examine different datasets from multiple sources and researchers, which we intend to achieve for this collaborative research. The authors' extensive experience in interviewing North Koreans and their collection of previous interview data have been valuable in cross-checking and validating the newly acquired interview data. In our qualitative study, we specifically focus on what Ang refers to as the "speed money" type of corruption, involving non-elites (or the simmering middle class in North Korea), where favors are exchanged from a moral and cultural perspective, rather than purely as economic activities. As a result, our informants are unable to provide insights into large-scale elite-led corruption involving theft or exchanges that may have occurred in North Korea.

LEGAL CHANGES REGARDING CORRUPTION AS CRIME

Before we move into the detailed accounts of recent North Korean perceptions of bribery, it is worth reviewing the legal setting of how the North Korean state has redefined corruption. Geunsik Kim (1987, p. 172), a North Korean legal expert, highlighted that bribery was a crime whereby an individual received money or goods in exchange for either performing or not performing certain duties. Kim (1987, p. 172) warned against bribery, noting that it was a remnant of an exploitative society from before the socialist revolution and that where there was bribery there was also rampant obsequiousness, both of which make socialist principles untenable. And yet, the state has made amendments to the punishment of bribery in the past decades (Ministry of Justice 1993, 872; Law Publishing House 2004, 828; NIS 2020a, 346). Article 130 of the 1987 Constitution defines the sentences for bribery as up to two years of hard labor or up to four years in cases of large or forced bribes or bribery committed by high-ranking individuals. The 2004 Amendment reduced the sentence to up to two years of labor training (Article 242). In 2015, this was further reduced to a maximum year of labor

training for individuals who received a large bribe. The 2015 Criminal Law stipulates a maximum of five years of hard labor for individuals who received an exceptionally large bribe, and five to ten years of hard labor for particularly grave cases (Article 230).

Until 1987, bribes, regardless of size, were classified as violating the law by involving monetary and material gains in exchange for work-related duties and carried a standard punishment of two to four years of hard labor. The 2004 revision included an ambiguous concept known as “mass bribery,” with the punishment reduced to a maximum of one year of “labor training.” In contrast to “hard labor” conducted at political prisons, “labor training” is a punishment aimed at individuals classified as simple criminals, whereby the individual in question is put into isolation at a labor training camp through forced hard labor. The 2015 Bribery Law does stipulate that those who partake in “mass bribery” may be sentenced to hard labor for up to up to ten years in particularly grave cases. However, there is no information as to what “mass bribery” constitutes. Furthermore, it is unknown how law enforcement implements the amended criminal law in practice.

The bribery-related provisions note various considerations when determining punishment, including whether the individual was simply carrying out their professional duties, contributing to the state through the act, and whether the individual can compensate for any damages that occurred. These legal changes concerning bribery were a response to changing reality and reflected a tendency for the state to tolerate widely practiced bribery in the everyday lives of North Koreans.

EVERYDAY BRIBERY IN NORTH KOREA AS MORAL ECONOMY

Based on our in-depth interviews, we analyze how the micro-level petty cash “speed money” type of corruption has taken place and is perceived in North Korea. The following narratives from former North Korean residents demonstrate how everyday bribery is practiced and perceived among ordinary North Koreans. The accounts provided by our informants shed light on how the perception of bribery has evolved in present-day North Korean society compared to that of 20 years ago when the authors initially started interviewing North Korean migrants. For example, Heejin, who was a 34-year-old teacher at a secondary school when she left North Korea and was interviewed in 2004 in South Korea, described how the concepts of gifts and bribery were intertwined and ambiguous in the school context:

It’s difficult to tell what’s an acceptable [gift] and what’s not [bribery] as a good socialist teacher. North Korean parents, just like South Koreans, are obsessed with their kids’ education. If a teacher favors one student, it would be against socialist principles and will be condemned by other teachers and students. You will not be a good teacher if you’re not fair to all students. Parents normally know the boundary, and a pack of cigarettes or a bag of corn powder will do as a gift. No more than that. Once the mother of one of my students presented me with cash in an envelope and it was quite a lot. I did not accept it.

What was an appropriate “gift” or not was decided between the giver and the receiver. Small gifts were not considered bribery. Receiving sizable cash, however, was not right for her as a “good socialist teacher.” Bribery was perceived negatively, not only for the socialist principles the state had imposed but also for work ethics and morality. Another former North Korean resident and medical doctor, Miok (then 72 when she left North Korea, interviewed in 2013 in London) told us a similar story:

People [patients] always gave me something, cigarettes or bags of grain or vegetables but these were gifts as a courtesy, not bribery. If they want specific medicines, they gave me cash in Chinese Yuan or US dollars, or more expensive cigarettes such as Marlboro I could exchange or sell in the market. . . . Western cigarettes were popular as men showed off their wealth and status via the brand of cigarettes. Party officials or law enforcement wouldn't budge without those bribery cigarettes. Really bad. . . I couldn't live without any salary as the state couldn't pay me. While I still practiced my medical profession, I could not accept bribery. I started making and selling homemade alcohol in the market as a side job.

While Miok acknowledged the rampant practice of bribery by party officials and law enforcement agents, she perceived it a “bad” practice for work ethics and purportedly denied accepting bribery as a medical doctor. At first in the 1990s, she thought the regime would recover from the socialist economy. Economic hardship, however, worsened throughout the 2000s, and that was why she eventually left North Korea. This practice and perception toward bribery have changed over the past 20 years as the Kim regime has allowed limited market activities in the North Korean economy. Though not officially acknowledged, the state has displayed a level of tolerance toward bribery on small to medium scales, even as it publicly denounces and penalizes those involved in large-scale corruption, particularly elites. An example of this was the execution of Kim Jong Un's uncle, Chang Song Thaek, in 2013. *Rodong Sinmun*, the party's daily, published editorials on eradicating corruption among bureaucrats (2018), which is a sign of Kim's recognition of widely practiced bribery. The fact that Kim's anti-corruption campaigns never succeeded as bribery is now deeply rooted and morally accepted among ordinary North Koreans. At a societal level, ordinary citizens also gradually accepted petty bribery as a norm, a courtesy, and a virtuous act to show respect for those who provide essential services by paying the market price under a malfunctioning economy. This act is considered mutual support, constituting a moral economy.

Bribery as Moral Economy at the Workplace

Interviews with migrants from North Korea suggest that various bribery economies are operating according to the workplace, with broad permeation across both low (individual) and high economic sectors such as factories and businesses in key industries. Arum, a man in his late 30 s from Ryanggang Province, had worked as a police officer in North Korea. Arum explained that the official wage he had received at the time was only 3,500 won per month (equivalent to \$2 USD) and that this was quite high compared to wages for other jobs. Nevertheless, Arum testified that he could not afford a kilogram of rice at

the market and that it was virtually impossible to make a living on his monthly salary. Officially, the Socialist Enterprise Responsibility Management System stipulated that each worker must be provided with remuneration by their affiliate institution; however, there was a significant gap between official salaries and actual commodity prices.

The bribery economy serves the dual purpose of compensating for inadequate wages and supporting the official economy in a paradoxical manner. In cases where enterprises lack sufficient support from the central government to function properly, they may not shut down entirely. Instead, they employ minimal labor to continue minimal operations while receiving bribes from individuals who do not actually come to work. This system allows enterprises to survive despite the lack of proper support, and the bribes contribute to keeping them afloat. Those not coming to work are instead then tasked with obtaining resources necessary for production. Of course, if the labor ratio is not maintained well, then there is the risk of labor shortage and lack of capacity to continue operation; and so, accordingly, both workers and managers are coordinated to ensure minimum functionality by being mutually accommodating in their respective roles and pursuing informal economic activities. The profit handed over to the state, as well as the living expenses and wages of workers, can be supplemented by utilizing the goods produced. Individual workers, for example, make up for shortages in wages by using factory materials to manufacture surplus which is then redistributed on the market. Chongnam, a young man from Ryanggang Province in his 20 s who had worked in forestry, gave details on how he supplemented his wages by making wooden furniture:

There were a total of 500 workers at my forestry office and about 30 in my team. I had to make and sell furniture, paying 50,000 won to the state. The official monthly salary was 1,500–2,000 won, but you could earn 30,000–35,000 won for selling one door, so the more you made and sold the better. When my team of 30 paid state dues, the team leader would take part of the payment. Supervisors, team leaders, and junior secretaries all pay their assigned fees and take a portion for themselves. That's how people made ends meet.

Proceeds from the products Chongnam produced and sold would go to paying the government contribution allocated to him and keep the rest to cover living expenses. Here, the team leader was tasked with managing 30 workers, a role that would then be partially paid for with bribes from workers. In return, they would overlook deviations such as labor outside of standard working hours. Additionally, they would accept bribes from those who were idle without the permission to not engage in work. Team leaders would then use bribes to pay their own allocated government contribution and keep the rest to cover living expenses.

Dongbae, a man in his 40 s from South Pyongan Province who worked in law enforcement, explained that North Korean organizations operated based on obligations set by the state. People would perform work duties while receiving bribes according to their daily needs. Possessing a role with more authority in bribe networks based on rank meant that one could eventually receive more bribes and was, thus, also fulfilling more financial obligations to the state. Dongbae explains:

The operating systems were all the same. If you needed a big permission for something, you would give a big bribe. If you needed a small permission, you would give a small bribe. So, to receive bigger bribes, you needed to be in a high position. Those who contributed more to the state (or to national projects) than had been designated would be recognized as more loyal: the higher the figure, the higher your loyalty. Those recognized as loyal could be promoted to roles with greater authority. It's the same all the way up just below from Kim Jong-Un, all the way down to the masses.

Recent North Korean migrants we spoke to for this study presented a rather mixed view of everyday bribery, not as a necessary “evil” but something moral and ethical. They consider bribery as *sangho bojo* (mutual support) required for survival where one cannot survive, only relying on official wages, rather than a criminal act of corruption (Yoon 2021). Bobae, a woman in her 40 s who left North Korea in 2019, referred to bribes as *todök* (morality or virtue):

People would use many different expressions to refer to those who didn't give bribes, such as immoral, not very smart, or slow-witted. It became corruption, illegal and non-socialist, only if you got caught. Sure, bribery is not socialist, but it's all connected like a food chain.

In the realm of daily life, bribes are perceived as a legitimate price paid by people for services (Hong 2005). In such contexts, bribes paid to people for services of an equivalent value are interpreted as “moral” acts, supplementing, if not replacing, the official socialist economy that has been broken for a while and has not been able to pay adequate wages. Everyday bribery at the workplace is a means of survival for both the receiving and giving parties.

Petty Gifts for Teachers as Moral, Ethical, and Rightful Tuition Fees

Education is a key area to constantly inform the people of the tyranny of imperialism (Kim, 1978). In his 1977 work *Theses on Socialist Education*, Kim Il Sung stresses that teachers are responsible for cultivating revolutionaries (Kim 1978, 387). The cultivation of people is vital for the socialist revolution against external threats from Japanese colonialism and US imperialism, which served as an essential pillar of regime stability. Education was made free in 1959 and, after six rounds of educational reforms, a 12-year compulsory education system was introduced in 2012. As a result, North Korean students receive free compulsory education from the age of 5 to 17, consisting of 1 year of kindergarten and 12 years of primary, middle, and high school education (Om 2017, 2–5). Under Article 16 of the Education Act, it is further stipulated that no school is to receive any payments related to school admission, enrollment, classes, or extracurricular activities (NIS 2020b, 540).

The realities of education have, however, changed drastically due to economic difficulties as schools could not receive sufficient support from the state. According to our informants, educators in North Korea are people of authority who are highly respected. They receive gratuities from students, parents, and even graduates on special occasions. For teachers, it is tricky to openly engage in economic activities as they are expected to maintain professional integrity and a prominent level of social dignity. Eunhee, a former mathematics teacher in her 50 s from North Hamgyong Province, said that she had to move to a new village in

South Pyongan in 2000, only to earn a living at a market. Eunhee did not want to be seen as a market vendor in her hometown where she had gained respect and authority as a teacher. After Eunhee's husband had passed away during the mass famine, it became impossible to make a living through her official salary. Eunhee noted:

Even if I had quit teaching, it would have been difficult to conduct any business in North Hamgyong. I was, after all, a respected teacher. What would students and their families think of me, had they spotted me selling stuff at the market? It would have been embarrassing. And so, I moved to South Pyongan where I did not know anyone and could do business at a marketplace.

More recently, student cadres created a new social order, which may include class presidents, vice presidents, and class representatives, a proud honor for both students and their parents. The roles may be of benefit in pursuing future career paths. To become a student cadre, one must not only have good grades and live an exemplary life but also be favored by teachers as they have the authority to elect student cadres. Jimin, a man in his 40s who had lived a relatively prosperous life in North Korea, tells us about a letter from his child's teacher:

The teacher wrote something like this: "we need money to improve the classroom environment. Shouldn't the class president and vice president play a role in this? I would appreciate it if you could send me X amount and by X date via your child." This is an example of some of the reasons teachers can come up with when asking for a bribe. Some money may indeed go to improving the classroom environment, but most goes toward the teacher's living expenses. In the past, I criticized a teacher for telling such lies to get money, but teachers can't be involved in business and so it's hard for them. It's difficult for ordinary students to give money and teachers don't normally ask. But parents of the class president and vice president, such as us, are conscientious and want to morally help the teacher because they devote themselves to our child's education. (Yoon 2021, 66)

In North Korea, providing economic support to educators is considered a normative act, as it helps to run schools given the state's inability to pay teachers' salaries or improve building environments. In this context, offering financial assistance to teachers is viewed as a practical way to sustain the educational system. This practice formed an implicit rule whereby only the children from wealthy families that can afford such exercises become student cadres: socialist education, affected by market principles and economic hierarchization. Bobae, a woman in her 40s whose father was a high-ranking official in the Korean Workers' Party, explained:

There is a great passion for education in North Korea. In wealthier households, children are taught to play instruments such as the violin and piano from the age of four to promote intellectual development. Entry into prestigious arts kindergartens such as Gyeongsang and Daedongmun in Pyongyang is highly competitive. Directors select talented children with a few entering the school for \$3,000 (USD) in bribes. Elite education is a must if you are to secure a good job in North Korea. . . . Education determines fate.

Like most Korean parents, North Korean parents are passionate about education because they believe only a good education can secure stable living conditions. Parents are willing to pay bribes as tuition fees for their children to enter elite schools or as membership fees for student representatives, following not just market mechanisms but also rightful and justified practices in a moral sense. There is no more “free for all” socialist education in practice. The more prestigious the school is, the higher bribery parents are willing to contribute to their children’s education and their future. In this context, bribing teachers is considered a moral economy running elite education in North Korea that cannot otherwise be operated by the public sector. Everyday bribery in schools helps both students and teachers and is therefore perceived as a mutual support system and a virtuous act in North Korea.

Bribes for Professional Sacrifice of Medical Practitioners

North Korea has prescribed a free health system since 1953 (Kim 1980, 20–26). The medical system in North Korea consists of universal health, preventive care, and a district doctor network. Under the People’s Health Act, the Infectious Disease Prevention Act, and the Medicines Control Act, all patients have the right to receive free medical treatment. All kinds of medical services ranging from medication, diagnosis, experimental tests, treatment, operations, and doctors’ visits, through to hospitalization and meals, are provided free of charge. Preventive medical care including recuperation, delivery, checkup, consultation, and vaccination is also free of charge. People receive health care from their doctor as part of the district network system (Kim 2017, 22, 41, 65). Article 56 of the Constitution states that the government should try to strengthen universal care and preventive medicine for all (NIS 2020a, 37).

At the same time, Kim Jong Il (2011, 66–92) emphasized the sacrifice and dedication of healthcare workers through “devotion movements.” In these movements, healthcare workers were encouraged not to get frustrated even when facing shortages of medicine and medical equipment. Instead, they were advised to find alternative ways to treat patients with utmost “devotion” and care. The tendency to emphasize the devotion of medical staff continues to this day.

However, the reality is that not all people can receive dedicated treatment from healthcare workers in North Korea. Medical supply in hospitals is poor and therefore both medical staff and patients are proactive in seeking medical supplies elsewhere. Our informants told us that after receiving a prescription, they had to procure any outstanding medications from markets. Patients offer bribes to medical staff to receive faster and better medical services. The size of bribery varied, depending on the nature of the medical service required. The payment method was often cigarettes or sometimes cash. Gangnam, a man in his 50 s, explains that cigarettes as bribes are more commonplace than exchanging money, which may look inappropriate:

When you go to the hospital and the line is long, you can never tell when it’ll be your turn. And even when it’s your turn, you can only get simple medical treatment. If you want to receive a medical diagnosis through ultrasound or X-ray, you should bring

along two cartons of cigarettes (1 carton = 10 packs). A doctor's monthly salary is 2,800 to 3,000 won. You don't feel sorry for giving cigarettes and people like them. Offering money can sometimes be considered an insult, but cigarettes are a safe bet. You can offer a small gift such as this simply by saying something like "please give these a try." Cigarettes are like currency because you can easily buy and resell them anywhere.

The more respected the profession is, the more difficult it is to openly exchange cash. *Chemyon* (face-saving or grace) is important in the North Korean context, akin to the mathematics teacher who had to move to another village to be a market vendor. Social bonds and networks are formed between medical staff and patients. Bribes serve as an informal economy that helps the smooth running of North Korean medical sectors. Although doctors and nurses may have a greater need for cash, cigarettes are often mutually chosen and negotiated as a respected medium of exchange.

Haesung, a man in his 40s from Chagang Province, explains that offering cigarettes was adopted only after the Arduous March:

I got a shot from the doctor and gave them a pack of cigarettes. It's a moral thing. It's not bribery. They used their time to treat me. They helped me. And so, I give them a pack of cigarettes out of a feeling of moral obligation. This is also obvious and expected from the recipient. Why? Because they also must do the same thing to get by! A society that coexists. We don't just live for one day. If you don't say thank you, who will give you a shot next time? And so, we must coexist and live together. . . . Under the existing socialist system, what used to be a bribe has now been transformed into a moral act. Individuals directly pay for official labor that the state cannot compensate. It serves as a moral "greeting" through which individuals acknowledge and appreciate the value of each other's labor and lives. It is direct compensation for the value of labor. (Yoon 2021, 67–68)

The collective common experiences of the mass famine in the 1990s seem to have created a social bond among North Koreans who survived the ordeal. Bribe givers do not perceive the receivers negatively. Instead, both see bribery as a natural and morally appropriate action in supporting one another, allowing for the provision of mutually beneficial medical and material assistance. Not observing these social rituals is, therefore, perceived as an immoral act that threatens the very survival of the other party. Haesung rhetorically asked who he could rely on to receive treatment when he was sick if healthcare workers could not get by, further noting that such exchanges are a social virtue.

The understanding of everyday bribery as a moral economy is not exclusive to North Korea with similar observations in developing countries in Africa such as Zimbabwe (2021), Uganda (Nystrand 2014), and Kenya (Carrier 2021), even more so than in post-socialist states. While large-scale corruption by elites in Russia, Eastern Europe, and China is seen as an internal threat to both the state and the economy, these small-scale petty bribes have been tolerated in North Korea as far as it does not challenge or threaten the Kim regime. This kind of "speed money" by non-elites is not considered a threat to the regime and is furthermore perceived as a moral economy by ordinary North Korean citizens. Kim Jong Un punished large-scale corruption and treason by his

uncle, Chang Song Thaek, by public execution. How long and at what level the Kim Jong Un regime will tolerate everyday bribery is an area North Korean watchers will have to keep observing for future studies.

CONCLUSION

After more than 30 years since North Korea's limited marketization, it seems inadequate to interpret bribery simply as corruption, crime, or purely a market mechanism of informal economy. Everyday bribery now serves as more or less a moral economy, based on certain cultural and ethical principles. It has emerged because of grassroots practices involving reciprocal exchanges of small amounts of cash and items, whereby individuals assist one another in the absence of a functioning state and formal economy to provide essential services.

Rather than criminalizing bribery and corruption, the North Korean state has allowed everyday bribery to occur, as it serves to fulfill what the state has failed to provide to its people. In a situation where people's economic activities fill the gaps left by the planned economy, bribery serves as a minimum moral norm and ethical rule that facilitates economic transactions at the everyday level. Beyond mere survival, the North Korean people now actively pursue these mutually beneficial means of everyday bribery, recognizing the advantages and benefits it can bring to their lives. Moral economy through everyday bribery is now normalized and necessitated to complement, if not entirely replace, the formal economy.

In the shifted perception of everyday bribery as a moral economy, reciprocal exchanges of small amounts of cash or petty items are no longer seen as crimes that warrant punishment by the state. Instead, they are regarded as virtuous acts that have become normalized and internalized by the non-elite population in practice. Everyday bribery in North Korea extends beyond the control of the state. The multiple law reforms undertaken in North Korea regarding bribery indicate a clear mitigation of punishment for such offenses. Furthermore, certain conditions exist that, when met, can lead to a reduction in punishment for the crime of bribery.

This contrasts with Ang's (2020) categorization of "speed money," which is typically viewed as illegal and subject to legal punishment in many post-socialist or developing states. However, in the North Korean context, our interviews reveal that the moral economy associated with "speed money" has played a crucial role in supporting essential social services like education and healthcare during periods when the state is unable to provide the necessary resources. In this regard, the moral economy helps the state alleviate anger and grievances that could otherwise be targeting the failed socialist economy or elite-level corruption in Ang's categorizations. In North Korea, bribery as a moral economy is not only seen as a virtue among non-elites but also not deemed illegal or a heinous crime by the elite. Both groups have a shared interest in allowing bribery to continue, as it has become a social norm and an integral part of reciprocal community relationships.

The long-term implications of the widespread practice and perception of bribery in North Korea remain to be seen. Given the state's reluctance to strengthen

anti-corruption laws that would harshly criminalize petty bribery in the daily lives of ordinary North Koreans, it is unlikely that significant changes will occur soon.

Despite the technical illegality of bribery within the North Korean criminal justice system, the moral economy is expected to persist as a temporary stabilizing element, operating at both non-elite and elite levels of corruption, albeit on different scales. The moral economy serves the interests of both groups for distinct reasons, contributing to their respective objectives and circumstances. For the non-elite, bribery is a new norm and a virtue. For the elite, it alleviates tensions between both groups. In other words, everyday bribery in North Korea is partially responsible for sustaining the current system. While we have no intention to endorse bribery as moral economy as a substitute for North Korea's formal economy, we argue that informal economy and market activities in North Korea cannot be solely explained by economic principles and that the cultural and moral dimensions of everyday bribery should be properly understood at a more micro grassroots level of interactions among ordinary people.

More importantly, how the perceptions about bribery and corruption have changed and will change in the future would be a critical area to keep monitoring for those interested in social changes in North Korea. There is still the possibility that bribes may lead to negative outcomes in the long term, as the moral economy, just like other economies, will eventually reproduce socio-economic inequality. Evidently, there is pressure to secure more favorable jobs that demand more bribe consumption. Furthermore, bribes in the education sector may lead to disproportionate demographics among students as only richer families can afford to provide bribes to teachers.

Without a doubt, the North Korean regime will take measures to punish individuals engaged in bribery if it perceives it as a threat to regime stability. Nevertheless, it is crucial to recognize that everyday bribery in the North Korean context is a complex and multilayered social phenomenon that is interpreted, negotiated, and practiced within the framework of a moral economy. ■

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