

The Story of North Korea Told by a North Korean Refugee

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CHAPTER 1

LIFE IN NORTH KOREA

1. Local People's Neighborhood Unit System in North Korea
2. North Korea's Unequal Structure Reflected in the Ration System
3. Rampant Class-Based Discrimination
4. North Koreans: Never Free to Date or Drink
5. When Will the North Korean Subway Come "Aboveground"?

1

Local People's Neighborhood Unit System in North Korea

The outside world calls North Korea a “military society” as it imposes militaristic totalitarianism on its people. A prime example of such military structures is the local people's neighborhood unit system, which places greater focus on keeping an eye on the people than on bringing greater convenience to their everyday lives. With a growing number of people deserting state institutions after the Arduous March, Pyongyang has been trying to control North Koreans by further reinforcing the neighborhood unit system as it now is harder to control them through their respective workplaces. The local people's neighborhood unit system in the North is comprised of two key elements: the heads of the people's neighborhood units and householder units. The former serves as the watchdog of all residents in a given building; the latter controls and watches the husbands only.

Most apartments in Pyongyang are institutional ones

The householder unit system is actively in use in

Pyongyang—in contrast to the rest of North Korea—as central government agencies are concentrated in the city. Legally speaking, apartments belong to the state, of course, as private ownership is defined as illegal there. Instead of being bought individually, apartments are offered only to those state institutions excelling in per-institution performance and loyalty evaluations. This is why these “institutional” apartments are home to numerous North Koreans in the city of Pyongyang, for example.

To control North Koreans more efficiently under this residential environment, Kim Il-sung gave an instruction in the mid-1970s to introduce the householder unit system. The inspiration for the system came from an official at the central party who drank after work and created a disturbance in his apartment. This led Kim to come up with the householder unit system which, under the local people's neighborhood unit system, monitored and controlled the life of husbands as an extension of their office life. He said, “Party officials should maintain their dignity even after work; their responsibilities as party officials do not end as they leave their offices.” Upon taking office as party secretary, Kim Jong-il rolled out the householder unit system, which until then had been applicable only to central party-assigned apartments, throughout the entire country. While the head of a people's neighborhood unit deals with everyone living in a given building, the head of a householder unit organizes people's

neighborhood unit meetings, mobilizations and lectures only for the husbands. Having no freedom to choose where to live, all North Koreans are bound to a life in people's neighborhood units, meaning the regime is even controlling their daily lives after work.

Why the heads of people's neighborhood units and householder units have such enormous power

The authority of those heading people's neighborhood units or householder units is not limited to "organizing people's neighborhood unit meetings" for communicating directions from above. North Korea's administrative system is made up of cities, districts and local towns (*dong*); each of the levels involves members dispatched from three supervisory authorities: party committees, the Ministry of State Security and the Ministry of People's Security. On a weekly basis, these monitors check any unusual moves by residents in their jurisdictions through the heads of people's neighborhood units and householder units and report to their supervisors; residents on bad terms with these heads may face any number of disadvantages in this process. In addition, documents on party officials in North Korea have columns for evaluations and signatures by the heads of people's neighborhood units and householder units, concerning the ideological orientation, family life, and even the personality of party

official candidates. However loyal and talented a candidate may be, he is bound to be blocked if the head of his people's neighborhood unit or householder unit makes an issue of his life in the local people's neighborhood unit.

In fact, Kim Jong-il indicated that evaluation by the heads of people's neighborhood units should be taken as an important reference, saying, "The loyalty of party official candidates is important, but uncovering their hidden sides is a more accurate option." The heads of people's neighborhood units and householder units use the following criteria for resident evaluation: (a) if the resident regularly takes part in people's neighborhood unit meetings as well as social development, mass events and mobilizations by the people's neighborhood units asking for various types of support; (b) if the resident complies with the principles of "family revolution"; (c) if the resident comes home on time (checked via security guards at the apartments); (d) if the resident leads a modest life suiting his income level; (e) if the resident has many visitors at home; as well as many others.

The heads of people's neighborhood units are appointed by local town offices, primarily among women from high-class families loyal to the Party. For the sake of dignity, the heads of householder units are chosen among those with a fairly high social standing as they will be dealing with men. The heads of people's neighborhood units have especially strong power in towns heavily populated with central party officials such as

Changgwang-dong, Jung District, Pyongyang; they are asked to track all visits by non-residents and the time when central party officials go to work and return home and to report every day to the Changgwang Security Office run by the central party. Such watertight censorship is possible as all apartments in North Korea have only one entrance.

Market influence cripples the local people's neighborhood unit system

Aside from special organizations like the central party or the Ministry of State Security, those working for other institutions avoid living in institutional apartments in a bid to break away from censorship under the local people's neighborhood unit system and thereby genuinely enjoy their "life after work." This is attributable to recent changes in the social environment—driven largely by the expansion of the market—where individual solidarity is more valued than organizational solidarity. As the state fails to provide rations, people have no choice but to rely upon the market. In other words, the unity between individuals brings greater benefits in their everyday lives than competition to prove their loyalty toward the state.

The private collusion between the heads of people's neighborhood units and residents has gradually paralyzed directions from the top, creating a new driving force of local

people's neighborhood unit system where people's privacy is genuinely respected. Furthermore, an increasing number of local town security planning agents, security officers and party officials are seeking to benefit personally from their ties with the residents that they are responsible for. As such, market influences are threatening the very foundation of the surveillance system that the North Korean regime is placing the greatest emphasis on.

2

North Korea's Unequal Structure Reflected in the Ration System

Differentiated ration and supply of goods for the privileged

The three-generation rule in North Korea is not just about the Kim family. Consisting of a few people loyal to the family, a small group of power elites has also enjoyed the privilege of staying in power generation after generation. In fact, the country has a preferential ration system designed to discriminate social classes. For this reason, one's class is determined by the ration system he is eligible for. The rations system is divided into daily rations, three-day rations, weekly rations and monthly rations. Since the Arduous March that began in the mid-1990s, the monthly ration for ordinary residents has effectively become non-existent. The state asked individual authorities to handle the weekly ration for mid-level party officials on their own, while at the same time strengthening the ration for the privileged.

For the privileged, North Korea has daily and three-day rations. Under the daily ration system, the state determines the amount of calories to be consumed on a daily basis,

matching the number of people per family, and supplies rice, meat, fish, fruits, oil and other necessary foods. For those eligible for the daily ration, the responsible division in the central party's Financial and Accounting Department visits the families on the list at six every morning and supplies fresh food carried in freezer trucks. The daily ration is offered to central party secretaries and directors (plus the deputy directors of the central party's Organization Department), the premier of the Cabinet, corps commanders and higher-ranking military officials, chief secretaries at provincial party offices, and those involved in the personal guard of Kim Jong-un and handling other affairs concerning the North Korean leader. The three-day ration applies to deputy directors and department managers at the central party, vice-premiers of the Cabinet, and the heads of individual ministries. Other figures associated with Kim Il-sung, the families of those working for Anti-South Korean espionage bodies, and unconverted long-term prisoners sent back from the South are also eligible for the three-day ration. Unlike the daily ration, the three-day ration involves separate supply offices in the respective areas; rations are provided twice a week—on Wednesdays and Saturdays.

To this end, the Financial and Accounting Department at the central party has priority in the operation of farms, stock farms and fishing grounds in each of the areas nationwide that produce local specialties. The cows sent by Chung Ju-

young, the late former chairman of Hyundai Group, were also sent directly to the central party's milk cow farm in North Pyongan Province. Most of the new trucks that carried the cows at that time were sold to China and exchanged for used gun carriages of the Chinese Army; the rest are being used in a kimchi factory in Pyongyang. However severe a natural disaster hits the North, these farming areas governed by the central party's Financial Accounting Department suffer no poor harvest; first-grade foods produced here are excluded from the nationwide statistics compiled by the National Planning Commission.

Shopping benefits as part of the ration system

Since the late 1970s, North Korea has run the central party shop for those eligible for daily and three-day rations. The central party shop was created by Kim Jong-il, as his succession of power began at the central party's Organization & Guidance Department, in a bid to motivate party officials. Situated in Jung District, Pyongyang, the head office of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) has two separate main entrances: Reception #1 and Reception #2. The former is reserved for those working at the WPK headquarters, while the latter handles the entry of non-employees. After passing Reception #1, the central party shop can be found next to Mongnangwan, a reception venue for Kim Jong-il where

the first Inter-Korean Summit was held. At the time of its establishment, the shop primarily offered goods from the communist Eastern European countries under Kim Jong-il's sole leadership of the Organization & Guidance Department at the central party.

As Kim Jong-il's Office No. 38 (managing body for his slush funds) grew bigger, branded products from the United States, Japan and Europe also piled up in the central party shop. At that time, North Korea applied an exchange rate of one won against one dollar, which reflected its ideological confrontation against the United States. Those presenting their identification cards from the central party were free to buy imported goods up to half of their monthly wages; the ceiling was raised by a certain amount on the birthdays of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il. As gifts from Kim Jong-il, the heads of agencies other than the central party would also issue what was similar to gift certificates in South Korea, with which one could buy imported goods virtually for free. This was the origin of "preliminary tickets" for preferential purchases in state-run shops or restaurants at state-set prices. As a result, the existence of the central party shop became known to the general public; when briefed about the shop, Kim Il-sung ordered it to be closed immediately, saying even the party officials, who were supposed to be strongly committed to socialism, were being brainwashed by capitalistic products.

Kim Jong-il later made a false report to his father that

foreign currency-based shops for foreigners were needed. This led to the launch of the “Rakwon Department Store,” the first department store in North Korea to sell imported goods, which actually served as a replacement for the central party shop. Kim Jong-il had since given shopping benefits to the power elites by giving out “notes converted with foreign currency.” After his father’s death, he ordered the central party shop to reopen; this time, he restricted the benefits by letting elites buy with a preset amount of coupons instead of spending up to half of their monthly wages. Kim Jong-il offered such shopping benefits to party officials with the goal of showing his generosity and preventing central party officials from becoming corrupt and accepting bribes.

Separate hospitals for ordinary people and party officials

In North Korea, a class-based society where ration supplies are used to set off competition for loyalty, an endless string of special benefits are provided to the loyalists, with the public health management system being just one of the examples. The country hails its free medical care as evidence of its regime’s supremacy, but in reality, the system applies only to party officials. The North Korean Cabinet has Public Health Bureau 1 and Public Health Bureau 2. The former oversees the Ponghwa Clinic and Namsan Governmental Clinic; the latter is responsible for the remaining hospitals.

Situated in Sinwon-dong, Potonggang District, Pyongyang, the Ponghwa Clinic is the hospital where Kim Jong-il, his family members and relatives, and people subject to the daily ration system are treated. It provides medical service for central party directors and secretaries, the premier of the Cabinet, chief secretaries at provincial party offices, corps commanders and higher-ranking military officials, and their family members. One level lower than the Ponghwa Clinic, the Namsan Governmental Clinic is located in Dongmun 3-dong, Taedonggang District, Pyongyang. It treats the deputy directors of the central party, the heads of various social organizations, Cabinet members, and department managers at the central party, as well as artists, athletes, scholars and professors enjoying the confidence of Kim Jong-il.

Unlike the Ponghwa Clinic, the Namsan Governmental Clinic only accepts those who are eligible, not their family members. (The family members of deputy directors at the central party are the exception.) For their families, Kim Man-yu Hospital and Pyongyang Medical College Hospital have separate divisions called the Party Officials Treatment Department. Just like civilian agencies, the North Korean military also has a separate hospital for treating military personnel called “Oun Hospital,” which is located in Sokchondong, Sosong District, Pyongyang also known as the “town for the Ministry of the People’s Armed Forces.” Affiliated with Public Health Bureau 1, hospitals for party officials

have an abundance of expensive imported drugs and relief supplies from the international community. Other hospitals for ordinary people, in contrast, use toilet paper in place of essential medical supplies like cotton balls, not to mention the lack of drugs.

Educational perks by class

In North Korea, universities mark the very beginning of class-based discrimination. The internal rules for human resources management in the central party's Organization Department stipulate that top priority is given to the graduates of Kim Il-sung University. As Kim Jong-il himself went to Namsan Middle School and graduated from the Department of Politics and Economics at Kim Il-sung University, those with the same educational background are preferred as part of the state's efforts to deify the leader. For this reason, the Department of Politics and Economics at Kim Il-sung University has been the cradle of party officials, with a bright future guaranteed for anyone joining it.

South Koreans may think many children of privileged families in the North would study abroad, but the opposite is actually the case. Having long been viewed as a privilege, studying abroad started representing a fall in social standing with the demise of socialist countries in Eastern Europe, as those who were studying abroad at that time—and witnessed

how socialism collapsed—were labeled internally by the National Security Agency as the “rebellious class.” (North Korea classifies its citizens into the “loyal class,” “wavering class” and “rebellious class.”)

With the recent expansion of the market, the focus of North Koreans has shifted from loyalty to the party to money, bringing considerable changes to how the rich educate their children. Nowadays, many students choose the Department of Politics and Economics at Kim Il-sung University to study economics, not politics. Their preferences for universities have also changed, as made clear by the amount of cash exchanged illegally for college admission regardless of test results.

As of 2004, it cost 1,200 U.S. dollars to enter Kim Il-sung University, while the figure amounted to 3,000-3,500 dollars for Pyongyang University of Foreign Studies. The graduates of this university can land a job in government agencies dealing with foreign affairs or at least in trading companies and can thus earn dollars. The Department of Service at Pyongyang University of Commerce was also popular, as its graduates can be dispatched to China as service workers. Other universities priced higher than Kim Il-sung University include: Kim Chaek University of Technology (Faculty of Computer Science); Kim Hyong-jik University of Education and Kim Chol-ju University of Education (Faculty of Foreign Languages); Pyongyang Medical College; Pyongyang Institute of Music and Dance; Pyongyang University of Dramatic and

Cinematic Arts; and Pyongyang Art College. Kim Il-sung University has clearly been devalued; as the country's best university producing future politicians, its students are asked to attend various political events and face much stronger punishments than in other universities. In the past, North Koreans were determined to endure any amount of suffering for a great career, but now they no longer feel the need to do so.

As South Korean drama series and movies become more popular in North Korea, word has spread that doctors are the best-paid profession in the South. As a result, a growing number of North Koreans are aspiring to enter Pyongyang Medical College. With inter-Korean exchanges growingly active, Pyongyang Institute of Music and Dance, Pyongyang University of Dramatic and Cinematic Arts, and Pyongyang Art College have become much more popular as their graduates can engage in artistic exchanges. Now it costs 2,000 dollars on average to enter these universities. The most expensive of the professional schools in North Korea—equivalent to technical colleges in the South—is Pyongyang Professional School of Statistics located in Rungra 1-dong, Taedonggang District, Pyongyang. In North Korea, professional training in bookkeeping is offered only in Wonsan University of Economics and Pyongyang Professional School of Statistics; graduation from these schools guarantees a job as a financial bookkeeper in a trading company.

North Korea's best educational institutions include the Kim Il-sung Advanced Party School (for party officials) and the People's University of Economics (for administrative officials). These schools are designed to reeducate incumbent officials to be later appointed as high-ranking officials; all personnel management is undertaken exclusively by the Officials Department 4 of the central party's Organization & Guidance Department. Designed for officials at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other organizations responsible for external affairs, the University of International Relations was closed in 2000 and incorporated into the Department of International Relations at the People's University of Economics. Communist colleges in individual provinces—just like the Kim Il-sung Advanced Party School that is run and managed by the central party—are reeducational institutions under local parties to produce human resources for provincial party organizations.

3

Rampant Class-Based Discrimination

North Koreans are not free to choose their epitaphs

Human beings turn to dust when they die, but their headstones stand by their graves as the symbol of their career or life. Their epitaphs typically include a passage that summarizes their life, showing what ideas they held while alive. In North Korea, however, it is illegal to engrave any text on the headstones of individuals, as they are open for everyone to see. In the country, all texts that can be read by two or more people should be approved by the authorities, and epitaphs are no exception. This shows the stark reality of North Koreans who are forced to remain silent even after their life ends.

Then what about party officials?

Under the title of “loyalists,” power elites are buried in the “Revolutionary Martyrs’ Tombs” on Daesong Mountain. Written on their headstones are their names, the positions that they had during their lifetime, and the dates when they

were born and died. Even for these people, this is all they can leave behind on their headstones. The achievements of the dead are rarely found even on the headstones of those who were considered the closest aides to Kim Jong-il.

There are a small number of headstones with the achievements of the dead specified. Even in these rare cases, the wording is designated by the party, not by the individuals. In this sense, these party officials face even greater restraints than ordinary citizens, as they are publicly known figures. This illustrates the state’s intention to use even death as an open medium for political propaganda.

Recently in South Korea, the epitaph of Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw—“I knew if I stayed around long



Engraving any text other than the names is forbidden for the graves of ordinary citizens



The headstones of party officials also contain basic information, without any epitaph found

enough, something like this would happen”—became the talk of the town on the Internet. The passage in his epitaph itself may sound silly, but it embodies his unceremonious summary of a human being’s transitory life in a single sentence. As such, an epitaph could be the last word that a man wishes to leave to the world before he dies. If even this passage is manipulated or forced, it amounts to utterly denying the entire life of the dead.

North Korea easily distorts the history of individuals. Even for those having negative views of socialism, their epitaphs could be something like, “I have dedicated myself to the construction of socialism, honoring the vision of Supreme Commander Kim Jong-il.” The country is a place where people are deprived of the freedom to say a few words upon their death and where the life of individuals is routinely manipulated.

Class-based discrimination in greetings

In November 2011, North Korea’s state-run broadcaster Korean Central Television (KCTV) reported: “Our people today have developed traditional Korean bows further to meet the needs of the times. Against this backdrop, it is recommended to bend by 45 degrees for a deep bow and by 15 degrees for a simple bow. Traditional Korean bows are hygienic ways of greeting, as people do not hold each other’s

hands or go cheek to cheek. A handshake as a Western way of greeting is not a traditional greeting for North Korea, so bowing is the right way of greeting for us.”

What sets North Korean bows apart from their South Korean counterparts, most of all, is that one never bows to a total stranger. If he does so first, this means he has a lower social standing than the other. In the hierarchical society of North Korea, bows are therefore hardly exchanged between those meeting for the first time. Bows are understood as a way of greeting used only when two people know each other well enough to identify their respective social standings or when they are introduced by someone else. The social hierarchy is carefully checked, so even an old man has to bow first to a party official, however young he may be.

Different levels of bowing are used for the *suryōng* (the leader) and for ordinary people. One can bow deeply at the waist only to Kim Jong-il and his family. If an ordinary citizen makes this type of bow to a party official, the official would be quite perplexed, as this may be interpreted as individual idolization and potentially put him in danger of being slandered. This illustrates that a deep bow is an expression of such strong loyalty that it can only be made on limited occasions (e.g. in front of Kim Il-sung’s statue).

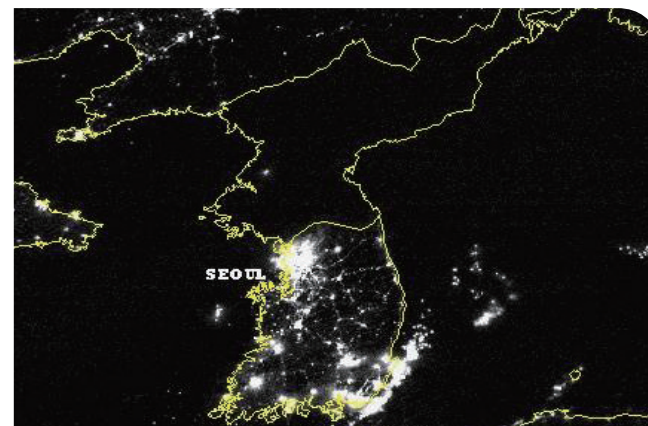
This was clearly demonstrated in the way North Koreans bowed to the South Korean presidents during the two inter-Korean summit meetings. During the visit of former President

Kim Dae-jung to the North, the North Korean boys who delivered flowers to Mr. and Mrs. President never lowered their heads, simply greeting them by putting their hands on their heads. When former President Roh Moo-hyun crossed the military demarcation line by foot, the deputy director of the United Front Department came to welcome him, but he simply “shook hands” without lowering his head at all. Ironically, it is North Korea that has claimed a handshake is a Western way of greeting and is not hygienic as hands are touched. We hope a new day of reason will arrive in the North as quickly as possible so it will learn the courtesy of deeply respecting each other.

Class hierarchy reflected in the lights of households

A picture portraying the power shortage in North Korea recently became a popular issue in the South. The stark contrast between the two Koreas drew especially keen attention from netizens. While even the remote islet of Dokdo is shining on the Southern part of the peninsula, little light is found in North Korea except for the capital city of Pyongyang.

In North Korea, class hierarchy is clearly found even in the “lights” leaking through apartment windows—even during blackouts due to power shortages. Enjoying an uninterrupted supply of electricity, the apartments for power elites and party officials in North Korea go as far as to use brighter lights to



Picture of lights on the Korean Peninsula taken by a satellite from the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA)

show off their privileged standing. Then how are ordinary North Koreans coping with long, dark nights?

Bulbs



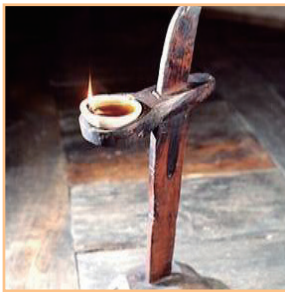
Bulbs are used in ordinary households, too. What they produce, however, are often very thin beams of light from the filaments, as the voltage there is much lower than in the apartments for party officials. Relying upon hydraulic power generation, provincial cities have virtually no electricity being supplied during droughts or in winters when it hardly rains.

Candles



South Koreans use candles usually for special events, while candles in North Korea remain the main lighting system for everyday living. Without candles, one cannot stay up at night. Candles are used only by those families that can afford to buy them; they are widely used in cities where the living standards are relatively higher.

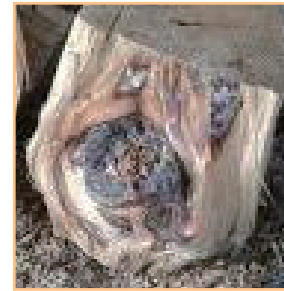
Oil lamps



There is a saying in Korean, “The foot of the oil lamp is dark.” Many families in North Korea still use oil lamps. When you grill pork belly, you will see the flames grow when fat starts flowing out. The oil lamps in North Korea are fueled using animal/vegetable oil or cooking oil.

Pine tree snubs

The poorest families in North Korea generally use “snubs”



for lighting. A snub is the bottom part or stump in the branch of a tree. When a tree puts out lateral branches, the wounds created while supporting these branches are hardened to become snubs. These snubs burn easily when a fire is lit, but they produce a large amount of soot. Some North Koreans suffocate while trying to use these snubs indoors. Despite all these risks, snubs are widely used to this date in North Korea because they are easily available.

Moonlight



This is the simplest form of lighting from nature as it is. There are many people living in the dark, who are spending their nights with moonlight as their sole source of light. It is the only light that consoles the lives of the most marginalized people in the North, such as the elderly, the sick and weak, and street children.

Since Edison invented bulbs, we have inhabited a bright world. In North Korea, however, there still are people living in the darkness. Even those dark nights, some North Korean defectors

say, were better than the daytime when they were forced to do hard labor. We have so many wishes in our lives, but for the North Koreans, their only wish is to have a better day.

North Koreans: Never Free to Date or Drink

No “White Day” in North Korea

South Koreans celebrate special days for lovers such as “St. Valentine’s Day” (February 14; men give chocolates to their girlfriends), “White Day” (March 14; women give candies to their boyfriends) and “Pepero Day” (November 11; Pepero chocolate sticks are exchanged between young people and couples). North Korean lovers, on the other hand, only share their time together without any special dates to celebrate. In a country where individual celebrations other than the deification of the Kim family are opposed, any significance given to a certain date, even between couples, constitutes an illegal act in itself.

Like South Koreans, North Korean couples celebrate number-based anniversaries. Influence from South Korean drama series could be one of the reasons behind this, but these number-based anniversaries are something acceptable in a country where 10-year, 20-year, 50-year and other decade-based national anniversaries are highly celebrated. As

witnessed by North Korean defectors, however, there can be no special date celebrated personally, as any form of individual celebration or idolization is defined as illegal, except for the deification of the Kim family. Another factor at work here is the overall poverty of the North Korean population.

How North Koreans get married

The Family Law in North Korea stipulates men can get married starting at the age of 18 and women at 17. In reality, however, men are known to tie the knot around their late 20s or early 30s and women around their mid-20s. The average age of marriage is later because men finish their obligatory military service at 26-27 and it is strongly recommended in North Korean society to work hard for the country and people



North Korean newlyweds being photographed after their wedding ceremony

before getting married. It also is common sense for women to “serve the society for about four to five years to repay the party’s favor of having them study.”

Once they decide whom to marry, men and women should report their marriage to the responsible officials at their respective workplaces, the party or the Kim Il-sung Socialist Youth League. All North Koreans belong to certain types of organizations: They are members of the Youth League before their marriage, but once they get married, they are automatically transferred to Trade Unions unless they are party members. During meet-the-family meetings involving each other’s parents, they exchange small gifts and set the date for engagement. Poor laborers and farmers in North Korea generally buy minimum food for the party, renting the rest of the dishes from the market at low prices and returning them after taking celebratory pictures.

Wedding ceremonies for ordinary citizens are held at home, usually on national holidays or after work. Essential elements for the wedding party are steamed chicken and, as in the case of South Korea, the props with traditional meanings: a hen decorated with jujubes or flowers, and a rooster holding a cigarette or a red chili pepper (which means coming of age) in its mouth. Wedding ceremonies for party officials, on the other hand, are much larger in scale; they hold great significance as an occasion to show off the social standing of these officials. Even trucks are mobilized as the number of

visitors to the wedding hall proves one's social standing. What counts there is not whether expensive cars like Mercedes-Benz and BMW are there but how many cars are lining up. The more cars there are, the more splendid the wedding is considered.

For the children of those privileged enough to receive gifts from Kim Jong-il hotels or institutional villas are rented to hold their wedding ceremonies. Watches are an essential wedding gift, as they are considered one of the important assets proving men's dignity in North Korea. Wedding ceremonies cannot be held on April 15 and February 16. Since they are the birthdays of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il, these dates should be celebrated as national holidays but cannot be personal holidays.

Another major difference in North Korean weddings is that no officiants are involved; the party secretary or high-ranking official from the groom's workplace would come to the wedding and give words of celebration to the couple. No bouquet is used at all, especially after one party official who used a bouquet during his wedding ceremony got severely condemned for adopting capitalistic culture. For monetary gifts, party officials pay dollars while ordinary citizens offer drinks, rice and other simple food to be used during the ceremonies.

Most couples do not take wedding photographs due to

financial restraints, but those choosing to do so always take pictures in front of Kim Il-sung's statue. This is not compulsory but is strongly recommended as part of common social ethics. There is no such word as "honeymoon" in North Korea; the newlyweds would go back to work the day after their wedding. However, they wouldn't have anywhere to go due to the lack of freedom to travel, and those taking some days off to celebrate their wedding are deemed disloyal to the party.

"Remarks under the influence" are more fatal than driving under the influence

Recently in the South, there were some cases where driving under the influence led to punishment and even dismissal from work. Then what are the risks associated with drinking in North Korea? There is a saying in the North, "One dies not because of a long neck but because of a short tongue." In fact, more North Koreans are sent to labor camps or killed for remarks they made while drunk than for driving under the influence.

One director-level official at a central government agency ended up being sent to a labor camp after gibbering while drunk, "Our supreme commander is a rice ball, and we are snack balls." One scholar got emotional while drunk and mumbled to himself, "Even a big country like China is

opening up and reforming. As a small country, why do we remain [closed]? How much do we actually have to defend?” He had to spend 20 years in prison, as his remarks were considered to be anti-regime. One drunk person was also imprisoned for what he thought was a joke: “Why is our stepmother, the Workers’ Party of Korea, tormenting us day and night, while my biological mother is not like that?” (Note: The Workers’ Party of Korea is called the “mother” in North Korea.) As such, even remarks made while drunk are strictly punished in the North.

North Korean defectors who have been taken to political prisoner camps say, “Around 20% of prisoners in North Korea’s political prisoner camps are those who made inappropriate comments while they were drunk.” This is why North Koreans always say during drinking sessions: “At first men drink alcohol, and then alcohol drinks alcohol. In the end, alcohol drinks men.” The damage from inappropriate comments while drunk does not end there: If close colleagues or subordinates drinking together with the person do not report the issue, they face the same punishment as they are deemed to agree or sympathize with them.

What is interesting is that the North Korean authorities do not crack down on driving under the influence, which is the cause of most deaths in car accidents for the North Korean elites. In this sense, North Korea is the world’s only “suppressor of remarks under the influence,” which turns a blind eye on

the drunk drivers that undermine the health and safety of its people while imposing severe punishments on anti-regime comments made while drunk.

5

When Will the North Korean Subway Come “Aboveground”?

There is one clear piece of evidence that Pyongyang, the capital of North Korea, has yet to come out into the bright world of reform and market opening: Unlike the South Korean subway trains going “aboveground” and “underground” depending on the routes, the subway trains in Pyongyang remain underground only. With the technological support of the Soviet Union, the construction of the city’s subway system began in 1961 during the First Seven-Year Development



Entrance to a subway station in Pyongyang

Project. Chollima Line (Puhung-Pulgunbyol), the north-south route, was completed in September 1973.

The second-phase of the construction project continued, with the east-west Hyoksin Line (Kwangbok-Ragwon) completed in September 1978; the extension of the Chollima Line from Ponghwa to Puhung was finished in September 1987. It is not difficult to find the entrance to a subway station in North Korea. As shown in the above picture, subway entrances have the sign “지” (Ji) as the abbreviation of “subway” (Jihacheol in Korean), so these entrances can be easily found.

North Korea has two subway lines (east-west and north-south) traversing the center of Pyongyang. What is noteworthy is that subway trains do not stop at Kwangmyong Station,



Platform of Kwangmyong Subway Station in Pyongyang

which currently is a restricted area for civilians as Kumsusan Memorial Palace and other facilities for guaranteeing the security of the Kim family are concentrated nearby the station. This may be an illustration of the “fear of dictators” hidden beneath the surface.

The picture below shows signs in the North Korean subway system. The South Korean subway system nowadays has “smart TVs” everywhere, which passengers can touch to get the information they need. North Korea also has its own version of “smart signs” for the subway system in Pyongyang, although these signs cannot match the level of technology in the South. As illustrated in the picture, a rider presses a destination on the signs, and the destination will light up to



Subway signs in Pyongyang

show how to get there.

Below is not a simple subway map but a satellite picture of Pyongyang with the two subway lines mapped.

As such, the subway system in North Korea serves not just as a means of transport but also as a shelter for defending its political regime. At a time when market opening, reform and globalization are being pushed for, this is more hard evidence that they are sticking to their own political, social and economic doctrines. When will the North come out of the “underground” and enjoy the “sunlight of free and open democracy”? What they desperately need now is the “subway” to go “aboveground.”



Subway map superimposed on a satellite photo of Pyongyang

SOCIAL TRENDS

1. North Korea at War against the Market
2. "Brave Guys" in North Korea
3. Signs of Change Driven by the People
4. "*Suryŏng*-Centeredness" as the Religion of North Korea
5. Scientific Development Breaking
Through North Korea's Closed-Door Politics

1

North Korea at War against the Market

Why the North Korean regime had to allow a market

Until the early 1990s, North Korea had no market other than state-owned shops, governed by the order of production and supply, except for the rudimentary farmers' market that Kim Il-sung allowed farmers to have in a bid to narrow the gap between the urban and rural areas. In the mid-1990s, however, the failure of the ration system led to mass starvation. Sensing a threat to its own security, the North Korean regime initially sought to allow the sale of essential foods such as rice and soybean sauce in the farmers' market. This was an inevitable choice for the regime that had already become incapable of providing rations. Once they opened the market, however, they found more people selling their stuff from home to buy rice than those actually buying rice.

Without room for control, the market expanded further from a space for mere survival toward one for full-fledged commercialization. Until 1995, many North Koreans were bound by their workplaces and just watched what was going

on in the market. The Kim Jong-il regime believed officially acknowledging the failure of the ration system would damage its own legitimacy, so it simply urged its people to achieve self-sufficiency without reflecting upon or asking for their understanding over the lack of rations. In the end, the state's continued failure to provide rations resulted in a massive number of deaths from hunger, leading a large portion of the population to abandon their workplaces. Facing the double whammy of a large-scale exodus from workplaces coupled with mass starvations, the North Korean regime was eventually forced to give up its control over the market.

Market-driven changes in North Korea

In early 1996, the North Korean regime ordered state institutions to earn money for themselves and supply food for their employees. A large number of trading companies were launched since then, but they were called "trading companies" only in name, as North Korea's only two foreign currency vaults—Office No. 39 and Office No. 38 for managing Kim Jong-il's political funds—kept their doors firmly closed. Even the Ministry of Trade as part of the Cabinet had no money to provide its officials as expenses for their business trips abroad to "beg for food."

Natural resources were all that North Korea had to give abroad, so it would offer coal, minerals, wood and other

resources to receive rice from Chinese merchants in exchange. If the regime had allowed at least this barter-based trade to keep working, there would have been no mass starvations. In 1997, Kim Jong-il instructed that all trade transactions be made only in cash, without taking the reality of the country into account. Export permits had been granted for bartering, he asserted, but these transactions could not ensure an inflow of loyal funds in foreign currency. This froze transactions between North Korea and China, causing even more deaths from hunger; Chinese merchants who invested in bilateral trade—with the credit from North Korean state authorities as a guarantee—also fell into debt.

Losing their confidence in North Korea, Chinese merchants argued all transactions should be made in cash. As a result, individuals with ample capital started playing a greater role in North Korea's trade than the government agencies. State authorities were eager to partner with whoever had plenty of money regardless of past reputations. This shook the personnel management principles of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK), and eventually, the people's values and sense of reliance upon the regime. The cash-based trade between North Korea and China also gave rise to collusion between economic and political elites in the North.

North Korea has changed dramatically since the children of privileged elites, who used to stay loyal only to the state, got a taste for money. With political power and capital joining

forces, they bought a wide variety of cheap products from Chinese merchants and resold them in North Korea at double the original prices. This naturally led to the distinction between wholesalers and retailers, and the market flourished further as a result.

Power elites leading the North Korean market

North Korea has an unbalanced economic structure of import and consumption, as opposed to the balanced one of production and consumption. It called for *Juche* (self-reliance) only in the realm of politics, while its economy was heavily reliant upon the outside world. One of the poorest countries in the world, it faced limits in consumption in just a year after the market was allowed. Many children of party officials made considerable debts from China; one of them was even murdered due to money trouble. After this incident, the North Korean regime consolidated trading companies run by the myriad of state institutions to strike a balance between supply and demand, limiting their authority so they would only trade items befitting the nature of respective organizations.

Nevertheless, party officials in North Korea openly claimed that, while Kim Il-sung's "instructions" served as laws, Kim Jong-il's "words" were nothing but words. The party, the military, the Ministry of State Security and other state institutions took advantage of Kim Jong-il's exclusive

ratification system, submitting proposals befitting their own interests. Once their proposals were approved, they could use these documents as legal grounds to bring any issue back to square one. In the end, companies associated with the party and the Ministry of the People's Armed Forces—run by the children of privileged elites—dominated the rights to all imports as well as production bases for export (e.g. key mines and fishing grounds at home), leaving the Cabinet effectively powerless.

With the Cabinet losing its power, the country's planned economy faltered while the market grew bigger. In order to save state institutions under the Cabinet, Premier Hong Songnam of the Cabinet suggested to Kim Jong-il what is known as the "consent system." The system was intended to rent out empty state-run shops and restaurants to individuals or other institutions—instead of keeping them vacant—and divide the profits by the ratio of 7:3. This, he believed, would cut the institutions some slack, and ultimately, incorporate the external market where individuals drive prices gradually back into the state-run store system for better control and management. With the active support of Kim Jong-il, North Korea shut down the market and launched state-run shops where posted prices—slightly lower than market prices—were applied.

Many individuals rented state-run shops and restaurants, thinking this would be the only option to take, but the

situation turned out to be quite the opposite. Already transformed into "businessmen," the children of privileged elites gained related information ahead of others and sold the goods they had at low prices to prepare against a forced price cut. As a result, posted prices imploded soon after the consent system was launched. With price competition going on between the market and state-owned shops, Kim Jong-il ordered the consent system to be discarded a year later. Even this, however, did not work out as the dictator had hoped. Restaurants became very market-oriented, with individual investors having already renovated the venues, although this was less the case for the shops. Furthermore, state institutions already got accustomed to the consent system, so discarding the system was tantamount to stopping the Cabinet's breath.

Kim Jong-il later realized that the children of privileged elites were the source of all the problems, so he asked the #4 Department of the party's Organization & Guidance Department (dedicated to uncovering irregularities by central party officials) to check where the children of secretaries or higher officials at the central party were working. He also banned these children from landing jobs in foreign currency-earning organizations, but these measures were never enough to fully tackle the situation. As the market had already been structured around them, North Korea's international trade would have been paralyzed if they had been ousted. Indeed, as they often say, what is wrong with "benefiting the country

with money when it lacks it”?

Most of the children of privileged elites are now working for companies affiliated with Office No. 38, anti-South Korean espionage agencies, party organizations, the Body Guard Command, the Ministry of the People’s Armed Forces, the Ministry of State Security and other state authorities. These North Korean millionaires are serving as presidents or executives at key corporations associated with the party and the military, playing a leading role in the country’s international trade. They are using their own networks to manipulate market prices, and with the power of dollars, they are even shaping national policies related to their interests. Obsessed with money and backed by the power of their fathers, these privileged children have turned themselves into capitalist forces—unlike their fathers who were loyalist forces—by slandering and purging even the economic elites they started business with to dominate profits from the companies.

Currency reform ends in failure

With the ration system already destroyed, the North Korean regime introduced a currency reform in 2009 as the market was already beyond its control. Its intentions can be summarized as five-fold: (a) **Escape** – The state sought to break away from market influences; (b) **Exploitation** –

It wanted to take in capital accumulated in the market; (c) **Closure** – The state sought to cut off the ties between the market and exchange rates and bring capital values back under its control; (d) **Management** – It aimed to curb the market’s autonomy; and (e) **Control** – The state hoped to restrain people’s sense of dependence on the market.

North Korea in the past would have pushed for a currency reform designed to improve and strengthen the state’s sole control of the economy, but its currency reform in 2009 was a desperate move for survival by a state edged out by the market. After the July 1 Measures, of course, the North Korean regime implicitly allowed the market to operate, seeking to implement a currency exchange in an effort to control and manage the market at the state level. The lack of market understanding and reluctant responses of policymakers delayed the implementation of the currency exchange, and in the meantime, market currency dominated the market ahead of state currency.

The main culprits behind this were none other than the party officials in North Korea. Having driven the market with their political power, they prepared for a currency exchange—even before the regime sought to—in order to protect their wealth. This led the prices of the dollar to go up; consumer prices skyrocketed as rumors spread about the upcoming currency exchange. In the end, the 5,000-won notes, for which the country’s regime set the highest ceiling for currency

exchange in history, lost their value and opportunities, and the other, less-valuable notes became completely worthless.

North Korea's secret attempt to undertake a currency exchange ended in failure. The biggest reason for this was that the regime saw market values from the standpoint of the dictatorship while failing to notice individual values. After the July 1 Economic Management Improvement Measures in 2002 (also known as the "July 1 Measures"), North Koreans were forced to get accustomed to the market for their own survival and started putting greater value on money than on loyalty. The North Korean regime, however, still saw its people as those brainwashed with the values of loyalty to the state, treating them recklessly under this assumption. In short, they thought only about extorting capital from the market; they failed to take into account people's resistance to their material value being plundered. These are not common values shared by everyone but are unique, varying ones held individually, which Kim Jong-il took from each and every one. For this reason, the currency exchange aggravated the people's defiance against the leader.

Kim Jong-il made another misjudgment about the gap between market levels and state needs. North Koreans nowadays are accustomed to the market's diversity and continued demands. In this process, they have fully embraced market-oriented ways of thinking and awareness. Kim Jong-il, on the other hand, sought to realize the state's needs merely

through currency. In other words, he forced individualists, who believe the only way for them to survive was to discard totalitarianism, into a more powerful form of totalitarianism than in the past.

As the "king" of a closed kingdom, Kim Jong-il underestimated how the dollar has become a global currency. Obsessed with the diachronic understanding of foreign currency needed to maintain his regime and local currency for ensuring the people's survival, he simply tried to redefine the value of North Korean currency through a currency exchange—without considering the dollar's supremacy. In a twisted economic structure that relies entirely on imports without any homegrown production, a complete domination of the market as he intended was something utterly impossible from the outset. The currency exchange, after all, was a shortcut to self-destruction caused by the leader's short-sighted egocentrism and narrow vision for a self-sufficient economy.

Today, North Korea has two classes: One is the ration-based class remaining in the party and the military, and the other is the market-centric class that survives in the market on its own. The conflicts and confrontations between these two classes will likely continue in the future.

2 “Brave Guys” in North Korea

An act called “Brave Guys,” which is part of the sketch comedy show “Gag Concert” popular among young South Koreans, is gaining huge popularity recently. They sympathize with the act as it covers issues that ordinary people would not dare to talk about. When there are things barely talked about even in South Korea, as a country enjoying freedom of speech, those running against the Kim Jong-un system in North Korea, where no such freedom is allowed, truly deserve to be called “brave guys.” In this section, several of these brave guys challenging the North Korean regime will be introduced.

Rumormongers

Since North Korea bombarded the South Korean island of Yeonpyeong, “You are so acting like the little idiot” has become a catch phrase in North Korea, likening someone who does a stupid thing to Kim Jong-un. This is the exact opposite of the North’s propaganda message that the young leader took resolute action. There have also been many rumors

spreading across the society, including one that the portrait of Kim Jong-il was taken down in a state institution. These secret rumormongers are challenging the regime’s deceptive propaganda head-on.

In fact, the North Korean regime systematically creates and spreads rumors about South Korea among its people. The key state institutions responsible for such operations are Liaison Office 101 and Liaison Office 26 under the United Front Department of the Workers’ Party of Korea (WPK), whose mission is to invent and spread false South Korean public opinions—as if Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il are considered pivotal figures of the Korean nation or the presidents of a unified Korea. Originally designed for psychological warfare against the South, these divisions are actually being leveraged to perform “psychological warfare against the North,” that is, toward ordinary North Koreans. At first, the country’s state-run newspaper *RodongSinmum* suggested imaginary information sources such as “Professor Kim from South Korea” and “Mr. Park, a politician affiliated with an opposition party in South Korea.” The newspaper later chose to come up with fake names under which it publishes articles that worship Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il.

The same tactics are used for external propaganda. A few writers at the External Propaganda Department under the central party’s Propaganda and Agitation Department are tasked solely with making up foreign names to praise Kim Il-sung

and Kim Jong-il as the “leaders” of world revolution. Any texts glorifying Kim Jong-il under the names of South Koreans or other foreigners are all false unless backed up by specific photographic evidence. These implausible, invented stories are announced everyday via the public media of *RodongSinmun* and Korea Central Television (KCTV). The Ministry of State Security even has a division responsible for spreading rumors. Using the mentality of people who are easily influenced by word of mouth, it fabricates and spreads ill-grounded myths like, “North Korea is the world’s leading military power and is soon to become a strong and prosperous nation.”

These rumors fabricated by the North Korean regime have their limits: In order for stories to become rumors, they first need to be spread, but all of the rumors about Kim Jong-il are gossip that the regime is afraid of. As the popular Korean saying goes, “the voice of people is the voice of god.” Spreading faster and igniting more interest than the false propaganda from the regime, rumors among ordinary people are breaking down the very foundation of the efforts to deify the Kim family.

College girls spreading the “Korean Wave”

Another prime example of “brave guys” in North Korea are the college girls who are expressing their open ways of thinking. Showing off the same hairstyles as the female lead characters in South Korean drama series, these girls imitate

their accent as well as the way they dress. As indicated in recent media reports, North Korean college girls have recently been found to wear practical ultra-shorts in their dormitory rooms or even daringly strut in these shorts—in groups of three or four—along the streets outside their campuses.

Also influenced by South Korean drama series, young couples in the North are starting to celebrate the 100th-day anniversary of their relationship, which is another trend first pioneered by college girls. North Korean lovers celebrate their anniversaries in a very modest manner. They generally treat each other to a meal or give pumpkins or cucumbers; some of them bring two tangerines as fruits are rare in the country. It is very interesting to see these couples offering practical food items as gifts. On special dates, South Korean couples head for the coasts to watch the sunset; their North Korean counterparts take a bike ride to celebrate their 100th day together, as they are not free to travel and typically lack a means of transportation.

Interestingly, North Korean boys and girls also go out—just like those in the South—and they exchange stationery like erasers and ballpoint pens as gifts. Despite continued crackdowns by the authorities, college girls in North Korea are benchmarking how the lead characters in South Korean drama series look, spreading their hairstyles, accent, fashions, and even dating skills. These college girls may well be called “brave guys.”

Border guards opening the frontier for defectors

Border guards secretly helping defectors cross the borders can also be called “brave guys.” Their motivation, of course, is not a sense of justice but money or bribes. In addition to the 24,000 North Korean defectors living in South Korea, there reportedly are more than 100,000 North Koreans who have escaped the country and are now staying in China or other third countries. Given that this figure is only for those who have already taken action to flee the country, the actual number of North Koreans who have decided or are looking for a chance to defect must be much greater. The border guards are taking advantage of this trend to make money.

More recently, border guards in North Korea have become engaged in these irregularities more openly and actively than ever before. North Koreans who recently fled the country say that, until a year ago, there were some cases where the guards released those caught by the Ministry of State Security while trying to escape, if they bribed these guards and said they were only visiting China to buy food and other goods. More recently, however, the guards are reported to be allowing defectors to pass easily if they say they are going to the “lower town” (South Korea), as those trying to cross the river blindly are more likely to be caught by the Chinese security police while hiding themselves in China without any connections.

North Korean defectors taken back home face thorough

interrogations. If they reveal how they escaped, the responsible border guards also faces punishment. Some of them have even been shot to death as examples to the others. For this reason, it is reported that, while demanding money, these soldiers ask quietly, “Where are you going?” If the defectors say, “We are going to the lower town,” they even reply, “Travel safely,” or “Please do not get taken back.” They feel relieved when the defectors say they are going to South Korea, as they are well aware that the families or relatives of these people, who fled to the South earlier, pay money to hire brokers for them.

In the case of these defectors, they have people waiting for them on the other side of the river, who will provide them with shelter and expenses for their defection. Therefore, border guards ask, “Where are you going?” to determine if the defectors have these better conditions or are just trying to leave the country without any connections. None of them, however, openly say, “I am going to South Korea.” Everyone knows what the “lower town” means, so they need not spit out the word and make everyone uncomfortable.

During the Arduous March from the mid-1990s through 2000, border guards were reportedly engaged in what was dubbed the “making-1,000-dollars movement”; now the figure has increased further to 10,000 dollars. This means that, during their military service, they secretly take money from those trying to defect from North Korea and save 10,000

dollars until they are discharged. As they may get exposed if they hide the money within their units, these guards find a civilian partner living nearby the units. Guards stash their money with their partners, who then engage in trafficking or defection brokerage to mutually benefit each other. To root out such corrupt relations, the Ministry of State Security and the Military Security Command have cracked down on those involved. These crackdowns, however, have proven ineffective, as their schemes are so elaborate and even the high-ranking officials as well as local residents are involved.

While the state is trying to prevent defection, local soldiers and high-ranking officials are making money from the practice. This vividly illustrates how the political control of the Kim Jong-un regime fails to reach the very bottom of the political system and the local areas. Whatever their motivations may be, the border guards who wink at North Korean defectors crossing the borders are brave soldiers risking their own lives to challenge the regime's orders.

The “power of *ajumma* (married women)” as pioneers of the market

Just like their South Korean counterparts, married women (often dubbed *ajumma* in Korean) in North Korea are willing to do just about anything to support their families. In the face of mass starvation during the Arduous March, they were the

first to introduce the capitalistic idea of a “local marketplace” in the country. While their husbands were simply trying to save face, waiting for the rations to be supplied, these ladies abandoned the regime's ration system and engaged in the market voluntarily, saying that husbands were responsible for state affairs and wives for the livelihood of their families. If the market had been pioneered by men, the North Korean regime would have pressured it with stronger control, and the market would have never evolved into what it is today.

Whenever state authorities like the Ministry of State Security, the Ministry of the People's Armed Forces and the Prosecution tried to control the market, the ladies fiercely protested, citing their families' rights to survive as their noble cause. However strict Kim Jong-il's directions might have been, they could not entirely disregard the practical demands and complaints of these women trying to feed their families. They examined market prices based on their experience and knowledge gained from making ends meet; they also introduced the order of supply and demand to the country, which had only experienced the structure of order and obedience, and proliferated material values that went beyond ideological ones. As the pioneers of the “local marketplace,” the origin of the market that the North Korean regime fears the most, these women have shown true courage.

North Korean defectors who fought the regime with action

Under the North Korean regime, escaping the country is a life-risking struggle which can never be fully understood by those who have not lived it. North Korean defectors are people who resisted against the regime through the action of defecting from the country. In the course of defection, some of them pushed their way through the jungle to escape the North Korean and Chinese security police; others crossed the Mongolian desert while going hungry.

The number of North Korean defectors who settled in the South now stands at about 24,000, a figure carrying profound implications. The biggest blow they have dealt to the regime is that they have broken its strict principles for selecting party officials, where even the most distant relatives of the candidates are rigorously investigated. If these traditional criteria were to be applied strictly, none of the 20-million population in the country would be qualified to become a party official.

According to the Organization & Guidance Department's principles for personnel management, even Kim Jong-il and Kim Jong-un can be classified as the family of defectors. Song Hye-rang, the elder sister of Kim Jong-il's wife, Song Hye-rim, fled to the United States as an exile in 1996 and published *Wisteria House: The Autobiography of Song Hye-rang*,

a book revealing the secret life of the Kim dynasty. Her son, Ri Han-yong, who escaped the North together with her, also published *Kim Jong-il's Royal Family*, in which he exposed the reality of Kim's dictatorship that he had witnessed as his nephew-in-law. The publication of this book eventually led to his assassination. Song Hye-rim was later treated in Russia and died in May 2002. Even Kim Jong-nam—Kim Jong-il's eldest son—has had a wandering life in Macau and elsewhere. In an interview with a Japanese journalist, he denounced the Kim family's succession of power over three generations, calling the country “North Korea”—a widespread term in South Korea and the rest of the world which has never been accepted in the North—instead of the “Democratic People's Republic of Korea” as its official name.

The same holds true for Kim Jong-un. Ko Yong-hui, the young leader's mother who was the third wife of Kim Jong-il, was Korean-Japanese. In the history of the Kim family propagandized by the North, however, even the term “Japan” is nowhere to be seen. Furthermore, Ko Yong-suk—Ko Yong-hui's younger sister and Kim Jong-un's aunt—also headed for the United States via Switzerland in October 2001 to seek asylum. Currently under the protective custody of the U.S. authorities, she avoids contact with any strangers or journalists.

As such, these defectors have made people doubt the very political legitimacy of the leader's own family. Indeed, they

have contributed greatly to exposing the inner life of North Korea to the outside world. With the courage of risking their own lives to flee the country, they are now working hard to start a new life in the unfamiliar environment of the South. These North Korean defectors are showing the true definition of “brave guys.”

Signs of Change Driven by the People

3

A wind of change in North Korean television

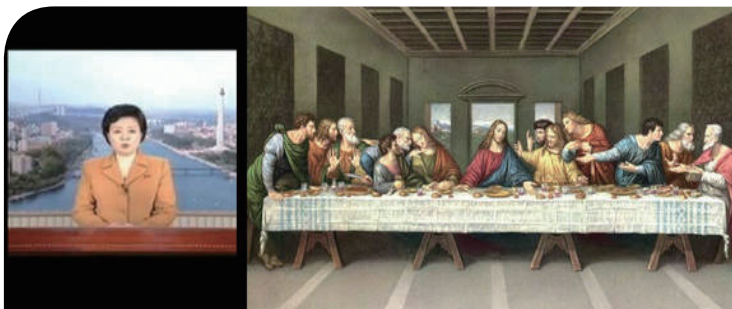
An analysis of content from North Korea’s state-run broadcaster, Korean Central Television (KCTV), indicates that significant changes have taken place since the year 2006. Given the nature of the country, most of the video content broadcasted there is comprised of programs for worshipping the Kim family, so the most standard content of the evening news has been chosen as the subject of analysis.

Before 2006, North Korean television simply featured a newscaster in the center against a blue background. This blue background was used intentionally as half of the country’s news reports every day were intended for the “deification of the Kim family” and could be seen as too formal and stiff. In color psychology, blue is viewed as a color that “lessens tension.” If red (implying “revolution”) had been used in the background, the emotions of viewers might have been even more intensified, especially



in the face of mass starvation, and this could have led to an actual revolution. This shows how the country's extremely elaborate techniques for propaganda are applied even to news reports.

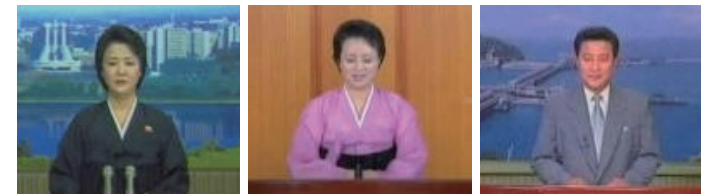
Since 2006, simple panels were introduced as the new background, indicating North Korea does embrace some trends of the times. The well-known painting, *The Last Supper*, became famous thanks largely to the integral role of its vanishing point. When you draw a straight line from the ceiling to the door, the end of the line falls straight into the eyes of Jesus, visually focusing concentration into the center of the painting. North Korean news reports since 2006 have also sought to achieve the same effect by intentionally matching the end of the Taedong River in the background with the newscaster's face so the viewers would pay greater attention to what he or she said. With the vanishing point placed on the newscaster's face, his or her comments for the "deification of the Kim family" are felt by viewers to be more credible. Even the simple picture panels are designed to support the country's agenda.



Background picture for North Korean news where the vanishing point is used to draw attention to the newscaster's face

Despite all these changes, North Korea has still held fast to the tradition of deifying its leaders. In the below photos, all newscasters are sitting up straight with their hands put together. This is an expression of respect to the "Kim family," as they are sitting "at attention." This is not all: Among the three pictures below, the ones on each side are from reports on the general news of North Korean society; only the one at the center covers a field visit by the "Kim family." While the backgrounds of the two photos feature the overview of Pyongyang or large buildings as if they represent the society overall, the report on Kim Jong-il's field visit was made against a background of hardwood patterns highlighting his dignity and authority.

The picture below reveals some more differences: When



Various background pictures and wide-ranging postures of newscasters in North Korean news

reporting general news on North Korean society, the newscaster moves from the center to one of the sides, sitting and putting his/her hands together in a more natural way. This represents an established practice under the country's principles of propaganda and agitation where the leader is clearly set apart from his people.

More recently, North Korean television content is becoming increasingly modernized. For example, computer graphic effects are used in news reports, while large-scale plasma display panel (PDP) televisions are placed next to the newscasters. Newscasters are also posing more casually, presumably in an effort to ensure the right composition and balance amid the introduction of computer graphics. Aside from “militant” reports on field visits by the Kim family, they are trying to bring a sense of “psychological comfort” to the other news reports. Even the state-run broadcaster in North Korea is feeling the need for change in line with the trends of the times.

Then what is driving such massive changes in North Korean television? These changes are not entirely attributable to the directions of Kim Jong-un as the new, young dictator, as market influences play a greater role in this process. As materialism brought about by the introduction of the market overtakes totalitarianism, new values and cultures have spread across the society. Under such circumstances, the state's refusal to embrace the market-driven culture of

ordinary people may make its ideological messages “empty echoes.” In other words, it is no longer leading the trends of the times but is distorting its history under growing pressure from below.

North Koreans feeling the gap between reality and propaganda

Deemed the “textbook” for the party's Propaganda and Agitation Department, *On Juche Literature* states, “Masterpieces reflect their times.” The notion of “masterpiece” here, of course, is totally different from what applies to popular songs in South Korea. These masterpieces are “songs for brainwashing,” which are not sung spontaneously by the people; the regime picks these songs and forces people to sing them. Even so, the titles and lyrics of North Korea's representative songs by era reflect how its system has fallen apart—instead of symbolizing the country's renaissance.

The Song of Chollima Jockey, a representative song from the 1960s when the North was better off than the South, has the phrase, “I see the hill of communism over there,” in the lyrics of verse 3. This is a bold expression of its confidence in socialism at that time. The title of a popular song these days, on the other hand, is *Let Us Defend Socialism*, implying that the country is now worried about its current system, not to mention communism as a whole. The same holds true

for songs intended to idolize the Kim family as well as the regime. One of the representative songs for the deification of Kim Il-sung in the 1980s is *Dear Suryŏng, the Night Has Grown Quite Late*, which described the leader's hard work throughout the night. Back then, the very setting of "the supreme leader's windows well-lit until late night" was enough motive to write a song.

Under the Kim Jong-il regime, however, they could no longer make such emotional appeals but outspokenly turned to expressions of madness: "The Commander is a crack shot, and we are his bullets and bombs." This suggests the politics of Kim Jong-il, which offered an ever-worsening quality of life for his people, cannot touch the hearts of these people as much as his father's did. The party's Propaganda and Agitation Department even wrote a song, *The Commander's Rice Balls*, to present Kim Jong-il as a leader that shares the people's hunger, but the song ended up having the opposite effect and intensifying their repulsion.

Until the 1960s when North Korea remained confident about its political system, there were many songs portraying the pride of various members of society, such as *The Song of the Weaver*, *The Song of the Wood Cutter*, and *A Happy Morning*. From the late 1980s when socialist Eastern Europe started falling apart, the country also saw its political system put in jeopardy and cling to totalitarianism, without involving personal emotions. At that time, even a song titled *Going*

Millions of Miles to Follow the Suryŏng, *Going Millions of Miles to Follow the Party* came out. When the Propaganda and Agitation Department compelled the proliferation of this song across the country, ordinary people indirectly ridiculed the regime's propagandistic policy by saying secretly to each other, "When have we told them that we will not follow the party? Have we ever said we will betray the *suryŏng* right now?"

From the mid-1990s when the Arduous March began, the party's Propaganda and Agitation Department could no longer follow traditional causes and ideological formats. As a result, it had to order the creation and distribution of songs about giving one's life to defend the *suryŏng* and socialism. Now having to appeal to people's convictions, not their emotions, the songs of the North Korean regime became grimmer and more militant with the use of more hysterical themes and patterns. As the country was put in a position to accept humanitarian aid from the United States and South Korea, which it had long called its "main enemies," it started producing kamikaze-like militant songs—as if the rice from the United States and South Korea were bullets and bombs—to urge its people to defend the Commander and socialism by all means. These songs, however, only led North Koreans to realize the gap between reality and propaganda more profoundly.

As if it realizes this social atmosphere, the North Korean regime is now employing the last means of propaganda—

applying the format of military music even to music performances, allegedly in line with today's "Military First" era. Even the lyrical songs that could have been sung solo in the past are now being performed by large choirs, creating a thundering noise like that of a multiple rocket launcher as Kim Jong-il himself put it. "Songs of emotion" have been turned into "songs of politics," creating an unpleasant discord.

North Korea has so far relied on the two pillars of dictatorship: power-based dictatorship and emotion-based dictatorship. The latter, however, has virtually been destroyed. A true masterpiece to be played soon on this land will surely be about freedom and liberation.

North Korea's public sentiment as reflected in slang

Also called "jargon," slang expressions are used exclusively within a certain group so only the members of the group can understand what they mean. Slang is used primarily to satirize contradictions and irrationalities in society. In North Korea, slang expressions about the Communist Party or food shortages have been the most commonly used. First of all, the Workers' Party of Korea is mocked as the "Disaster Party," implying the party brings the people nothing but misfortune. The Communist Party is ridiculed as "bean candy" (*kongsatang*), which sounds similar to "communist party" (*gongsandang*) in Korean. Party officials for their part,

are referred to as "wolves." There are other slang expressions about idolization: The party's politicians who simply talk about the idolization of the Kim family are called "baby pheasants." The term "handclap medicine" means that clapping hands more enthusiastically during congresses or learning sessions can make life safer.

There also is slang terminology about policies implemented by the party. "Digging up the bones" means investigating even the bones of one's ancestors buried in their graves—in the name of family background investigations—to root out weaknesses. "Burning the bedbugs" refers to the Chollima Movement and other forms of labor exploitation, which are so severe that even the bedbugs on people's bodies are burned. "Empty cart" means high-profile ideological learning sessions having no substantial content and bearing no fruit. Plus, the informants from the Ministry of State Security and the Ministry of the People's Armed Forces, who are working in various workplaces and organizations to gather information on what goes on there, are called "rats" (meaning they keep "squeaking") or "wedges."

In addition to this party-related jargon, many expressions on food shortages have been coined since the Arduous March in the early 2000s. First of all, food-related slang includes: "powder rice" (a powdery meal made of corn powder); "bomb rice" (a very small portion of rice in a bowl, looking dented as if it was hit by a bomb); and "planes rice" (a bowl of rice with

the surface neatly cut off, as if it was planed). The leading examples of other slang expressions about soup are: “pork broth soup for your health” (a bowl of soup with only oil on the surface and no meat inside); and “nylon soup” or “salt soup for your health” (soup or porridge cooked only with salt). Also, the country’s free medical care system lacking hospitals, doctors and drugs is satirically called the “medical system without three elements.”

North Korea also has various satires about party officials and the regime as well as slang for denouncing them. Even the party officials themselves have a dig at Kim Jong-il by saying, “Yes, he indeed is the Sun. We burn to death if we get too close to him, and we freeze to death if we stay too far away from him.” Since the fall of the ration economy in the mid-1990s, all manufacturers in North Korea have closed down. The clear lack of materials, coupled with extortion by party officials, led to even more serious consequences. To criticize this, North Koreans argued: “Group leaders embezzle only half, office heads embezzle directly, cell secretaries embezzle carefully, managers embezzle by giving orders, and party secretaries embezzle proudly. No wonder employees have no choice but to steal!”

There also are expressions for mocking party officials who routinely commit sexual violence. North Korea has numerous mixed-gender military units. Starting at the age of 16 when they finish middle school, North Korean men

serve in the military for 10 years and women for seven years, hence there is a large number of servicewomen. Against this backdrop, an endless string of sexual crimes take place in the North Korean military. Female soldiers, in particular, are often sexually abused by their commanding officers. North Koreans lash these officers verbally by saying: “Platoon leaders profit timidly, company commanders profit from time to time, battalion commanders profit massively, divisional commanders profit extravagantly, corps commanders profit under military law, and military officials at the General Staff Department and the General Political Department profit comprehensively.”

The party’s slogans are also ridiculed by the people. One of the slogans goes, “After going thousands of miles in hardship, you will find millions of miles full of happiness,” which is openly mocked by ordinary people who respond, “After going thousands of miles in hardship, you will find millions of miles full of more hardship.” The Workers’ Party of Korea created the slogan, “When the party decides, we do,” claiming there is no such word as “impossible” in Kim Jong-il’s dictionary. North Koreans, however, use this slogan when they make the impossible possible not for the party but for their own interest. They use a modified version of the slogan, “When we decide, we do,” to explain their decisions and actions when, for example, soldiers steal civilian assets or when laborers steal and sell state property in the market.

North Koreans also secretly criticize the regime's propaganda on Kim Il-sung as a "hero of anti-Japanese independent movements" by saying, "He ousted the terrible Japanese colonists and managed to create an even more terrible world than during Japanese colonial rule." These countless slang expressions and satires on the North Korean regime imply that the country's public sentiment is very much against the regime.

"Suryŏng-Centeredness" as the Religion of North Korea

4

The world labels North Korea a "religious" state where the Kim family is worshipped as gods. If it had been a normal socialist country, it would have welcomed the new era of reason, together with other formerly socialist countries, upon the demise of socialist Eastern Europe. If at least its official name, the "Democratic" People's Republic of Korea, had held true, it could have carefully chosen the path toward reform and market opening, just like China, albeit based on limited democratic decisions. However, North Korea is not merely a country under the long-term dictatorship of a single person; if so, popular uprisings might have been possible there, as in the case of Libya where the waves of democratization from the Middle East put an end to Gaddafi's iron-fist rule.

A physical dictatorship has not been the driving force behind the North Korean regime's unprecedented succession of power across three generations. The key has been its dictatorship of brainwashing, a religious rule where the leader is absolutely idolized. Calling North Korea a "religious" state, of course, is not the right analogy to make, as this would be

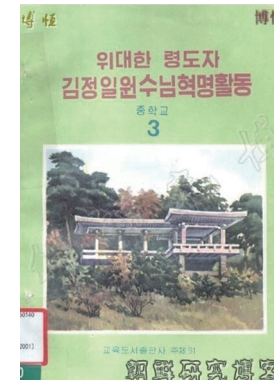
an insult to all the religions in the world. Throughout the history of humanity, there has never been such a horrendous religion that asks for the sacrifice of the entire society for the interest of a handful of individuals. In an endeavor to clearly tell right from wrong and fully understand the two factors, however, this section will compare North Korea to a religion.

Kim Il-sung as North Korea's "god"

Kim Il-sung is the "god" of North Korea, which is why he is called the "Sun of the Nation" and his birthday, April 15, is celebrated as the "Day of the Sun." The North Korean regime has designated the day as the "origin of Korea" and uses the unprecedented era name of "Juche" which starts from that very date. This is an outrageous verbal affront that, without the birth of Kim Il-sung as the country's "god," neither the history of North Korea nor its 20-million people would ever have existed.

Revolutionary history textbooks as North Korea's "bibles"

Revolutionary history books on Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il are North Korea's "bibles." The free education that the country boasts is actually "compelled" education designed to deify the Kim family. North Koreans learn about the childhood



Revolutionary history textbooks in North Korea

of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il in kindergarten and about their student days at primary school (equivalent to "elementary school" in South Korea), growing together with the revolutionary history of these leaders. These "revolutionary bibles" call the two Kims the "Messiahs" saving the lives of all North Koreans. They call these lives "political lives," suggesting

that human beings as social organisms have political lives in addition to their physical lives. These "revolutionary bibles," however, never mention the ordeals of the innumerable "physical" lives ended by Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il.

Revolutionary history institutes as North Korea's "sanctuaries"

North Korea's "sanctuaries" are revolutionary history institutes on Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il, which may be understood as sanctuaries for the deification of these leaders. Always open to the public, these institutes have no room for individual views. Taking part in such programs as "learning sessions on the *suryŏng's* words," "movements for following the revolutionary history," "declarations of loyalty" and "gatherings

of oath,” everyone should think only about Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il—and for today, Kim Jong-un. These “revolutionary sanctuaries” in North Korea host a wide variety of events such as the Hail to the Leader, the Revolutionary Sermon, and the Penitence.

Songs praising the two Kims as North Korea’s “hymns”

The “hymns” of North Korea are songs of praise for the two Kims. Every day, North Korean television channels start off with *The Song of Commander Kim Il-sung* and end with *The Song of Commander Kim Jong-il*. The same applies to the beginning and end of any event or declaration. With the two Kims being the only two “commanders” of the nation, these songs encourage North Koreans to have a sense of gratitude and loyalty toward them at all times. The lyrics and melodies of these “hymns” are more solemn, merrier and more reverent than any other songs in the North.

Party secretaries as the “clerics” of North Korea

North Korea’s “clerics” are the secretaries of the Workers’ Party of Korea (WPK) who preach from the country’s “revolutionary bibles.” They deliver instructions from Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il every week and are responsible for all sorts of

political brainwashing efforts such as lectures and instructional sessions. Therefore, party secretaries are special figures selected carefully by the party’s Organization & Guidance Department. They should lead the other party members by example, and be more “humble,” more “loyal,” and most of all, more “humane” than anyone else. In short, they should be straight-arrow workers devoting themselves to nothing but the leader and the party.

General life meetings as North Korea’s “penitence”

General life meetings represent the North Korean version of “penitence,” where one first quotes the words of Kim Jong-il or the instructions of Kim Il-sung and then examines if he has lived up to those standards. In order to infuse a sense of



Reverend Ri Song-suk of Pongsu Church in North Korea

slave-like obedience, the regime forces all North Koreans to make self-criticism part of their habit and lifestyle. In these general life meetings, participants are asked not just to confess their sins but also to criticize others, as well. Such “penitence” forced by the North Korean regime is intended to completely disunite individuals and to rally them into “*suryōng*-centeredness.”

Party membership fees as North Korea’s “offering”

Party membership fees can be likened to “offerings,” which all party members are obliged to pay to their respective party organizations. Deducted straight from their monthly wages, the fees are not exactly paid voluntarily. There are other contributions that one needs to offer for himself—for foreign



General life meetings as North Korea’s “penitence”

currency earnings for loyalty, military support, social support and many other causes. These offerings, the regime preaches, represent the conscience of the people who live for their leader and motherland.

The WPK’s Ten Principles for the Establishment of the Monolithic Ideology System as the “precepts” of North Korea

The WPK’s Ten Principles for the Establishment of the Monolithic Ideology System constitute the “precepts” of North Korea. If one is to abide thoroughly by what these Principles demand, he must practically give up living a human life: He should devote his whole life to the *suryōng* or supreme leader from his birth through his death; otherwise he no longer is considered alive. For this reason, all members of the party should learn the entirety of the Ten Principles by heart, as this is the very precondition for party membership as well as for life.

Portraits of leaders as North Korea’s “relics”

The portraits of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il are the “relics” of North Korea. These portraits are omnipresent—in every home and office, in every classroom and hallway, on every front gate and street, and even on everyone’s chest—so all

North Koreans will think about the leaders all the time. On ordinary days, they should further develop their conscience below these portraits; on national holidays, they should look at the portraits and cheer. The saints went as far as to sacrifice their lives for everyone else, but the two Kims of North Korea, even after their deaths, are still forcing the country to pledge their sole devotion in a form of “rule by the dead.”

To dominate everyone’s life, Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il tell their people to constantly hate all the enemies against them. This is why North Korea has political prisoner camps and the unjust law of exterminating the families of traitors over three generations to vent their spite. While the saints are willing to live and die miserably to save humanity, the so-called “gods” of North Korea, Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il, keep their “smile of the Sun” even after their deaths.



Scientific Development Breaking Through North Korea’s Closed-Door Politics

Mobile phones and computers are becoming widespread in North Korea, as well. If the market served as the space of survival for North Koreans, mobile phones or computers are their space of information gathering. There are three types of mobile phones (called *Sonjonhwagi* meaning “hand phone” in Korean) in the country: folder, slide and touch. The first two are sold primarily within the country, while the last is purchased individually by those on business trips abroad. Some of them are South Korean products from Samsung or LG. Smartphones, however, have yet to become available in North Korea and cannot be used there even if any exist.

Most of the cell phones sold in North Korea are Chinese products from Huawei and ZTE. Anyone can buy a mobile phone and subscribe to the relevant service by paying 200 euros. Each quarter, one pays the minimum charge of 3,000 won and tops up the credit. Every month, 200 minutes of free calls and 20 free text messages are offered. Voice calls cost 4.2 cents per minute; if you run out of credit, you can buy a 200-minute card at 8.4 dollars. For those not making

phone calls frequently, paying 3,000 won per quarter is enough for them to use their mobile phones even without buying 8.4-dollar cards, as they can make the best use of the 200 minutes of free calls offered each month.

Ordinary citizens find it hard to subscribe to mobile phone service because 200 euros is a huge amount of money for them, but once they take the plunge and buy mobile phones, they can afford to keep using them. This is why the number of mobile phone users in North Korea is growing exponentially. According to Egyptian mobile carrier Orascom, which won the rights to operate mobile phone service in North Korea, the official number of mobile phone subscribers in the country stands at 800,000, but the unofficial figure is known to be around 300,000 more than that, as there are special subscribers that the North Korean regime prevented Orascom from managing for the sake of security.

In exchange for granting Orascom permission to offer mobile phone service, North Korea built a separate, independent mobile service system that cannot be accessed by the company. The system is designed for the members of special state authorities such as the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK), the military and the Cabinet. The mobile phone numbers for Orascom subscribers appear as "191(193)-2xx-xxxx," while those for special subscribers look like, "195-xxx-xxxx." These special subscribers enjoy additional free calls (300 minutes) and 30 more free text messages; those working

at the WPK headquarters get an additional 100 minutes of free calls per quarter. The benefits do not end there: 200-minute mobile phone cards are sold to ordinary citizens at 8.4 dollars, while they are offered to the members of the WPK and other special authorities at 840 won—almost free if you take the exchange rate into account—under the pretext of facilitating their business operations. This is another prime example of how the class system is applied even to the use of mobile phones in this hierarchical society.

Computers have also created a new order of mass communication that runs against the existing order in North Korea. More than four million computers are being used in the country as we write, including those owned by individuals and institutions, with half of them situated in Pyongyang. There is no Internet service connected to the outside world; all networks are internal ones such as "Kwangmyong Net," "Changkwang Net," "Hoetbul Net" and "Korea Information Center Net." Key information on these networks is mainly about the deification of the Kim family and the supremacy of the North Korean regime, but they offer communication features like chatting and email, enabling real-time information sharing.

There is one prime example of how computers have been distributed and individuals have been using them in the North: The regime is constantly troubled by hacking attempts by individuals. It was around 1997 when the initial versions

of computer viruses were created in the country. Back then, Microsoft released Visual C++ 5.0 (1997) and Visual C++ 6.0 (1998), but North Korea preferred MS-DOS to Windows and Turbo C++ (Borland) to Visual C++ given its environment for integrated development and speed of file sharing. Espionage agencies developed viruses in an attempt to hack computer systems in the outside world; these viruses were written with Visual C++ 5.0 and MASM 6.0.

Computer viruses are on a dramatic rise in North Korea as hackers are growingly recognized as one of the most promising professions. As the children of party officials owning computers became interested in dissertations on viruses developed by espionage agencies, computer viruses started spreading across the society. At that time, North Korea failed to properly control computer viruses as it could not even imagine that computers would become widespread in the country. Since then, computer experts and students interested in these viruses, which had totally different formats from those based on MS-DOS—started analyzing the sources of viruses developed by espionage authorities, giving rise to whole new variants built on this basis. Young North Koreans often say, “Viruses are the key to your success.”

With state authorities desperately looking for great talents in computer science, those developing better viruses than the others can prove their competence rather than being punished. This is why young North Koreans become

interested in viruses when they start learning to use computers; evolving variants, as a result, are spreading beyond control. As even the computers at state authorities are infected with viruses, the perplexed North Korean regime launched a team of vaccine researchers to develop and distribute anti-virus programs. Notices like “An anti-virus vaccine has been released” are reportedly found quite often on North Korean online networks. In the replies to these notices, however, curses against those spreading the viruses outnumber requests for the vaccines; some of the replies are very emotional complaints even containing politicized terms.

As such, the introduction of mobile phones and computers has brought new concerns and challenges to the North Korean regime, as individuals share information via their mobile phones and have secret email conversations and chats on their computers.

POWER ELITES

1. License Plates as a Reflection of Authorities' Pecking Order
2. Kim Jong-un's "Physical Contact Politics"
3. Kim Jong-un Mimics His Father's "Ratification Politics"
4. Three Obstacles Facing Kim Jong-un's Succession of Power

1

License Plates as a Reflection of Authorities' Pecking Order

License plate numbers are very important in North Korea, as cars belonging to more powerful government agencies are less bothered by traffic security officers eager to take bribes. The very fact that the license plate numbers for cars affiliated with state authorities start with “2·16” vividly illustrates the country’s system for deifying its leader. (February 16 is Kim Jong-il’s birthday.)



In Pyongyang, there are more than a thousand passenger cars given by Kim Jong-il as gifts. North Korea has two types of passenger cars: those owned by North Korean residents in Japan who returned home, and those given by Kim as gifts. To set them apart from other cars, “0” is added to the license plate numbers for the latter, as the number—coming ahead of all the other numbers—embodies the divine standing of

Kim Jong-il. Cars with the prefix number of “2·16” followed immediately by “0” are those given as gifts to the leader’s closest aides. Some vehicles are not offered as individual gifts but are shared by two or three persons, including those given to the professors, doctors and distinguished scholars at Kim Il-sung University, doctors at Pyongsong Academy of Science, heroes from the anti-Japanese independent movements, and unconverted long-term prisoners sent back from South Korea. In these cases, those receiving the cars are generally too old to drive them on their own, so they have professional chauffeurs and use the cars in turn.

Every time he brought in new cars from Germany, Kim Jong-il would offer some of them to his closest aides. This was hailed as his expression of generosity and support for his aides; his real intention, however, was to have dozens of identical models running on the street and thereby avoid his own car being easily exposed as a target of terrorism, as high-end vehicles are extremely rare in the country. For this reason, the privileged usually receive several luxury cars as gifts—such as Ford and Chrysler from the United States, and Mercedes-Benz and BMW from Germany—and thus have chauffeurs for their families in addition to those for business.

When vehicles that carry license plates starting with “2·160,” which symbolizes privilege, enter the street, all the other cars are put to a halt. In principle, traffic security officers should take precedence over traffic lights and let all the cars stop.

Not receiving any prior notice due to a broken interphone, for example, can hardly be an excuse, as it is claimed that these cars run in the center of the roads and therefore are easily recognizable even from a distance. If you visit Pyongyang and have a close look, you will notice that two yellow lines are marked at the center of the roads—regardless of whether the lanes are on the right or on the left—in central areas such as Jung District and Potonggang District. These yellow lines are reserved only for the vehicles of the Kim family and the privileged and can never be crossed by ordinary cars.

Other license plate numbers, starting with place names like “Pyongyang,” are also subject to North Korea’s hierarchy of deification. License plate numbers in the country are comprised of the prefix number (representing place name and organization) and the suffix number. For this reason, you can immediately tell, just from the prefix number, which institution a car belongs to. The prefix number “01” represents the central party’s Organization & Guidance Department; other state authorities use subsequent numbers like “02” and “03.” Interestingly, no vehicles owned by state institutions in North Korea have the prefix number of “10,” in order to avoid any potential confusion as the number “1” is considered a sacred number associated with the Kim family. For this reason, the prefix number continues from “09” to “11,” skipping “10.”

Vehicles from the Russian Embassy are given “External

01” (marked as “외 01” in Korean) as the significance of the number “1” as the symbol of Kim Jong-il is combined with North Korea’s affinity toward the country. The license plate numbers for the Chinese Embassy start with “External 10” (“외 10” in Korean) to apply the same significance of “1” to China as well. In the case of the Ministry of the People’s Armed Forces, the prefix numbers of “8.15” and “8.16” are given to the vehicles associated with the General Political Department and the General Staff Department, respectively, to pay tribute to Kim Il-sung’s accomplishments in anti-Japanese independence movements. The North also puts great value on numbers in the tens, with the license plate numbers for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Culture starting with “Pyongyang 30” (“평양 30”) and “Pyongyang 60” (“평양 60”), respectively. Hailed as the providers of the country’s unique free socialist benefits, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Public Health have the prefix numbers of “Pyongyang 61” (“평양 61”) and “Pyongyang 63” (“평양 63”).

2 Kim Jong-un's “Physical Contact Politics”

In order to deify the new leader, North Korea's state-run newspaper *RodongSinmun* has recently published a series of news articles covering Kim Jong-un's field visits. It is noteworthy that he is making much more physical contact with his people than his predecessors. Unlike his father and grandfather, who remained strictly authoritarian in order to deify themselves, the young leader is trying to reach his people first, which is extremely unusual. In this country ruled by a single person, even the slightest change in how its leader acts creates explosive shockwaves. It is no exaggeration, after all, that the leader is the very source of all changes in North Korea.

In this sense, Kim Jong-un's physical contact holds great significance. To highlight the absolute presence of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il, North Korea has rarely televised physical contact between the leaders and ordinary citizens. These leaders would hold people's hands or hug them occasionally to enhance their noble character, but such scenes were not shown to the public as repeatedly as in the case of Kim Jong-un

today. This was to maintain the divine presence of the two leaders while maximizing the impact of a single physical contact. In fact, they were already deified as the country's absolute leaders, so meeting their people up close—without having to touch them—was more than enough to explain their ample love for North Koreans.

Those who have met the Kims at a close distance are called the “receivers,” meaning they had talked exclusively with Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il or sat together with them for over 20 minutes. As part of its efforts to deify its leaders, the North Korean regime grants civil privileges to these receivers. Enjoying special management by the central party leadership, they face judicial penalties only when such is approved by the leader, even if they are caught in the act with clear evidence of their crimes available. The receivers are always the first to be considered for appointment as party officials and official commendation; their names are at the top of the list of gift recipients, consisting only of the most steadfast loyalists across the country. North Korea built a perfect order of loyalty and hierarchy where having the new label as a receiver was enough to enjoy various special benefits and privilege. Under these circumstances, North Koreans had to show their gratitude for simply meeting with the leaders.

Another motive for the separation between the leaders and their people was to facilitate protection. To this end, military security guards would strongly communicate the principles

of reception to the people so no one would dare to approach Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il before they held out their hands. Just in case the leaders suggested a handshake, people were even asked to sterilize their hands in advance as part of the reception procedure. Another principle for reception was that, when standing and talking to the leaders vis-à-vis, they should never make any eye contact with the leaders but look only at the second button on their shirts. In this vein, the two Kims were absolute monarchs not even allowing visual equality, whom no one would dare to stare at or approach closely.

In the country where political leaders have traditionally been deified, the fact that Kim Jong-un has no choice but to pursue such “physical contact politics” implies that the North Korean regime itself is taking this vacuum of deification very seriously. In other words, he knows that, without this physical contact, he has no ground to claim his achievements and noble character. In the past, words were enough for a leader to make anything possible, but now he must go so far as to make physical acts to deliver his messages.

At the same time, Kim Jong-un’s “physical contact politics” also reflects ongoing changes in North Korean society. In today’s new political environment, he can no longer remain a sacred leader shepherding his people but feels he must approach them on purpose. His physical contact with his people are not about the young leader’s new form of

leadership based on actions; they represent an attempt to “beg his people to deify him” at a time when the country’s power elites and people feel a sense of fatigue toward the Kim family’s succession of power over three generations.

3

Kim Jong-un Mimics His Father's “Ratification Politics”

North Korea's state-run newspaper *RodongSinmun* recently disclosed the handwritten ratifications of Kim Jong-un, which are seemingly intended to imitate his father's “ratification politics” in a bid to highlight his single-person rule. Then what are Kim Jong-il's ratification politics about? In the mid-1970s, the exclusive ratification system was introduced in the North. Confining Kim Il-sung's authority to the Kumsusan Memorial Palace and effectively establishing an exclusive rule system by himself as party secretary, Kim Jong-il began his single-person rule with the concept of exclusive ratification.

The initial rationale for introducing the ratification system was to lessen the excessive workload facing Kim Il-sung by sending proposals to him after selection by the party's Organization & Guidance Department and ratification by the party secretary, Kim Jong-il. From the late 1970s, it was stipulated by law that all documents from the country's Cabinet, military and government should all be sent to the Organization & Guidance Department of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) via competent high-ranking divisions at the

party. For instance, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was asked to send its documents via the International Department and the Ministry of Culture via the Propaganda Department. For this reason, individual divisions at the party had to guide and instruct their management units how to develop, prepare and polish proposals. In this process, the country's Cabinet became nothing more than a name, while the party emerged rapidly as an absolute power. Here the Organization & Guidance Department had authority over key party officials; providing guidance on behalf of the party, it also exercised the rights to put together documents gathered from individual divisions, make reports on these documents and follow up on the outcomes.

Such a concentration of documents helped complete Kim Jong-il's exclusive leadership as party secretary. Starting



Kim Jong-un's handwritten signature disclosed by *RodongSinmun*

in the mid-1980s, Kim Il-sung was surrounded by the high walls of the proposal/ratification system run by the central party's Organization & Guidance Department, reduced to a blind leader who could not see what was actually going on in the country. When he finally realized what happened, it was already after his son had taken full control of all political powers and functions. He had to undergo numerous procedures just to meet his subordinates. Even with his guarding unit, the #1 Department of the Body Guard Command, being governed by the Organization & Guidance Department, he was subject to up-close censorship rather than up-close guarding.

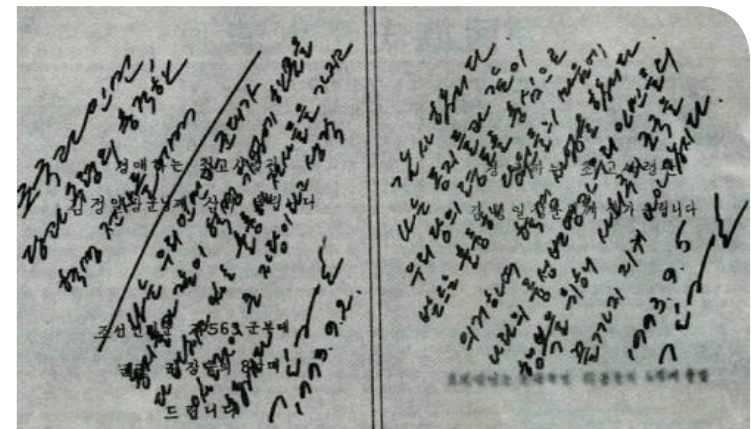
In diminishing his father's authority as the head of state, Kim Jong-il employed three levels of ratification.

The highest level of ratification was “ratification with handwritten instructions,” where Kim Jong-il modified or added to some parts of a proposal by hand and wrote down his name and the date of review. This applied to issues that the leader had the greatest interest in. Proposals ratified with handwritten instructions were binding and had to be executed as a top priority, and their outcome had to be reported back as quickly as possible. If the reports were delayed or the leader was dissatisfied with the results, the party's Organization & Guidance Department would track

down and severely punish the party officials involved by exercising its guidance authority.

The second-highest level of ratification was “ratification with name,” with the leader simply writing down his name and the date of review without any handwritten instructions. Proposals subject to this type of ratification were understood as simply “approved” by Kim Jong-il, while they drew less attention from the leader than those ratified with handwritten instructions. Therefore, proposals ratified this way were not strictly binding but were to be executed whenever possible; the outcome was reported to the Organization & Guidance Department, not to the leader himself.

The last level of ratification was “ratification with date,” where Kim Jong-il simply left the date of review without leaving any handwritten instructions or name. In short,



Kim Jong-il's "ratification with handwritten instructions" at the highest level of ratification

this simply indicated that he had read the material. When proposals ratified with a date were delivered, however, high-ranking party officials concluded that the leader had not read them, as they were more aware than anyone else of how the reporting system at his secretariats worked.

Kim Jong-il had two secretariats: one at the party's Organization & Guidance Department and the other at the Protocols Bureau. The party secretariat served to draw tables of content—based on the order of importance for these proposals by area—and prepare relevant documents. However well the Organization & Guidance Department drafted these tables of contents, it was the Protocols Bureau's secretariat that sent them directly to the leader's office, institutional villas or vacation homes and thus had much more powerful authority. The results of ratification could change depending on when and where they brought the proposals, considering Kim's intention and mood.

For this reason, Kim Jong-il thoroughly cut off the Protocols Bureau secretariat from the outside, in an attempt to avoid collusion between officials while ensuring his own security. Films archived at WPK contain images of him buried in mountains of proposal documents, but these images are nothing but propaganda. He simply read single-page tables of contents and picked out a few proposals that he liked to read further. It was common sense among elite drafters that those proposals luckily read by the reader were “ratified with

handwritten instructions” or “ratified with name,” while the rest of them were automatically labeled as “ratified with date.”

Such exclusivity in government operations has resulted in numerous confusions in North Korea. A case in point was the chaos that occurred in 1992 concerning who should move in to a 200-household ultra-luxury apartment in Sinwon-dong, Potonggang District, Pyongyang. The party, the military, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and anti-South Korean espionage authorities submitted their own proposals regarding this issue, and Kim Jong-il ratified all of them with handwritten instructions. On the date of moving in, trailers from different departments with ratified proposals stormed in all at once, so the Organization & Guidance Department had to step in to mediate the dispute. As everyone claimed ownership by presenting the leader's “ratification with handwritten instructions,” the party's Organization & Guidance Department eventually decided to analyze the instructions. Aspiring tenants with the instructions, “Address the issue immediately,” were granted the highest priority, followed by those with the instructions, “Address the issue quickly.” Those with the instructions, “Address the issue without strings attached,” completely lost out and had to wait for later opportunities, as their issues could be addressed whenever possible.

With their jobs being implemented and evaluated based on the ratifications made personally by Kim Jong-il, the heads of WPK departments were extremely skilled in drafting

proposals. They put the whole message into titles that were just a few characters long; they got every single word and punctuation right and made sure the structure and highlights of their proposals were fully reflected on one- or two-page documents. To avoid potential confusion and facilitate the leader's ratification process, different dates of reporting were set for individual departments.

To accentuate Kim Jong-un's exclusive leadership, North Korea recently disclosed his high-level ratifications—equivalent to Kim Jong-il's "ratifications with handwritten instructions"—through the *RodongSinmun*. His ratifications today, however, seem to differ from his father's. Kim Jong-il had enough experience at making decisions, the wisdom of age, and confidence in his power, while Kim Jong-un reportedly has to seek advice from party officials and sign the proposals. More specifically, his lack of experience leads to the dissemination of power, passing on the sense of responsibility and the fear of power to his aides.

There is one more piece of evidence that his ratifications with handwritten instructions are different from what was observed in the era of Kim Jong-il: To put his decisions into practice, the young leader has to have his own close aides in place, but at this point, he seems to be surrounded mostly by his father's former aides. Even before experiencing real politics, he got stuck in the established framework of "court politics" in the form of the ratification system.

Three Obstacles Facing Kim Jong-un's Succession of Power

A comparison of the three conditions facing Kim Jong-il and Kim Jong-un: the state, leadership, and resident conditions, will help illuminate their succession of power.

First of all, the state conditions at the time when Kim Jong-il was taking over power included the external factor of favorable international circumstances, as North Korea had socialist Eastern Europe as a bloc of friendly countries. Under the stable international political environment of the U.S.-Soviet Cold War rivalry, it could focus on unifying political power within the country. The second, internal factor was its relative economic supremacy over the South. Its relative confidence in the political regime led to the personal confidence of Kim Il-sung, motivating him to hand over power to his son. Last but not least, what proved most crucial in this process was the country's historical closeness, as it transitioned directly from a feudal dynasty to a socialist state without experiencing capitalism. This made it possible to falsely deify Kim Il-sung—as an extension of feudal Confucian customs—and thereby justify the succession of power in the Kim family.

The new leader, Kim Jong-un, has no such state conditions in place. The socialist bloc of Eastern Europe fell apart, and even the country's only ally, China, is pressing it to open its market and introduce reform measures. From an economic point of view, it has been reduced to one of the world's poorest countries, having no choice but to openly accept humanitarian aid from the United States, a country that it calls its "main enemy." North Korea's historical closeness has also been decimated. It has to rely entirely on earnings from abroad; in today's new environment, not just goods but also information are distributed together, and modern technologies like radio, computer and mobile phones are reaching beyond national borders. Against this backdrop, it would be fair to say that North Korea is already half open to the outside world.

In addition, the leadership conditions for Kim Jong-un are much worse than of those for his father. Kim Jong-il enjoyed an absolute political standing from his father as the preceding leader, which served as a precondition for the succession of power. The halo effect of his father allowed Kim Jong-il to easily pursue deifying propaganda for fabricating his presence and accomplishments. His greatest luck was that he had a very long time to be trained as the next leader. During this fairly long period of time, he learned how political power works and could complete an exclusive leadership system of his own, which proved strong enough to make even his father powerless.

Kim Jong-un, on the other hand, is quite unfortunate compared to Kim Jong-il. He has had to inherit all the disgrace and failures of his father; he has been so hurried that he had to appear in public as the vice chairman of the party's Central Military Commission in his 20s. Even this level of authority was offered as an insurance against Kim Jong-il's potential death; it did not translate into an actual succession of power. The key reason for this was the fear and anxiety of Kim Jong-il and his closest aides, who had the hands-on experience of usurping Kim Il-sung's power. A case in point: Until his death, Kim Jong-il did not hand over the absolute political power over the country's entire social order and system to his son. Under the country's Military First doctrine, he only entrusted his son with administrative affairs concerning the military, but even this position was never free from the guidance and intervention of party authorities.

One area where Kim Jong-il provided full-fledged support for his son was deification, but this proved to be absolute nonsense, too. Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il were able to distort North Korea's past history to deify themselves. For the young leader in his 20s, however, his happy past memories coincided with the era of the Arduous March when a large number of ordinary people died of hunger. The focus of deification, after all, should be placed on who he is today, but with the economy failing miserably, he has virtually nothing to brag about. Whether he "attacks the enemy vessel of the

Cheonan or bombards the Yeonpyeong Island with his brilliant military leadership,” all he ever gets in return is sanctions and condemnations from the international community, with his military initiatives hardly paying off. In the end, neither the state conditions nor the leadership conditions work well for him.

The resident conditions are even more severe for Kim Jong-un. In the era of his father, North Koreans knew only about ideological values, and a stable ration system ensured the complete structure of order and obedience. In this simplified social order, they had to rely entirely on organizational solidarity. Today’s North Koreans, on the other hand, are totally different: They place greater emphasis on material values than ideological ones, breaking away from the established structure of order and obedience and becoming more accustomed to the market order of supply and demand. Furthermore, they have selected themselves out of the country’s state institutions and survive in the market based on individual solidarity. They now serve as independent individuals, as opposed to the leader’s subjects. After all, with all these factors considered, one may confidently say that Kim Jong-un has inherited three major challenges from his father.