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## DEBATING NORTH KOREA

# Research on North Korea: An Analysis of Doctoral Theses Registered in the ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Database

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North Korea, doctoral theses, ProQuest, quantitative analysis, problem of data access, primary sources

### Article history

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1. “The Koreas at Night” (January 30, 2014), Earth Observatory, <https://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/images/83182/the-koreas-at-night> (date: August 31, 2021)

2. “Why North Korea is a black hole for American spies” (September 08, 2017), Politico, <https://www.politico.com/story/2017/09/08/why-north-korea-is-a-black-hole-for-spies-242473> (date : August 31, 2021)

3. Most recently see Park, Philip H. *Rebuilding North Korea’s Economy : Politics and Policy* (Exploration in Korean Studies). Kyungnam University Press, 2016; Kim, Cheehyung Harrison. *Heroes and Toilers : Work as Life in Postwar North Korea, 1953-1961*. Columbia University Press, 2018; Abrams, A. B. *Immovable Object : North Korea’s 70 Years at War with American Power*. Clarity Press, 2020; Sung-wook, Nam, Su-lan, Chae, Ga-young, Lee, Sung-wook Nam, Su-Ian Chae, and Ga-young Lee. *Mysterious Pyongyang: Cosmetics, Beauty Culture and North Korea*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2020; Buzo, Adrian. *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary North Korea*. Routledge, 2020; Panda, Ankit. *Kim Jong Un and the Bomb: Survival and Deterrence in North Korea*. (Oxford University Press, 2020); Kim, Immanuel. *Laughing North Koreans: The Culture of Comedy Films*. (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2021); Gray, Kevin, and Jong-Woon Lee. *North Korea and the Geopolitics of Development*. (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2021); Young, Benjamin R. *Guns, Guerillas, and the Great Leader: North Korea and the Third World*. (Stanford University Press, 2021).

4. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global: Overview Brochure, p. 3, <https://about.proquest.com/globalassets/proquest/files/pdf-files/brochures/pqdt/pqdt-global.pdf>

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The photo *Night Image of the Korean Peninsula*, published by NASA in 2014, has gained notoriety for depicting the different realities of North and South Korea.<sup>1</sup> Unlike brightly shining South Korea, the territory of North Korea, with the exception of the capital city Pyongyang, Wonsan city, Nampo and a few other major cities, is absolutely dark. This has variously also earned North Korea the designation as a black hole.<sup>2</sup> An expression that carries a double reference in the sense that most of North Korean nighttime territory does not emit light but also that it is generally difficult to obtain information about North Korea.

Therefore, it is not an easy undertaking to systematically research and understand the North Korean system from the outside. Due to the very specific nature of the system, not only is it difficult to access information, but it is also difficult to verify it or assess its reliability. Analysing the North Korean social structure and the management system, which is rooted in a state ideological system called *Juche*, is all the more difficult because participatory observation and field research are currently not possible.

Despite unfavourable research conditions, studies on North Korea continue to be published.<sup>3</sup> This is also the case for doctoral dissertations on North Korea. In itself, this may be unsurprising since North Korea is often the focus of attention of global politics. Equally unsurprising is the fact that, as a result, a seemingly growing number of scholars are engaging in North Korea research. Dissertational research of this kind is called for and potentially allows us to understand general trends and future challenges regarding North Korea-related issues. In this paper, I therefore seek to examine doctoral dissertations written in English between 2001 and 2020 in regard to quantity, institutional affiliations, keyword usage, and bibliographical references.

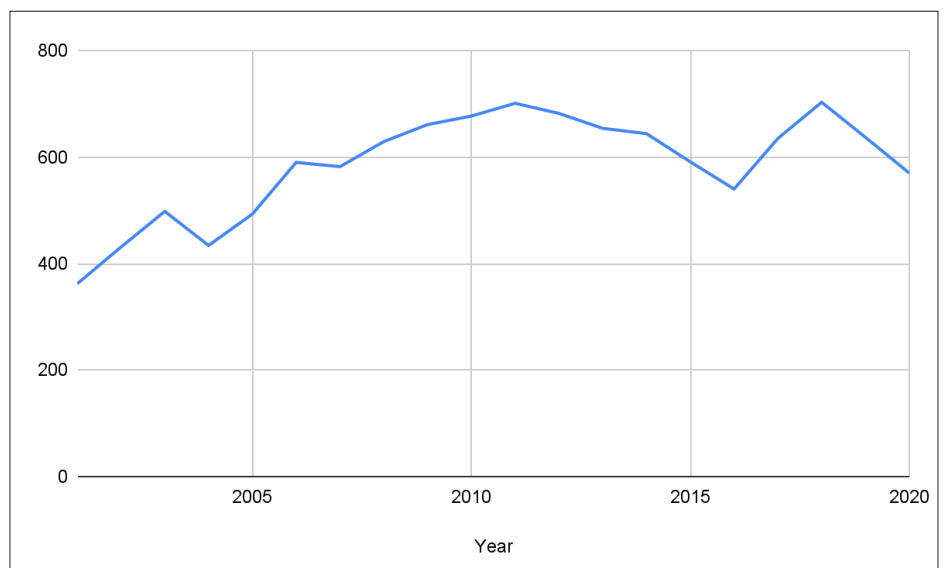
### 1. Data used and number of dissertations per year

To obtain data on dissertations ProQuest Dissertations & Theses (PQDT) repository was used. PQDT is designated the official dissertation repository of the United States Library of Congress. It is thus no exaggeration when PQDT refers to itself as “the largest editorially curated repository of dissertations and theses in the world”<sup>4</sup> The PQDT database is limited to dissertations and thesis written in English. It, however, also includes English language dissertations defended at universities in non-English speaking countries. PQDT not only allows to locate

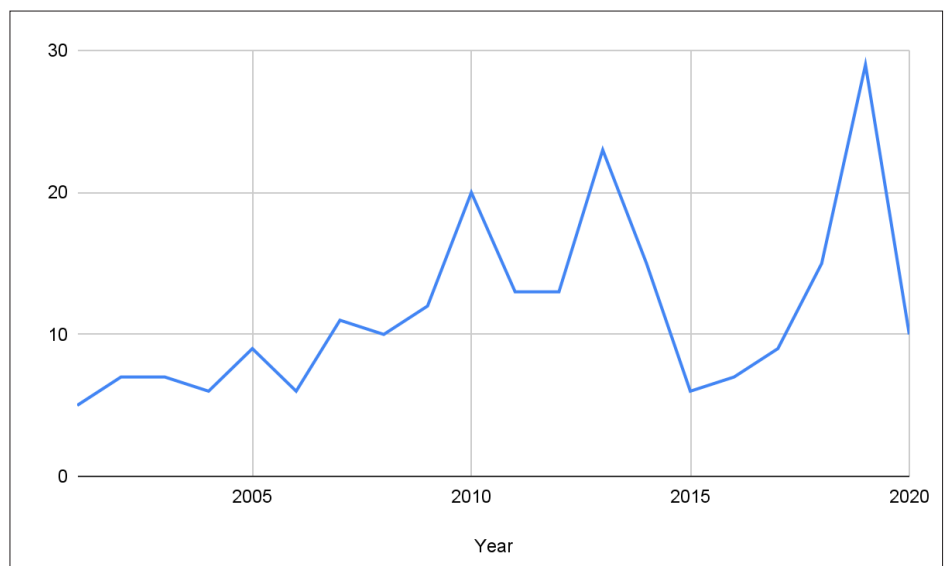
dissertations on specific topics, but also offers detailed content of the theses. The database also provides lists of references.

This paper does not review the research findings of individual dissertations. Instead, keywords, subjects and classifications, set up by author themselves, were used to classify the dissertations according to the topics.

A keyword search of PQDT for “North Korea” yields 11,741 doctoral and Master theses from 2001 to 2020 of degree year. If these are subdivided once again into title, keywords, list of contents and abstract, this leaves about 500 dissertations that explicitly refer to North Korea. Theses that have not directly related to North Korea, such as North Korean refugees, Koreans in Japan, Isang Yun, etc., have been excluded. After excluding Master’s theses from the sample, 233 doctoral theses remained. Arranged by year, the results are as follows:



**Graph 1:** Number of doctoral and Master’s theses in the PQDT database including the search term “North Korea”



**Graph 2:** Number of relevant doctoral theses in the PQDT database, searched by “North Korea”

5. The George Washington University (9), Georgetown University (6), American University (2), The Catholic University of America (2), George Mason University (4), University of Maryland, College Park (5), The Johns Hopkins University (5)

Data from PQDT shows that the number of doctoral theses is slightly increasing year by year. In 2015, the numbers show a sudden slump. However, they sharply expanded after 2016 and reached a high in 2019. Whether the sharp decrease in the number of dissertations shown in 2020 is related to the COVID-19 pandemic cannot be determined here. If we leave out the 2015 and 2020 outliers, we see a marked increase in the number of dissertations over time.

## 2. Universities and Departments

110 universities released the 233 doctoral theses examined here. 50 of them published 2 or more dissertations, 31 of them 3 or more. As only dissertations written in English are registered in PQDT, it is unsurprising that the universities that have published these dissertations are predominantly concentrated in North American, 204 (87.6%). In addition, many of these dissertations on North Korea have been published by universities located in a few distinct areas such as Washington, D. C. and surroundings, in New York, Boston or Chicago but also in the Los Angeles and San Francisco area. What is particularly noticeable is that universities in the Washington, D. C. area published 28 doctoral theses related to North Korea.<sup>5</sup> Most of the top-ranking universities according to the number of doctoral theses on North Korea are located within this area, with George Washington University having published the largest number.

Table 1 sorts the PQDT doctoral theses related to North Korea according to departmental affiliation. By far the largest number of dissertations were submitted in the departments of Political Science and International Relations. Others departments include Social Sciences, Cultural Studies, Asian (East Asian) Studies and History. Doctoral theses on North Korea were also written in departments of Education, Economics and Law, albeit in smaller numbers.

Department	Number and percentage of dissertations submitted in these departments
Politics; Political Science; Government; Politics and International Studies; Public Policy; Politics and International Relations; Public Policy & Administration; International relations; International Studies (Arts & Sciences); Global Governance and Human Security; International Service Government and Public Administration	67 (61%)
Social Science; Sociology; Anthropology; Ethnic Studies; Intercultural Studies; Cultural Studies	14 (13%)
East Asian Studies; East Asian Languages and Literatures; East Asian Languages and Civilizations; Comparative Literature; Asian Languages & Cultures; East Asian Languages and Cultures	12 (11%)
History; Art History; Diplomacy, History, and Politics	12 (11%)
Education; Educational Studies; Teaching and Leadership	3 (0.3%)
Economics; Politics and Economics	3 (0.3%)
Law	2 (0.2%)

Table 1: Number and percentage of doctoral theses on North Korea per department

## 3. Keywords

Table 2 sorts the keywords of the dissertations according to the frequency of mention. All the terms that the authors themselves specified as keywords were collected, their frequency calculated and then all those that occurred at least twice were recorded. In the North Korea related dissertations, there were 750 keywords

that are mentioned at least once. Among them, 117 were mentioned at least twice, and among those 58 at least three times.

Frequency	Keywords
More than 5 times	nuclear weapons(26), foreign policy(18), nuclear proliferation(18), United states(13), cold war(12), China(11), philosophy, religion and theology(10), international relations(9), nationalism(9), nuclear non-proliferation(8), deterrence(7), education(7), international security(7), Iran(7), North Korean refugees(7), Korean war(6), reunification(6), sanctions(6), bargaining(5), human rights(5), Kim Jong Il(5), non-proliferation(5), security(5)
4 times	conflict, cooperation, East Asia, Germany, India, Japan, Juche, Kim Il Sung, national security, Pakistan, proliferation, psychology, Taiwan, unification, United States-Korea, war
3 times	authoritarianism, citizenship, coercion, conflict resolution, defectors, economic sanctions, ideology, international institutions, leadership, Libya, migration, negotiations, North Korean migrants, prospect theory, rogue states, threat perception, U.S. foreign policy
2 times	agreed framework, alliance, arms control, Asia, authoritarian regimes, Clinton administration, competition, compliance, conversion, cultural cold war, defense, demilitarized zone, denuclearization, diplomacy, discourse analysis, domestic politics, empowerment, engagement, everyday life, family, game theory, Mikhail Gorbachev, human security, human trafficking, inducements, industrial development, Juche ideology, Korean unification, legitimacy, Marxism-Leninism, media, migrants, militarism, mission, modern Korea, multilateral negotiations, national identity, neoliberalism, non-proliferation, northeast Asia, NPT, nuclear non-proliferation treaty, nuclear program, policy, politics, public discourse, Pyongyang, reconciliation, refugee, rivalry, strategy, technology, territory, terrorism, victimization, weapons proliferation

Table 2: Keywords that appeared at least twice.

The fact that *Kim Il Sung* and *Kim Jong Il* appear 4 and 5 times respectively as keywords is to be considered unsurprising. *Kim Jong Un* does not yet appear as a keyword in the dissertations. This may be explained by the fact that he has not been the Supreme Leader for long and, therefore, research focused on his role has not yet been submitted.

It can also be considered natural that keywords frequency occurs in relation with Politics, International Relations and Nuclear Issues, since the North Korea related doctoral theses were mainly submitted in the departments of those fields. The reason for keywords like *(Non-)Proliferation*, *Deterrence*, *Sanctions*, *Coercion*, *Denuclearization*, *Game theory*, *Negotiations* and *Bargaining* is that these topics are often discussed in search of solutions for North Korean nuclear issues.

Since the United States and China are countries that play a key role for North Korea's foreign policy, these two countries appear more often than others as keywords. *Human rights* is also mentioned as an frequent topic. This may be because international interest in refugees and defectors, who appeared in large numbers in the second half of the 1990s, increased, and the confrontation between North Korea and the USA after the nuclear issue, both contributed to an heightened interest in human right concerns<sup>6</sup> Finally, North Korean state ideology has been an important topic of interest for a long time. Accordingly, one can see that *Juche ideology*, *Marxism-Leninism*, *Authoritarian regimes*, *Leadership* and *Nationalism* are still frequent keywords.

The fact that keywords such as *Education*, *Psychology*, *Citizenship*, *Prospect theory*, *Everyday life*, *Family*, *Industrial development*, and *Technology* also appear – albeit in small numbers – is indicative that research analysing North Korean society itself has also been carried out.

7. Ibid.

#### 4. References/Bibliography

No one disputes the fact that access to information on North Korea and sources from the country is one of the biggest obstacles currently encountered in North Korea research. Since most documents published in North Korea are compiled under government control, there is also the problem of reliability of the information they contain. It seems that in order to avoid this problem, most North Korea researchers rely on interviews with North Korean refugees as well as documents and materials published in South Korea and other areas outside North Korea.<sup>7</sup> But even in these cases, one encounters the issue of reliability of the interviews with the refugees and critically verification is called for, especially regarding the often tendentious nature of the documents and materials on North Korea.

Official North Korean documents, materials and information that can be used in North Korea research include the official broadcasting media and the *Korean Central News Agency* (KCNA) as well as daily newspapers, for example *Rodong Sinmun*, *Minju Joson* and *Choson Sinbo*. Information can also be obtained from the official North Korean websites [uriminzokkiri.com](http://uriminzokkiri.com) and [dprkto-day.com](http://dprkto-day.com). Through the supreme leaders' "Works" published by the North Korean government, one can also gain information on government policies. Furthermore, there are also academic journals published in North Korea. There are more than 100 different kinds of journals, and they are released to the world outside North Korea.

However, it was possible to ascertain through the present analysis that in reality, material published in North Korea has not been much used in the doctoral theses examined. For this purpose, of the 233 doctoral theses related to North Korea registered in the PQDT Database, a total of 37,359 sources were examined, which were contained in 141 dissertations (60%) for which the References/Bibliography are given in the form of a database. Among them, there were 304 documents published by publishing houses in Pyongyang. From the main Korean news media KCNA and *Rodong Sinmun*, 197 and 200 sources respectively were found.

There was slight overlap in these three sources, but since it was not that significant, they were considered as independent cases. The website [uriminzokkiri.com](http://uriminzokkiri.com) appeared 19 times as a source, [dprktoday.com](http://dprktoday.com) only once. Again, there is mostly overlap with the above three sources. Even if these are also considered as independent sources, the total amount is 721 sources. While there may be documents that were not published in Pyongyang or by institutions other than the news media of North Korea, their number will be extremely small. Based on these figures, it emerges that of the list of 37,359 sources, only 721 sources (1.9%) published by North Korea were used. Even if you include publications from places other than Pyongyang, it does not add up to 2%.

#### 5. Conclusion

While North Korea is a state that provokes a lot of criticism because of its development of nuclear weapons, in reality not much is known about the society and history of North Korea and the lives of the people there. Despite extensive discussions on the nuclear problem, there is in fact no accurate knowledge, from the genesis of nuclear weapons development, to the size and capability of the nuclear forces. For this reason, systematic research on North Korea is needed.

As the quantitative analysis of the North Korea related doctoral theses registered in PQDT indicates, current North Korea research mainly focuses on Politics, International Relations and Nuclear Issues. This means, research is focused



more on North Korea's relation to the world community than on North Korean society and history itself.

As a result of the analysis of References and Bibliography, it was possible to highlight the specific features and limitations of the North Korea research carried out in the published doctoral theses. The fact that the proportion of documents written by North Korea is not even around 2% shows that attempts to approach North Korea *from the inside* are not very frequent. Not including documents published in North Korea in the object of analysis means that in the dissertations quantitatively analysed, research on North Korea – to a large extent – relies on the *view from the outside* and does not attempt to read or understand its inner logic. Of course, one could also explain the reason why not many documents released in North Korea are used, by the closed nature of the North Korean system. However, in order to conduct systematic research on North Korea, at least critical examination of accessible materials should be made a precondition. A fundamental task of researchers is to critically review as many documents and materials as possible. Viewed from this perspective, there is no need to *prima facie* exclude materials published in North Korea from critical analysis. In order to be able to analyse the thinking and logic of the North Korean leadership, one must of course also include those documents that are officially published by North Korea as a valid object of analysis. This is important because it is mainly through systematic and critical research that one can contribute to finding a solution to integrate North Korea as a peaceful member of the world community.

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