

PYONGYANG'S 'UNIFICATION' MARKET OF TODAY

What kinds of goods can be found for sale in Pyongyang? Towards the end of last February, one Chinese reporter introduced us to merchants selling luxurious Chinese clothing and flower-pattern dresses at the 'Unification Market', North Korea's representative market located near Pyongyang's Rakrangku Station.

These days, the Unification Market is jam-packed with people looking for quality designer clothes and shoes, which are mostly made and brought in from China. Also abundant are the peddlers: mainly North Korean women in their forties who (to this reporter) were not distinguishable from the average middle-aged Chinese woman. Despite being a whirlwind of activity, these colorfully dressed women -- white hats, pink clothes, and floral-print aprons -- still managed to radiate grace.

According to the reporter, "Through recent investments by Chinese retailers, China is introducing modern fashion lines, designs, and dyeing technology, and this is having a huge effect on the clothing worn by North Koreans as well. These days, North Korean clothes are reflecting current fashion trends."

A look around the market revealed that although vegetables were 20 percent more expensive than in China, seafood and clothing was 20 percent cheaper. Take into account, however, that the average monthly income of a North Korean farmer is 3,000 - 10,000 DPRK won (approx. 20 - 70 USD), and goods in the Unification Market are not particularly cheap. Be that as it may, after observing not just a few people coming and going with goods in hand and full shopping baskets, it was surmised that "the lives of ordinary North Korean citizens" -- or at least those residing in Pyongyang -- "are definitely improving."

As economic recovery continues, the demand for electrical appliances seems to be growing among ordinary households. The very first Chinese appliance to enter the North Korean market, the Sinbi refrigerator, now occupies 40 percent of the market share, and can be easily found even in government facilities.

Following DPRK leader Kim Jong Il's instruction in March 2003, which allowed for the transformation of farmers' markets into consolidated markets, the Unification Market opened as the largest market in Pyongyang on September 1st of the same year. With 1,500 booths spanning over 6000 sq. meters, the market is divided into three zones -- agriculture produce and fish products, food and clothing, and metal utensils and appliances -- with each zone housing a management office, money changer, and a food court, which offer a variety of conveniences to the customer.