

DEFIANCE 002

ESCAPING NORTH KOREA

THAE YONG-HO
FORMER MINISTER OF NORTH
KOREAN EMBASSY IN LONDON



DEF002 - THAE YONG-HO INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTION

ESCAPING NORTH KOREA

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Peter McCormack - 01:41

Good to see you again, Mr. Thae.

Thae Yong-ho - 01:43

Okay. Nice meeting you.

Peter McCormack - 01:44

Are you well?

Thae Yong-ho - 01:45

Pretty well. Yes.

Peter McCormack - 01:47

So, obviously, it's great to get you on the podcast. It's a new show that's launching. After

meeting you in Oslo I spoke to Alex and I said I would really love to interview you. And in doing my research, I didn't realise at the time that you were the deputy ambassador to London, which obviously is a nice fit because I live near London.

Thae Yong-ho - 02:07

Right, yes.

Peter McCormack - 02:07

And you were telling me before you and your children are big clients of London.

Thae Yong-ho - 02:11

Yes, that's right. Yes. I served two times in London, in North Korea embassy in London. I served from 2004 until 2008 and then my second term was 2013 until 2016, until I defected from North Korea. So I have many friends in London. All of my children's friend are still in London. London is actually my second home town.

Peter McCormack - 02:48

Oh, right. And did you get into English football?

Thae Yong-ho - 02:50

Of course. Oh, yeah.

Peter McCormack - 02:52

Who was your team? Chelsea?

Thae Yong-ho - 02:54

Actually, I supported Man U. Oh, maybe it is disappointment to you.

Peter McCormack - 03:01

I'm Liverpool.

Thae Yong-ho - 03:02

Oh, you're Liverpool?

Peter McCormack - 03:03

So we're big rivals. We're big rivals.

Thae Yong-ho - 03:07

Right.

Peter McCormack - 03:08

Well, look, fantastic to meet you again and to talk to you. I'm very intrigued and fascinated by North Korea.

Thae Yong-ho - 03:15

Yeah.

Peter McCormack - 03:16

There's so many different areas that you can explore and talk about, but obviously I'd like to find out more about it from your perspective, because I read something about you that you're now determined to pull down the regime, but there was a time where, obviously, you worked for the regime. So it feels like you've been experienced being on both sides of the fence.

Thae Yong-ho - 03:39

Right.

Peter McCormack - 03:39

So how has that been from you going from being somebody who worked for the regime to now somebody being an activist trying to essentially end the regime?

Thae Yong-ho - 03:49

Right. Oh, actually it was a long evolution period. I was taught in North Korea and I was totally brainwashed by North Korean education system. And my parents and my grandparents were really a true, loyal to North Korean system. They really and strongly believed in North Korean system. So when I was young and when I was young man, I really, truly believed in North Korean system. But that kind of belief changed when I was firstly posted in Copenhagen.

Peter McCormack - 04:39

In Denmark.

Thae Yong-ho - 04:40

Yeah, in Denmark in 1996, because the education was received was that the capitalist

countries are full of beggars in the streets, the exploitation by capitalist was so extreme the richest are getting richer every day while the poor are getting poorer every day. Maybe to some extent that is the truth, but the reality which I was shocked about was that there was a certain level of a welfare system in a capitalist countries as well. And I was told that a North Korea is the only socialist paradise in the world, but where I compared the welfare system of Western Europe and North Korea, I concluded that a wealthiest system in capitalist countries of Western Europe were much better than that of North Korea.

Thae Yong-ho - 05:46

So that was a kind of start of disbelief and suspicions. But this kind of deep suspicion and double-thinking do not actually arrive at my decision of defection. So it took really a long... the process. The main reason really happened when my sons in London grew up as young man. So for instance when my sons enter in British high school education and the college in London, they learned about the concepts of human rights, of freedom, democracy, the history they were taught in British schools were quite different from what they were taught in North Korea. And when my sons went through British schools, they came to make friends with British boys. And usually at the first few months, British boys always tried to make fun of my boys. Something like asking questions like, "Hi, how North Korean children are getting along without Internet?" Or, "Hi, is North Korean children are getting along without Facebook?" All of these things, you know? "Is there any Internet game in North Korea?" The boys in London, they're really fussy. They bombard my sons with all these questions and they tried to make my sons very difficult.

Peter McCormack - 07:36

Right. But let me ask you, when you first moved to Denmark, obviously you had grown up in North Korea.

Thae Yong-ho - 07:42

Yes.

Peter McCormack - 07:43

How old were you when you went to Denmark?

Thae Yong-ho - 07:45

No, at that time it was 1996. So actually I was 34. And the age of 34 as a North Korean diplomat still was regarded a very young generation.

Peter McCormack - 07:58

Of course. And in those 34 years you were essentially brainwashed with the socialist utopia of North Korea. How aware were you of the outside world? And how much of a shock to the system was it when you first got off the plane and settled in Denmark?

Thae Yong-ho - 08:14

Yes. Where I was in Denmark, I was instructed to try my best to get a food aid from Danish government and NGOs like Danish Red Cross for North Korean... the people. At that time the famine was really great inside North Korea. So whenever I approached the Danish government or NGOs, they were actually very generous. Denmark at that time was one of the big donors for North Korea. And some time they kept me asking the questions like, "Why North Korea spent hundred of billions of dollars on the defence industry or building of mausoleum while neglecting its people to die?" So these kind of questions and debate with the Danish government officials and NGO people kept me very... the difficult.

Peter McCormack - 09:15

Right, okay. And also you obviously had quite a prestigious job in North Korea.

Thae Yong-ho - 09:21

Of course.

Peter McCormack - 09:22

You seem to have had a privileged education.

Thae Yong-ho - 09:24

Sure.

Peter McCormack - 09:25

Is that because there is a certain class system that existed in North Korea, or was it due to connections with your family or your own hard work? How did you come to get such a prestigious job?

Thae Yong-ho - 09:38

Oh, yes. That is really a combination of my hard work and also, you see, my lucky. For instance, North Korea is a system based on the class division. The whole North Korean population are divided into three classes. The ruling class is called core class, to which I belonged to. The second class is called wavering and the third class is hostile. The majority

of North Korean people belong to wavering class. And I belonged to a core class, which is around 10% to 15% or 20% of North Korean population. And I was very lucky, because my grandparents and my parents were core class. But the opportunity did not go well to all of core class.

Thae Yong-ho - 10:36

So I also worked very hard and at the age of 12 I was lucky to enter the Pyongyang school of foreign language studies. I entered to that school because of my good examination marks, but that school was only open to the children of core class, but on the meanwhile not all the children of core class can enter that school, because the capacity of that school was so limited. So I would rather say that... so, my success of my childhood was a combination of my good luck to be born in core class and also my hard work.

Peter McCormack - 11:22

Okay. So I've looked into your past. Obviously, you had your time in Denmark and then you had your time in London. As you said, two periods. And during your second period you were recalled to Pyongyang, but you made a decision to defect. Was this preemptive? Like, were you concerned about why you were being recalled to Pyongyang?

Thae Yong-ho - 11:44

Oh, the story really went on like this. In March of 2016 the 12 of North Korean waitresses working in China all of sudden defected to North Korea collectively. And it was the first time in North Korean history that the people in one organisation collectively defected from North Korea to South Korea. So after that instant Kim Jong-un ordered that all university children of North Korean diplomat must be back to Pyongyang nor later than the end of July of 2016. My first son was not exception at all. At that time he was in the London, the college, and my son was also ordered to be back. It was only a few months left.

Peter McCormack - 12:44

Was it like a trap? They would have the children back so you would be scared to defect?

Thae Yong-ho - 12:49

That's right, yes. That's right, because it was North Korea's policy of taking the hostages of the children of North Korean diplomats. So my son must go back to Pyongyang immediately. The instruction actually made me very angry, because as a father, loved my children, I paid great attention on the education of my children. But when I learned that I

could not do anything to let my son finish his education in London, I thought that the North Korean system actually was not the system which I should continue to be loyal. And at that time I tried to think what kind of life I spend in the past, what would be the future of my children in the future, and I concluded that the life of myself and my family, we're nothing but the current slaves. So I decided that I should cut off this kind of slave chain for my children and let my children be a free man, like the people in the free world.

Peter McCormack - 14:07

Yes. So you make the decision to defect. Obviously that's a decision that doesn't come lightly and there's lots of considerations. Considerations for your family that are still back home in North Korea.

Thae Yong-ho - 14:18

Absolutely.

Peter McCormack - 14:19

We often hear of the families of people who do defect being imprisoned in work camps, so that's a consideration. I think what I'd like to know first is, what is the process you go through to defect? Because I guess there are only certain people you can talk to. You can't tell everybody. You have to go through quite a strict process to protect yourself and your family. So can you talk me through that?

Thae Yong-ho - 14:41

Right. Yes, first of all we discussed about our plan of defection, inside my family. At that time I was lucky with my wife and my children. They were all in London. So we discussed. And we had a little bit of the family debate, because the decision of defection was not so easy decision, because we were very sure that if we defect from North Korea, then it would be very difficult for my relatives and my brother and sister left in North Korea. But on the meanwhile, I cannot also persuade my sons to go back to North Korea because of the lives of my relatives or my sister and brother. So actually I was in a difficult dilemma at that time.

Thae Yong-ho - 15:41

So I decided to take all those responsibilities on me, because I was ready to take all those responsibilities because this is the decision made by me, not by my children. So I told my children that at my generation, if I do not cut off the chain of slavery to my sons, then I think my sons in the future may be angry or may be frustrated at me because we actually would

lose a very good opportunity for freedom. So that is one of the things we decided to choose.

Thae Yong-ho - 16:28

The second thing is that at the time I had a very good relationship with my colleagues in the embassy. I had a very good relation with my master, my friends. So we were all actually friends. But I knew very well, if I would defect from North Korea to South Korea, it could be a very difficult period or time for my friends left in North Korean embassy in London. Maybe they would suffer from very severe punishments. So I felt very sorry.

Thae Yong-ho - 17:09

But on the meanwhile, North Korea's a system that you can't open your mind. You can't tell friends your plans in advance. If you say your honest plans to your friends, then who would agree? That's why actually I kept my plan confidential, away from my friends. So at that point I still feel very guilty about my decision and I feel very guilty that because of my defection my friends actually suffered very difficult punishments in North Korea.

Peter McCormack - 17:51

Are you aware of how your brother and sister are doing? Have you spoken to them? Do you know their situation?

Thae Yong-ho - 17:56

No. Actually, once I defected from North Korea, I lost all my contacts with my relatives and brother and sister. So I have not any informations at all.

Peter McCormack - 18:11

Okay. When you defected, is it a case of you go to the South Korean embassy and you make an announcement? What is the actual process that's involved?

Thae Yong-ho - 18:23

Oh, I made a very quiet departure from London, because Britain still has a diplomatic relations with North Korea. And there are some British diplomats still working in British embassy in Pyongyang. So I can't made it open about my defection in London, because if it is publicised in London, then North Korea would do anything to stop my journey to South Korea. For instance, what happened between North Korea and Malaysia after the assassination of Kim Jong-nam. North Korea all of sudden detained all Malaysian diplomats

in Pyongyang to release the body of Kim Jong-nam and North Korean diplomats detained by Malaysian government. So that kind of political or diplomatic role would easily take place. So it was not my interest or the British to make open or public about my defection to South Korea.

Peter McCormack - 19:41

Was the assassination of Kim Jong-nam a surprise to you? Because he didn't seem to be actively involved in politics. He seemed to have rejected any interest in North Korea, any succession, and he seemed to live quite a quiet and independent life.

Thae Yong-ho - 19:58

Oh, actually, it was not a really shocking surprise, because Kim Jong-nam is a kind of subject of elimination in North Korean system, because Kim Jong-un, the current North Korean leader, always advocated that he is the only possible successor of Kim dynasty. And majority of North Korean people, even so now, do not know the existence of Kim Jong-nam. And Kim Jong-nam is the first son of Kim Jong-il. And North Korea is really a country based on Confucius cultures where the first son is always the one who succeeds the family business. So North Korean people actually so far do not actually know whether Kim Jong-un is the last son or first son or whatever. So the physical existence of Kim Jong-nam itself pose a direct threat to Kim Jong-un.

Peter McCormack - 21:16

It feels more like it poses a threat to his own insecurities and ego rather than any of his position, as his brother didn't seem to have any interest in politics.

Thae Yong-ho - 21:26

Yeah. Actually Kim Jong-nam did not have any influence in North Korean politics, because he lost all those... the influence in North Korean politics. So it seems that he did not have any influence on North Korean politics, but as I have said, the physical existence of Kim Jong-nam as the first son of Kim Jong-il-

Peter McCormack - 21:54

Is a threat.

Thae Yong-ho - 21:55

... itself was a threat and it may create a kind of future threat to so-called legitimacy of Kim Jong-un.

Peter McCormack - 22:08

And you being the most senior defector and now an enemy of the state, and somebody who is now an activist to bring down the North Korean state, seeing the assassination of Kim Jong-nam, was that a shock to your system and a wake-up call that you had to... did you have to change your security? Was that a scary thing to see?

Thae Yong-ho - 22:29

That's right, yes. I think the world was shocked as well, because Kim Jong-nam was not shot in the streets at midnight or whatever. He was just killed in an open place like international airport of Koala Lumpur of Malaysia. The world has seen clearly how he was toxinated and how he was killed by those hired foreign two young innocent girls. The world has seen it. So this shows that Kim Jong-un does not hesitate to use any kind of means to eliminate his foes. So that kind of incident actually made me kind of the shock. So after that incident my security in South Korea was further strengthened, as you have witnessed. No, I mean, in Taiwan.

Peter McCormack - 23:24

Seen it tonight.

Thae Yong-ho - 23:37

That's right. As soon as my arrival in Taiwan, I have been heavily protected by the security. So that's why. I think the assassination of Kim Jong-nam has given a world a kind of new lesson. And it's a kind of really a new alarming, what the world should do to protect the people like me.

Peter McCormack - 24:03

Yeah. How dangerous is Kim Jong-un? And also, what do you make of the relationship that he's been building with Donald Trump? Do you see this as a positive or do you see this as some way validating what is a tyrannical regime?

Thae Yong-ho - 24:20

Oh, to be honest, the Kim Jong-un is really very intelligent guy. He is very young, but he will

also know how to deal with the president like President Trump. President Trump is the president of United States who is supposed to lead the world for a kind of the better place, but the past one year and half, the history of the negotiation between North Korea and America seemed not quite well. Kim Jong-un announced its new nuclear stages in November of 2017. And now the world is going to face almost two anniversary of the official announcement by Kim Jong-un of his accomplishment of vehicular weapons ICBMs. But was the United States has achieved so far? No American has ever visited the nuclear sites or ICBMs of North Korea. North Korea even more intensified its nuclear capabilities. Even, for instance, North Korea test fired it's new short-range missile successfully. This year alone North Korea tested 10 times of his short-range... the missiles, which exactly targeted the whole part of South Korea.

Thae Yong-ho - 26:04

But from the part America, President Trump continues to say that this continuation of missile tests by Kim Jong-un does not pose any threats to America. And as long as North Korea does not test its nuclear ICBM, President Trump seems happy with the current situation. And President Trump always says that denuclearisation talk with North Korea or denuclearising process of North Korea would take a long time. So these kind of new, big comments by President Trump or the recent remarks by President Trump give me a kind of suspicion that whether President Trump is really interested in denuclearising North Korea or he's only interested in managing the current North Korea's nuclear status in his own terms.

Thae Yong-ho - 27:10

For instance, if President Trump is not interested in denuclearise of North Korea, but he's only interested in adjusting or the managing of the current North Korea and he is just managing to persuade Kim Jong-un to say on on his moratorium on nuclear test of ICBMs in order to make a good environment for his reelection, then I think the world in the near future would accept North Korea as kind of the new nuclear state in this region. And I think that is really a dangerous development in this area.

Peter McCormack - 27:54

But what are the alternative options? Because sanctions have essentially failed. The North Korean government has found ways to generate income by exporting labor, through hacking, through various other means, and their trading relationship with China. So it feels

like the only way to force something would be some type of preemptive military strike. It itself feels dangerous, but would you support that?

Thae Yong-ho - 28:19

No.

Peter McCormack - 28:20

No.

Thae Yong-ho - 28:20

I would not support the military options by America. But the reason of the failure of economic sanction actually lies in the American current policy on sanctions. After the failure of Hanoi Summit, it was really obvious that sanction really worked. So if Trump learned that Kim Jong-un is not interested in denuclearising North Korea, then I think President Trump should add more sanctions in order to push North Korea to the corner of total... the giving up of its nuclear program. But even after the Hanoi Summit President Trump refused to take any additional sanctions against North Korea. And he was not so tough on China or Russia on the sanction of regime, so this year alone America was not very serious or tough enough to ask China or Russia to take really a sincere obligation on sanctions. That was the main reason why Russia and China a little bit relaxed its policy of sanctions on North Korea. So that's why I think in order to bring the Kim Jong-un for the summit table, I think Trump is reluctant to engage more sanctions with the North Korea. That is my private assumption.

Peter McCormack - 30:04

Yes, because with the labor camps in Russia-

Thae Yong-ho - 30:06

Right.

Peter McCormack - 30:06

... with the export of North Korean labor out into labor camps in Russia and the trading relationship between China and North Korea, sanctions feel ineffective if they don't have the support of Russia and China.

Thae Yong-ho - 30:19

Right. Actually, Kim Jong-un met a President Putin in April and he succeeded in persuading President Putin to extend those work permits for North Korean workers in Russia. And Kim

invited Xi Jinping to North Korea. So that's why those work permits extended in the China as well. So I think it's time for America now to ask seriously, Russia and China, whether they're really a serious on the North Korea sanction regimes. But until now American administration does not show any kind of tough actions on China or Russia.

Peter McCormack - 31:14

Would you accept a denuclearised North Korea or is your goal bigger? Ultimately, are you looking to the downfall of the Kim dynasty and the end of Kim Jong-un and the implementation of full democratic processes within North Korea?

Thae Yong-ho - 31:32

Oh, what I would like to say, that the change of North Korea would take place in a long process.

Peter McCormack - 31:39

Okay.

Thae Yong-ho - 31:40

In North Korean leadership as a whole Kim Jong-un is the only leader with the third generation. He is now in 30s. He's the only one of 30s, while the people around him are all either over a 60, or 70, 80s. So there is really a generation gap between Kim Jong-un and the rest of the leaders, associates around him. If we look back into the communist history in other parts of the world, for instance, Russian or Eastern Europe, the changes were only possible when first generation were in power. Gorbachev was the third generation of Russian Communist Party. That's why he tried to bring a kind of change in former Soviet Union, together with his colleagues, most of them then were in third generations. But he failed and the communism in Europe failed.

Thae Yong-ho - 32:47

Now we look back in China. Xi Jinping is the second generation. So when the second generation in communist history of the party, you can't expect any kind of great changes. So I think that as far as China is concerned, we have to wait another 10 or 20 years. If you look at North Korea, Kim Jong-un is 30s, but the people around him is 60s and 70s. So there are 30 years of generation gap. So I expect that when these 60s and 70s are retired and the new millennium generation's in power, and when they are in parallel with Kim Jong-un in

power, then that is the period where North Korea's elite would try to change, bring a change in North Korean system.

Thae Yong-ho - 33:36

So envisage that the change of North Korea will take very slowly. For instance, if the end of Kim Jong-un regime in 10 years is maybe too quick, but within 20 years I'm absolutely sure that we may see the different North Korea. And the purpose of my current activity is to educate the millennium generation of North Korea for a possible change. I try my every way to educate of the millennium generation of North Korea.

Peter McCormack - 34:16

And what about a reunification of North and South to a single Korea? Do you think that's possible?

Thae Yong-ho - 34:22

I think that is very possible. To me, the real push for reunification would come from North Korea, not from South Korea.

Peter McCormack - 34:32

Of course.

Thae Yong-ho - 34:33

Because the current South Korean population now are getting a little bit far away from the reunification process. The young generation in South Korea, they are only obsessed with their future, jobs or whatever. But if you look at the reality of North Korea, the changes taking place in North Korea, the young generation in North Korea, they are very eager to know about the world. For instance, the demand for South Korean movies and dramas are very strong by North Korean young generations. That's why the process of smuggling the cultural contents are going on to the new millennium generation of North Korea. So that's why I think within 10 and 20 years the young generation of North Korea would demand, would just stand up, not only the change of North Korea, but they want to be reunited with the South Korea. Because why? They want a kind of new future. And they think that if they are united with the South Korea, the economic wealth of South Korea would arrive at North Korea very easily. That is a kind of dream.

Peter McCormack - 36:00

So you see pop culture therefore as a trigger for a revolution?

Thae Yong-ho - 36:03

Yes, that's right. Not only the pop culture, but outside informations to North Korea.

Peter McCormack - 36:09

So the information getting into North Korea is usually import and the smuggling of the thumb drives, the DVDs.

Thae Yong-ho - 36:15

That's right, yes.

Peter McCormack - 36:16

And that is, I guess, it's a conflict for people because they've grown up with the brainwashed utopian dream of the Kim dynasty of socialism. But they're seeing a different life. They're seeing people in South Korea who are living a free life.

Thae Yong-ho - 36:32

That's right, yes.

Peter McCormack - 36:33

They're living a happy life. But it does come at great risk, right? The smugglers are smuggling content at great risk. Even owning these thumb drives and DVDs and laptops, that's itself illegal.

Thae Yong-ho - 36:45

Yes. But if we look at the reality of North Korea objectively, the current North Korean system can be compared a kind of socialist skeleton. The bones are still socialist systems, but the flesh of that system are becoming too capitalist. So the fleshes of North Korean system are getting more and more and capitalist, the fleshes. Now there are more than 400 capitalist black markets all open markets in North Korea. The people in North Korea are more and more used to capitalist mind of private trade rather than socialist centralised planning economy.

Thae Yong-ho - 37:34

The young generation of North Korea have not seen the peak of socialist welfare system of

North Korea, because when they were born, the welfare system of North Korea was already gone. So they were grown up in a kind of black market systems. So the contents they learned at schools of so-called socialist welfare system were actually something they haven't seen. So that's why these young generations are different from my generation. My generation, I was born in 1960s and I was grown up in a socialist welfare system. So I have seen the peak of North Korean system. But my son's generation, no. So that's why the quality and the contents of North Korea's brainwash education actually does not reach the heart of the young generation of North Korea. And I think that is the point of the hope.

Peter McCormack - 38:43

So this is post the famine. The emergence of black markets was post the... was it 1994, was the famine?

Thae Yong-ho - 38:50

After the famine, actually started from 1995, but actually before 1995 there were a lot of strong symptoms of the famine.

Peter McCormack - 39:01

Why has Kim Jong-un allowed the existence of the black markets? Because that seems like a crack in the system, a weakness for his control of his utopian dream. Is it because sanctions have worked and he needs the black market?

Thae Yong-ho - 39:17

Even before the sanctions, because North Korean system tried very hard to stop this evolution, but they failed. Whatever they did, they failed. For instance, I'll tell you one example. In 2009, North Korean system introduced the devaluation currency reform.

Peter McCormack - 39:35

Currency... yeah, yeah.

Thae Yong-ho - 39:36

But after one month it turned out to be a new failure. So the person who was responsible for this currency devaluation reform was openly shot in order to calm down the strong protests.

Peter McCormack - 39:50

How did it fail? Because I've read before there was a limit, so like 100,000 you could transfer, but there were also protests about this.

Thae Yong-ho - 39:58

Yes, because at that time... North Korean system does not have any so-called banking deposit system.

Peter McCormack - 40:05

Yeah, no central banking. Yeah.

Thae Yong-ho - 40:07

So they almost... you see, all the income of the people were kept in North Korean currency at their houses.

Peter McCormack - 40:15

Yeah.

Thae Yong-ho - 40:16

But all of sudden when the government decide to devaluation of the currencies and there was a limit that each member of North Korean society was only entitled at the first stage to change 100,000 won. Then, what would you do? Billions of, millions of North Korean won. It is nothing but a paper. So people were so much frustrated and were angry, they just throw that money to the bank, they go up the bank, they burn it or... the people were just frustrated and outrageous. The parliament cannot control it.

Peter McCormack - 40:55

But an open protest?

Thae Yong-ho - 40:56

There was not any kind of open protest in the streets or demonstrations.

Peter McCormack - 41:02

Okay.

Thae Yong-ho - 41:02

But most of the markets were closed. So I tell you, for instance, if this is one bottle of water,

before that devaluation reform it was sold in the market at the price of 4,000 a bottle. But all of that in one day. The government announced the devaluation and the private vendors were forced to sell it at around 40 won. All of sudden, from 4,000 to 40 won. And those private vendors were not so sure whether this reform would arrive at success or not. So they kept all their... these mineral waters at their houses, not on the market.

Thae Yong-ho - 41:52

So the whole market was frozen. They were no goods. The people did not sell. So the market was dying. All of sudden. If the market was dying, where can you buy rice, vegetables, whatever? So there was no any kind of interactions between private vendors and then the customers. So that was really the end of North Korean system. So Kim Jong-I'm like, then the leader of North Korea, learned that that reform was going wrong way, so he stopped it and then he publicly executed the one who architected it and then he put everything into normal. So all of sudden, after one month, all the prices just came back to its original ones.

Peter McCormack - 42:46

But it seems therefore there are a number of cracks appearing in the Kim Jong-un regime. I've read about over a million mobile phones now.

Thae Yong-ho - 42:56

Around four million.

Peter McCormack - 42:58

It's four million now?

Thae Yong-ho - 42:59

Yeah.

Peter McCormack - 42:59

But it was a million within a year, right? And was there restricted to North Korea?

Thae Yong-ho - 43:04

Yes.

Peter McCormack - 43:04

You can have them modified to make external phone calls, I believe.

Thae Yong-ho - 43:08

No, you can't make it any kind of international calls.

Peter McCormack - 43:11

I was watching a documentary today that said some people have been using it to make international calls. They've modified-

Thae Yong-ho - 43:16

No, only foreigners.

Peter McCormack - 43:17

Ah.

Thae Yong-ho - 43:17

Yes. If you enter North Korea as a foreign tourist, then you would be asked whether you want to change your SIM card or not. And if you say yes, then you have to pay for the very special SIM card to put in in your phone, and you would be privileged to use your North Korean mobile phone to have Internet or international call, but that kind of thing cannot be available to North Korean people.

Peter McCormack - 43:49

So the documentary... I'll have to get it out and show you because they talked about that, but we have seen the thumb drives. We have seen the spread of information, the availability of information. It seems to me there is an inevitability to a revolution amongst the youth within-

Thae Yong-ho - 44:06

Yes.

Peter McCormack - 44:07

How do you envisage that happening? How do you envisage the response to that and what is Kim Jong-un's Achilles's heel here?

Thae Yong-ho - 44:16

Yes. As I've said that now in North Korea the power are at the hands of second generation. For instance, army generals and then the leaders of security forces, they are all second generation. That's why the millennium generation in North Korea knew very well that if they

stand up, like a demonstration or whatever, if they stand up, they would be easily cracked on by the regime, because they current power now are at the hands of second generation. While the third generation are demanding the change. So there is kind of generation conflict, right? But if you wait another 10 or 20 years, then the third generation who will demand the change are in power in the leading force. And then the same generation will demand the change. So if this, millennium generation, demands the change, the same generation who are in power will not take that kind of very violent reaction to crack it down. So that is how really the changes... it happened in the other part of the world.

Peter McCormack - 45:41

Okay. I really appreciate your time today. I've got two final questions. So my first final question is, there is an opportunity for people to visit North Korea.

Thae Yong-ho - 45:51

Yes.

Peter McCormack - 45:51

There are conferences now, there's a blockchain conference-

Thae Yong-ho - 45:54

Right.

Peter McCormack - 45:54

... which is within the sector I have experience in. You can go and run the North Korean marathon. You can go on heavily guided tours.

Thae Yong-ho - 46:03

Right.

Peter McCormack - 46:05

Do you support the idea of people visiting and discovering more?

Thae Yong-ho - 46:08

Sure.

Peter McCormack - 46:08

Oh, you do? Because I've heard people say, "If you are going, you are putting money in the pocket of the regime." Where do you sit with this?

Thae Yong-ho - 46:17

No. I strongly support more visits by this outside world to North Korea. Of course, if you are in North Korea, some of the money will go to North Korean regime. But on the meanwhile, you may disseminate more informations to North Korea. The point is that now all the tourists are really and heavily guided or minded by North Korean minders. So that's why I strongly suggest that all foreign tourists who are in North Korea should try their best to make a kind of human contacts with the North Korean people. Even though there is a minder, but you should try to meet and talk those... the street people. If they don't understand English, you try to as much as possible. And it is very important for foreign tourists to give a free-world image to North Korean people. I think that kind of free image of foreign tourists would give a very positive influence on the North Korean society.

Peter McCormack - 47:36

Okay. And my final question for you, and it's a two-part answer. People who are going to be listening to this maybe have an interest in North Korea, maybe have an interest in finding out more. What can any kind of normal, general person do, who's just listening to this, someone like myself, do to help support what you would like to see? And then, adding to that, what would you like to see from the international community?

Thae Yong-ho - 47:59

Oh, first of all, I think the only change in North Korea could be made upon educating the North Korean people. So that's why I think... and I strongly believe that a dissemination of outside informations are really, really important and we should also try our best to make a human contacts by, for instance, sending more visitors, foreign visitors, to North Korea, or we should try more investments on making very tailor-made contents for North Korean people to understand the outside world very easily. I think this kind of building more human contacts and also dissemination of more informations to North Korean people in order to educate them, I think, would be the only solution for North Korean issues.

Peter McCormack - 49:03

Okay. A final little question. Do you think Ole Gunnar Solskjær will still be Manchester United manager at the end of the season, or do you think they might fire him?

Thae Yong-ho - 49:16

I'm not quite sure. I'm not quite whether Manchester United, even Manchester City, I'm not quite sure they are really doing well these days.

Peter McCormack - 49:29

Did you ever get to go to Old Trafford?

Thae Yong-ho - 49:31

Not yet.

Peter McCormack - 49:32

Well, if you ever come back to London or back to the UK, I will get us tickets. I mean, I'll have to get like 12 tickets for-

Thae Yong-ho - 49:39

Right, right. Yes.

Peter McCormack - 49:40

... for your security as well, but we will go.

Thae Yong-ho - 49:42

Recent days I was a little bit frustrated to hear those racism issues in... why all of sudden these racism issues happened in Premier League? Premier League must be a kind of model of the football world, but all of sudden-

Thae Yong-ho - 50:04

I'm really sad with this kind of issue of racism.

Peter McCormack - 50:08

It's a minority of idiots. It's very small group. It's not back in the game. The game's moved on from that. But it's like, it's typical, when something like that happens it creates headlines, right? But no, it's not there anymore.

Thae Yong-ho - 50:21

Oh, okay.

Peter McCormack - 50:22

But if you ever come, I'll get you to a game. But listen, thank you so much, take care.

Thae Yong-ho - 50:25

Okay, thank you.

Peter McCormack - 50:26

I hope to see you again at a further conference, and look, best of luck with everything you do.

Thae Yong-ho - 50:30

Okay, thank you.

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