

Cracking North Korea's Shell

How Smugglers Hope to Topple North Korea's Tyrannical Government by Bringing in a Taste of the West

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It is a cloudy night in September 2014, somewhere in northeastern China. Three men are creeping stealthily through the woods. Soon they hear the sound of the rushing waters of the Tumen River and they know they have reached the North Korean border. Eventually, they make out the desolate, rocky banks in the gloom of the night.

The leader of the group is Jung Kwang-il, a middle-aged defector from North Korea. No, he has no intention of going back—at least not as long as the present regime of Kim Jong-un remains in power. He has had enough of the repressive communist government and its failing *Juche* ideology. He is here on a secret mission to help bring the North Korean regime down by smuggling



Bridge built in 1941 over the Tumen River, connecting North Korea with China.



Chinese border guards patrol along the Tumen river in the town of Tumen in China's Jilin province.

in the most potent weapon the West has to offer.

Jung has nothing to fear from the guards on the Chinese side of the border. Just two hours ago he sat with the local police chief and the head of the border patrol over a festive meal at a local restaurant. He treated them to a lavish 20-course dinner, expensive cigarettes and liquor. When the meal was over, the two officers quietly took pains to make sure that the border would not be guarded for the next few hours.

Jung even has his own copy of the key to the rusting bicycle lock that opens the border's barbed wire fence. As he steps through them he looks forward to tonight's meeting. He spoke to his contact man on the other side of the border earlier that day, using coded messages relayed over walkie-talkies. If everything is running as planned, they will find the man soon.

Now Jung steps out onto the riverbank and whips out a laser pointer. He flashes it onto the opposite bank and waits for a response. A red X will tell him that it is unsafe to meet and tonight's operation will be called off. A circle means it is safe to proceed. Jung is gratified to see a dancing red point draw a circle on the opposite bank. They're in business.

Soon a small figure appears. He is wearing a hood to cover his face and boxer shorts that will stay dry as he wades through the



North Koreans are seen on the river bank of the North Korean town of Sinuiju, facing the Chinese border city of Dandong.



Rare photo by Jung Kwang-il showing a North Korean smuggler crossing the Tumen River with a bag of illegal digital data in May 2013. Right: The smuggler's bag and the contraband it contained.



cold, knee-high water. When he joins the trio waiting for him on the Chinese side, the man walks straight up to Jung and hugs him. They inquire softly about each other's health and swap news. Jung has not seen his mother since he left North Korea 10 years ago, and he is eager to hear that she is still doing ok.

When the pleasantries are done, Jung gets down to business. He hands the man a trove of contraband, all carefully wrapped in a plastic bag to make it watertight. In addition to the illicit treasures, Jung includes in the shipment a laptop computer, cigarettes, liquor and around \$1,000 in cash. Those are to be used to neutralize the border guards on the North Korean side. The desperately poor police will not think twice about accepting these bribes in exchange for their cooperation.

After slinging the bag over his shoulder, the man in the hoodie bids the three farewell and heads back across the river. The men on the riverbank watch the figure as he is swallowed by the darkness of the moonless night.

Digital Contraband

The bag Jung handed the smuggler on that night in 2014 contained the one thing the North Korean regime fears most... and it is not rogue nuclear weapons. The most powerful weapon that the West can wield against the communist nation is a freedom we take for granted: knowledge.

Odd as it sounds, the bag carried by the smuggler back over the Tumen River held

200 Sandisk USB drives and 300 micro SD cards. Each flash drive and micro card was stuffed with 16 gigabytes of American and South Korean documentaries and music. No more, no less.

For all its nuclear missile saber-rattling, the government of North Korea is extremely unstable. It presides over a crumbling nation of starving peasants. It is made top-heavy by a modern army bristling with the latest technology. The army boasts 9.5 million soldiers, or 40% of the nation's population, making it the world's fourth largest military... and all the soldiers are also starving. The army does not even have sufficient fuel and ammunition to afford proper training for its personnel.

The economy, to the extent that one exists, is in ruins. Infrastructure is limited, electric supplies unreliable and modern amenities virtually non-existent. How can a small handful of elites remain in power in such an untenable situation?

The answer can be found in a well-known insight in the *Mesillas Yesharim*. The *Ramchal* explains that Pharaoh's strategy to enslave the Jewish nation was to keep them so busy that they had no opportunity to think. (*Ramchal* uses this as a parable to the strategy of the *yetzer hara*, which keeps people so busy with the details of their day-to-day existence that they lose sight of their true purpose in the world.)

This lesson was never lost on history's dictators. As much as the foundation of a democratic state is freedom of information,