

# The Changes of Everyday Life in North Korea in the Aftermath of their Economic Difficulties

Cho, Jeong-Ah



KOREA INSTITUTE FOR NATIONAL UNIFICATION

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The analyses, comments and other opinions contained in this monograph are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Korea Institute for National Unification.

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# I . Introduction

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The economic difficulties of North Korea in the 1990s caused overwhelming changes throughout the whole of North Korean society. The changes were not restricted to only economic poverty. The onset of economic hardship disturbed the socialist production and distribution system which had been deeply rooted in North Korea over the last 50 years, and it has influenced changes in the type of social relationships in North Korea. These economic difficulties destroyed the national distribution system which is the lifeline of the North Korean people and resulted in factories grinding to a halt. The North Korean people had to start new lives from scratch. However, these changes are not revealed in the public documents or statistical data, so it is difficult to appreciate the true nature of the changes. This study seeks to approach North Korean people's daily lives through both the testimony of North Korean refugees and the portrayal of life through works of literature in the period following the economic difficulties.

Studying everyday life means to understand 'how people live'

generally.<sup>1</sup> Everyday life is defined variously. Heller defined everyday life as “the beginning and the ending of each human activity, it is the sum of all individual activities.”<sup>2</sup> Habermas defined it as “meaningful interactive situation forming intersubjectively useful criterion of behaviors contrasting with strategic behaviors and intentional behaviors.”<sup>3</sup>

This study intends to divide everyday life to 3 domains; production, reproduction, and social relationships, making use of the viewpoint of Lefebvre who considers everyday life of modern society as the whole of labor, family life, and leisure. This paper will then examine the kinds of changes that have occurred in North Korean people’s daily lives in each domain in the wake of their economic difficulties. In the production domain, the study will investigate changes in the field of production. It mainly concentrates on how the people tried to find solutions to living in the midst of economic difficulties. In the domain of reproduction, this study investigates the expansion of consumption activities and the revitalization of the market, and explores the changes in family relationships and family life. In the sphere of social relationships, this study examines the issue of intergenerational conflict along with the changes in social control and the hierarchical order caused by the revitalization of the market and subsequent financial difficulties.

The target period of the study is from the 1990s when economic problems became most serious. In North Korea, even before the 1990s, the had started, and at the beginning of the 1990s several regions suffered from problems with the national distribution

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<sup>1</sup> Jae-hwan Park, “The Sociological Illumination to Everyday Life,” M. Maffesoli, *Sociology of Everyday Life* (Paju: Hanul Academy, 1994), p. 31.

<sup>2</sup> Laura Bovone, “Is It Pursue of Meaning or Negation of Meaning?” *Sociology of Everyday life*, p. 141.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 140.



system. The economic difficulties reached a peak in 1996 when the government declared ‘the Arduous March.’ The reality of North Korean people lives appeared in North Korean literary works and clearly focus on ‘the Arduous March’ in the middle of the 1990s and also tend to focus on the process by which these difficulties were overcome in the subsequent period.

Another factor adding momentum to the changes in the lives of North Korean people since the 1990s is the expansion of the market. An important turning point in the social changes, such as revitalization of the market and the accompanying phenomena - expansion of consumption activity and the increasing differentiation of social strata, were the adjustment measures for the new economy introduced on July 1, 2002. However, the changes at that time were the continuation of the series of social changes after the period of economic difficulties rather than those spurred by the measures of July 1. Therefore, it is more reasonable to see the new economic adjustment measures of July 1 as being led by this series of social changes. Therefore, this study considers the Arduous March and July 1 measures as a chain of interaction, not as separate events with their own separate momentum, and it further seeks to examine the kinds of changes which occurred in the lives of North Korean people at the time.

This study mainly makes use of the analysis of North Korean literatures including novels published since the 1990s. North Korean literary works are considered partially reflective of the social situation, so it is felt that they have a tremendous amount of legitimacy and value as study materials. Needless to say, the reflection of reality in North Korean literature is determined by the policy of the Korean Workers’ Party, and the reality in the literature is not the objective reality itself but a refracted reality, viewed as it is through the prism of the literature policy of the Korean Workers’ Party. Nevertheless, the literature of North Korea

describe the people's everyday private lives more exuberantly than the available public documents. Therefore, if there is a process to interpret this refracted reality, literary works can be used very effectively as a text to investigate the nature of North Korean people's lives. This study mainly utilized novels, included in *Chosun Moonhak*, *Chungryun Moonhak* and novels published after the 1990s.

Especially in the cases of 'abnormal normality' and 'exception' found in the novels, this study will investigate the changes in North Korean people's lives and social practices. An Italian micro historian, Edoardo Grendi, said that "only exceptional documents can show the social reality of the lower classes better than thousands of conventional historical material."<sup>4</sup> This means that few cases implying the existence of conflict can accurately reveal the socially strained relations which always exist behind the public discourse but are occasionally visualized. The discovery of cases of 'exception' in the literature issued publicly in North Korea means that the usual choices of the lower strata of the society are refracted through the recognition accorded by the upper strata and also cases of 'exception' could be but one slice of normal social phenomenon.<sup>5</sup>

This study analyzed the changes in the context of subjective meaning and North Korean people's experiences and forms of social interaction by utilizing oral materials gathered from in-depth interviews with North Korean refugees in order to make up for the limits inherent in the literary analysis. Oral materials are helpful in expanding the width and perspective of this study by the fact

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<sup>4</sup> Jurgen Schulumbohm, "Microhistory-Macrohistory," Jurgen Schulumbohm, ed., translated by Seung-jong Baek, *Microhistory and Macrohistory* (Seoul: Gungli, 2001), p. 44.

<sup>5</sup> Min Hong, "North Korean Factory and Labor World: 'The History from the Bottom'," *A Collection of Study Papers of Graduate School* (Seoul: Dongguk University, 2003).

that these can reveal the lower class' views which are normally excluded from public historical records and overcoming the restriction of the upper class' view and oversight of documentary data. In the case of studies on North Korea, it is impossible to do fieldwork, therefore oral materials are important in restoring the lives of ordinary people and overcoming the limitations and unilateral nature of documentary data. The oral materials quoted in this study were recorded from 29 North Korean refugees in 2005 and 2006. The contents of the refugees' oral recording are dependent on their origin, class, and even the year of their escape, and so, for these reasons, simple personal facts are included in the data.



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## **II. Changes in People's Lives in the Domain of Production**

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### **1. Economic Difficulties and Alternatives of 'Self-Reliance' as they Appeared in North Korean Literature**

The economic difficulties in the 1990s brought about qualitative changes over the whole society and people's lives in North Korea. North Korea's economic difficulties started in the early 1990s before 'the Arduous March.' According to the testimony of refugees, food distribution started to become unsteady in the late 1980s and was occasionally suspended in the 1990s. Closer to the middle of the 1990s, food distribution was often delayed, sometimes not meeting the monthly amount, and minor grains were substituted for rice (L1, escape in January 1999, Chungjin, Hamkyungbukdo; C3, escape in October 2000, Hoiryung, Hamkyungbukdo). The national distribution system almost stopped between 1994~1995, so no matter where people lived, or no matter which class they were members of, they could not live off the distribution system. Death by starvation started to occur in the

middle of the 1990s. There were regional differences, and Pyongyang's famine started to get serious slightly later when compared with other places (P1, escape in October 2003, Pyongyang).

The economic difficulties of the 1990s started to be first described in North Korean novels in 1999. Moon-chang Kim's novel, *Aspiration* (1999), was the first to describe the grim reality faced by people who had nothing to eat except boiled greens, the breakdown of the industrial structure, and a shortage of food during 'the Arduous March' which was a period of "unbelievable adversity and difficulty." The novels written from the year 2000 directly and indirectly revealed the difficulties experienced by people after the 1990s especially during the period of 'the Arduous March.' In *Kanggye Spirit* published in 2002, specific situations of adversity appeared in the context of the He chun-machinery factory. For example, factory workers and engineers died from hunger or fell ill from malnutrition, miners gathered low-grade ore because the mine was flooded, and the factory had to close down due to power and material shortages. Additionally, young pickpockets who had lost their parents and home are described in the novel.

These novels, however, did not intend to describe the difficulties that North Korean people endured during 'the Arduous March.' The theme of these novels are not the 'hardships' of economic difficulties but the positive 'will' to overcome them and the 'victory' which follows the suffering. We can understand that they accept their present hardship in the context of it being viewed as a trial for the future in the phrase; "Our children who grow up in midst of adversity, going out with nothing more than a mixed vegetable lunchbox are going to be the toughest and strongest humans in the world."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Hae-mo Yang, "Absent Representative," *Chosun Moonhak*, 2000, No. 10, p. 41.

Their ‘today’ of hunger, suffering, loss, and sacrifice during ‘the Arduous March’ was sublimated for the promise of victory ‘tomorrow’ in literature, and the suffering and sacrifice were left as just the traces of fierce, past battles. This is reflective of confidence overcoming “ordeals and difficulties which have forced others to have already given up on more than 100 times” and ‘the expression of revolutionary optimism.’ In the early part of this new century, the fact that North Korean literature started to reflect people’s difficult lives and the serious economic problems of the 1990s shows a degree of confidence in being able to overcome their reality of suffering and a strengthened will to achieve salvation through individual effort; in short it is reflective of a form of reality conquest.

External factors such as the “Imperialists’ economic sanctions and their attempts at isolation in order to destroy the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea”<sup>7</sup> and the natural disasters like floods are highlighted as the main reasons for the economic difficulties. If this is so, it begs the question; is the solution of these economic problems to eliminate the external factors? That is not the case. Bo-heum Baek’s novel, *The Hot Wind of Lanam*, which is one of the ‘immortal leadership’ series drawing upon the leadership history of Kim, Jong Il, described the manufacturing process of technologically advanced precision machinery never created before, with its own technology in the face of a severe lack of materials, equipment, technical expertise, and experience. This novel contains a scene of Kim, Jong Il saying to the North Korean Secretary of State in the Lanam mine that “The decisive thing is not the external factors but the internal factors.... The method by which we are going to get over the arduous march is not just by enduring it

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<sup>7</sup> Young-bok Son, “Far Away the Snowy Road,” *Chosun Moonhak*, 2004, No. 2, p. 7; La-soon Lee, “At the Foot of Moonsoo Mountain,” *Chosun Moonhak*, 2004, No. 12, p. 16.

like hibernation. We have to break the deadlock independently.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, the reasons for the problems are external but the driving forces for solving these problems are internal; they are in “the will of self-reliance,” “devotion,” and “enthusiastic aspirations for tomorrow” of the people.<sup>9</sup> On this point, overcoming economic difficulties has more meaning than just “living without eating.”<sup>10</sup> The attitude of ‘self-reliance’ suggested as the key breakthrough in literature contrasts with ‘defeatism.’ Moon-chang Kim’s *Aspiration* points out that one reason for the aggravation of economic difficulties is the irresponsible attitude of ‘executive members’ in other words, defeatism contrasting with ‘aspiration’ or ‘revolutionary optimism.’ This implies that the economic difficulties are related with not only external factors like the economic blockade of the U.S. but also chronic maladies such as bureaucracy and routine which are far removed from true revolutionary attitudes.

In fact, the extended suspension of the distribution and shortages of food forced people to find alternative survival strategies for ‘self-reliance’ such as utilizing their relationships, cultivating private land, manufacturing common products with materials otherwise not being used, or trading. However, ‘self-reliance’ when mentioned in the novel does not mean the type of self-reliance of securing individual survival. Actually, it has the opposite connotation, referring as it does, to the survival strategies of the North Korean people. For instance, in *Kanggye Spirit*, the main character, Doo-chil Jang died because he did not leave his

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<sup>8</sup> Bo-heum Baek, *The Hot Wind of Lanam* (Pyongyang: Moonhak Yesool Publishing Co., 2004), pp. 246-247.

<sup>9</sup> Moon-chang Kim, *Aspiration* (Pyongyang: Moonhak Yesool Jonghap Publishing Co., 1999), p. 209.

<sup>10</sup> Young-hwan Lee, “Burning Sunset,” *Chosun Moonhak*, 2005, No. 10, p. 29.



workplace unlike others who were busy engaging in their own business even though had collapsed. Doo-chil Jang sacrificed his life to enable the modern machinery to ‘survive’ in a tremendously harsh situation without recourse to sufficient food to maintain life or indeed resources, raw materials, or electricity. His sacrifice enabled the factory and the country to recover, so Doo-chil Jang who had died of starvation achieved immortality through a ‘social political life.’ “If he had made and sold ironwork for domestic use, he wouldn’t have died, but he did not want to go against his conscience like others who traded privately, so he broke down at the workplace.” These people are described as “precious treasures keeping socialism alive by not going against their conscience during the most arduous of periods.”<sup>11</sup> When the country cannot secure the people’s safety and when people have to find alternative survival strategies and change values from those of the present and past to stay alive, the conscience of people who maintain their old faith in the old system is the last bastion of the system. It is the crossing point and the splitting point of North Korean novels and reality.

Hae-mo Yang’s “Absent Representative,” published in *Chosun Moonhak* in 2000 also shows the same understanding. The main character of this novel, In-gook Han, an engineer of a construction design enterprise, designed and built an innovative electric furnace with his own will to survive in the midst of the economic difficulties. He worked to design a power generator without rest and as a result, became seriously ill. Through this, he was chosen as a representative for the national rally of laborers who were models for the ideal of self-reliance. In-gook Han was reborn as the factory’s representative for the rally as a model of self-reliance

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<sup>11</sup> Shin-hyun Lee, *Kanggye Spirit* (Pyongyang: Moonhak Yesool Publishing Co., 2002), p. 16.

not being as an emergency case whose life is in danger. A member of the Korean Workers Party visits Han and declares to the deputy director of the hospital, “throw away the plate “emergency treatment” on the door of the ward. In this ward, our enterprise’s representative for an historic rally, not an emergency patient, is getting treatment.” It is at this point that reality is overturned.

During the Arduous March, most North Korean people’s lives were undergoing emergency ‘first-aid treatment.’ Novels written during this time attribute the people with the honor of warriors, overcoming the national crisis with the will of self-reliance, and in so doing metaphorically discarding their status of ‘emergency treatment’ patients. The ordinary heroes of everyday life in the novels lose their lives in the midst of the economic difficulties and food shortages, but they perform their duty as members of the country and society not as an individual until the moment of death, so they could achieve immortality after death. On the contrary, the people who “live but do nothing for the country” are thought to be “dead people.”<sup>12</sup>

The people’s painful struggles for survival are compared to those of battle scenes. North Korean novels portray the overcoming of a brutal reality through ideological armament ‘making everyday life a battlefield’<sup>13</sup> by creating heroes of the 1990s who fought without any weapons in these battles. They differ from the heroes of previous novels because they are not typical heroes from the start, and some even have fatal faults. After they suffer and conflict at some critical juncture, they are reborn as real heroes, so to speak, they are ‘heroes of everyday life.’

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<sup>12</sup> Hong-chul Kim, “Unripe Corn,” *Chosun Moonhak*, 2000, No. 9, p. 32.

<sup>13</sup> In-hwan Go, “The Collapse of ‘the Giant’ and the Destination of North Korean Novels,” *Moonhak Soochup*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (2003).

## 2. Loss of Jobs and Alternative Ways of Living

All machines and the modern automatic conveyer belt stopped as if holding its breath. Workers were tired and slow in their work, lifting up heavy hammers in the empty work places. Several workers on the heavy conveyer belt were lying on the cement floor of the field smeared with greasy dirt. They are working slowly. Under the window, exhausted people attract our attention. Are they lacking in energy because of hunger? It was impossible for workers to come to work, but they are working nonetheless, somehow, miraculously enduring it.

The above scene is a portrayal of a North Korean factory during ‘the Arduous March’ in Shin-hyun Lee’s *Kanggye Spirit*. Since the middle of the 1990s, the distribution system did not work normally and it was difficult to keep factories in operation. Like the scenes in the novel, in most workplaces and North Korean factories, all the machines stopped and a few workers worked slowly with their bare hands. If there were only a few workers, it was better than other cases. Many local factories had to close their doors completely. There is no exact data for the rate of factory operation at that time, but it seems to have been under 30~40% according to refugees’ testimony and former studies.<sup>14</sup>

Two things mainly caused the crisis in production. First, there was the lack of raw materials and resources, and electric power supplies stopped so workers could not operate machines and manufacture products. Secondly, workers had to find other ways to make a living due to the discontinuance of the distribution

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<sup>14</sup> Woo-gon Jung and Ju-chul Lee regard that North Korea’s rate of plants operation is average 40% in 1990, and average 25% in 1996. Woo-gon Jung and Ju-chul Lee, “North Korean Social Safety Net and Reorganization of Class Structure in Cities,” *The Crisis and Change of North Korean Cities* (Paju: Hanul Academy, 2006).

system, so the attendance rate at work decreased rapidly.

The testimony of refugees proves that the circumstances of the factories portrayed in the novels mirror the reality. According to a number of refugees, since the middle of the 1990s, “local factories in North Korea have been in operation only during festival days and paper factories have been in operation at the end of semesters to provide students’ study materials for the new semester.” Even after the 7.1 measures, “Enterprises have self-supporting systems, but in many cases, they were not able to operate because there was no material to work with.” (S1, escaped at the end of 2003, Pyongyang)

When there is no material, one way to continue making products is securing recyclable materials instead and making alternative products. In Hae-mo Yang’s “Absent Representative,” published in 2000, the main character searched everywhere for silicon steel plate for the power generator. He could not find it, but he extracted iron core from an abandoned transformer and welder, and then he assembled them. This is the model of self-reliance through manufacturing emphasized in this novel.

However, this ‘self-reliance’ method of collecting waste materials has definite limits. People can only make 8.3 consumer goods with waste materials or recyclable materials. 8.3 goods production is generalized even in local factories, so sometimes each factory keeps their own store (K6, escape in June 2003, Haamheung, Haamkyung-namdo). With these stores, some enterprises were able to partially alleviate the food shortages for workers directly without any help from the authorities. Since the middle of the 1990s, enterprises generally gave employees products instead of wages or sold products to dealers at markets and purchased materials they needed with the income raised in these ways. Before the 7.1 measures, these activities were illegal, so they were restricted. However, after the 7.1 measures, managers of enterprises had to

support workers personally, so these activities were permitted.

After the 7.1 measures, the self-supporting system of factories and enterprises was strengthened. The rights of enterprises to manage their own profits has been strengthened. They have the right to divide the profits into wages and operational funds. The National Plan Commission issued a series of guidelines to enterprises, and empowered them to create their own plans based on it. A goods exchange market where enterprises could exchange goods was organized. Central factories cannot dispose of goods at the markets, but local factories can dispose of some of the goods with the permission of managers. Sometimes individual traders directly visit factories to buy products. In this case, they generally buy large quantities of materials with money they make through trade, and sell them to middlemen or through other markets. Occasionally they purchase the operation rights for factories. There are various ways by which individual traders can participate in trade with local factories, such as providing sources of funding as is the case in China and buying shares.<sup>15</sup>

Another reason why factories had difficulty operating during ‘the Arduous March’ was the drop in attendance at work, and the direct

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<sup>15</sup> Min Hong, “Socialist Ethical Economy and Village Organization in North Korea,” a doctoral dissertation of Department of North Korea Studies in Dongguk University Graduate School, 2006, pp. 340-341. One refugee said about such way of plants operation cases that “Every enterprise in North Korea got the direction that they should operate by themselves without any goods supply of government. Employees had to gather money and lived themselves by utilizing the gathered money. For example in Haamkyung-namdo, there is an agency for gold mine specialized in gold mining. The agency buys zinc concentrate from Moonchun at a cheap price and sells it on to China. With the money they buy rice for their employees. It is a business for public purposes, but they do it quietly lest it draw the attention of the authorities. We cannot say it is legal or illegal. For enterprises to survive, they must engage in business quietly. In that case, profit occurs to individuals. They relish it.” (K7, escape in November 2003, Haamkyung-namdo)

cause of this was the problem of food shortages. Workers were not able to receive rations even if they attended work. For this reason, they had to find alternative ways to make a living. The typical means of survival at this time was engaging in business, on both a large and small scale. During ‘the Arduous March,’ factories did not operate fully or even stopped, therefore workers did not have much work to do. Instead they were mobilized for social work like roadwork or manufacture of 8.3 goods. Most workers “went to factories in the morning, but after the morning meeting, they went out to engage in their own business” (K8, escaped in March 2003, Haesan). Factories allocated productive capital, which is supposed to be paid directly to the government, to workers when the normal production became impossible due to shortages of materials. Workers sometimes chose to pay money earned through business or manufacturing 8.3 goods instead of attending their factories. If they were regarded as attending factories in this way, they could receive occasional distribution of rations and avoid the intervention of labor organizations. As they could acquire greater profits from private business, it was better for them to pay money to factories to get time to engage in private business.

North Korean literary works do not describe people engaging in commercial transactions with great frequency. In Yong-han Kim’s short novel, “The Last Fishing,” published in 1990, the term ‘trader’ was described as being a “dirty name”<sup>16</sup> and the novel described the catching and selling of fish in negative terms. Novels published in the early 2000s have sometimes included scenes of purchasing groceries at the market, but it is difficult to find scenes describing the sale of products at market.

However, people’s conceptions of business have clearly changed

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<sup>16</sup> Yong-han Kim, “The Last Fishing,” *Chosun Moonhak*, 1990, No. 8, pp. 42-44.

and are viewed in a positive light. The following quotes make this clear; “After I started to do my own business, I did not feel shame and humiliation anymore” (K4, escaped in May 2003, Haamkyung-bukdo), “In the past, people despised the very idea of doing business, but these days they ask how can they live and eat without business.” And similarly, “the general notions of business” were formed among people (K8, escaped in March 2003, Haesan).

The crippling of factories and the subsequent revitalization of the market brought the spread of private handicrafts. Especially after the 7.1 measures and revitalization of the market, the people made and sold hand made goods through markets. As business transactions were legalized at the markets, “people who were able to, picked and sold herbs, and people who can make sweets made and sold sweets” because “anything which can be made or sold for money, is sold at market” (K7, escaped in November 2003, Haamkyung-namdo). Some people who lacked the capital to start a business got materials from factories on credit by pulling strings and then making and trading goods at the market. It is in these ways that they are able to start businesses. (K4, escaped in May 2003, Haamkyung-bukdo)

In the case of workers who have technical know-how, they can make a living through private business using their knowledge as well as keeping their factory jobs. In Bo-heum Baek’s novel, *The Hot Wind of Lanam*, the manager of a fishery business suggests to the engineer in charge of the factory’s main research unit that “if you repair my cargo boat, I’ll give you enough food to eat for a month, and if you make a copy of a new cargo boat’s design, I’ll give you enough rice to eat for a year.”

When private business was revitalized, the skill most in demand was driving. As the need for vehicles to carry goods increased, drivers working for factories were able to make money using their

enterprise's cars for private purposes. During break times, they assisted other people's business using their company vehicles and were paid for it. Driving became a preferred job because "If you can drive, you can make a living without any difficulties."<sup>17</sup>

Sometimes accidents occurred when drivers used their enterprises' vehicles or workers used heavy machinery for private purposes. Hae-sung Kim's short novel, "Key," has a main character, a worker in precisely this situation.<sup>18</sup> This novel shows that workers not only use their enterprise's equipment for private profit, but also steal the enterprise's materials and resources. In the novel, *Kanggye Spirit*, there is a scene in which the steel plates which were used as part of the roof of a barn and as the front doors of apartment buildings are stolen "because everyone was stealing loosely controlled materials."

Theft of factory property was widespread in North Korea after economic difficulties. Theft took diverse forms; from common theft such as workers taking firewood from their mine, eating the produce at food factories, or pocketing small amounts of materials or products (K2, escaped in December 1998, Chungjin, Haamkyung-bukdo) to the criminal level of causing problems in production such as stealing a retaining beam at a factory (H2, escaped in 2003, Saebyul, Haamkyung-bukdo) or stripping down machines to sell them (K1, Chungjin, Haamkyung-bukdo; Y2,

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<sup>17</sup> One refugee worker said about the realities like that "After working, people do their own business in their spare time. The private business is very popular. When we use a car, they pay usually ten thousand won to use a big car per day. They give a day to deliver things from somewhere to somewhere. In that case, the driver speeds up the car and work his own work in the remaining time. Originally it is not permitted. However the tires are not worn out even if they use them one more day. It is okay, hum... They don't care about accidents. The control is loose until now." (H1, Woosan, Pyongahn-namdo)

<sup>18</sup> Hae-sung Kim, "Key," *Chosun Moonhak*, 2004, No. 4.



Anju, Pyungan-namdo; H1, Wonsan, Pyungan-namdo). There are undoubtedly regional variations in this phenomenon.

Cultivation of vegetable gardens is being conducted at the individual, factory, and collective farm unit level to supplement the shortfall in food supplies. Groups involved in the raising of domestic livestock have also been formed, raising poultry, goats, rabbits, chickens, and ducks as well as growing grains like corn and millet to supplement workers' rations. (C1, Chungjin)<sup>19</sup>

The alternative survival strategies of North Koreans detailed above are very similar to those of the people in other states undergoing a transition from a socialist system. They are distinguished by the context of operating within a struggling economy and a deep dependence upon the secondary economy. In addition, North Korean people often make good use of unofficial networks like private connections (family, friends or acquaintances). Such unofficial networks based on social trust can be termed 'patron-client networks' or 'blat' and operate as a kind of social capital. The concept of 'blat' appeared in the former Soviet Union and refers to non-monetary exchange, a kind of barter based on a personal relationship. It is a reciprocal relationship which people call 'I help you and you help me.'<sup>20</sup>

There is a main character 'I' who tries to solve day-to-day problems through such acquaintance based networks in Woong-bin Han's novel, "Expectations of 《Good Luck》," published in 1993.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Moon-su Yang, "The operating system's change of local economy and economic crisis in the 1990s," *The Crisis and Change of North Korea Cities* (Paju: Hanul Academy, 2006), quoted from p. 85.

<sup>20</sup> Alena Ledeneva, "Continuity and Change of Blat Practices in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia," S. Lovell, Alena V. Ledeneva & A. Rogachevskii eds., *Bribery and Blat in Russia* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 2000), pp. 183-184.

<sup>21</sup> Woong-bin Han, "Expectations of 《Good Luck》," *Chosun Moonhak*, 1993, No. 10.

One day 'I' goes on a business trip near his parents-in-law's house. When 'I' buys a ticket at the train station, 'I' thinks that if 'I' buys the ticket through his wife's friend who is working at the station, it would be faster, so 'I' asks his wife's friend to buy the ticket. However, it turned out to be slower than just queuing for it, and as a result almost misses the train. After more than an hour, he gets a seat, and by accident his seat was next to a worker of the city housing allocation department. At that time 'I' was trying to get a newly built house in the city, so 'I' thought that it was a good chance to get an allocation. 'I' decided to ask for a housing allocation later by forming a relationship with him. 'I' forced him to accept a bottle of 'Coryo Ginseng liquor' which was supposed to be a gift for his father-in-law. When 'I' arrived at his destination, he received a letter from his wife telling him that they got a housing allocation. After reading his wife's letter, 'I' regretted his foolish attempts at trying to get the house through a new acquaintanceship. This novel reflects contemporary North Korean social attitudes, seeking benefits through acquaintance in all matters, big and small, such as buying tickets and getting housing allocations. Bo-heum Baek's novel, *The Hot Wind of Lanam* includes an episode where a character engages in a 'negotiation' with the district construction team to build a large private house during height of 'the Arduous March.'

In the 1990s, unofficial networks based on acquaintanceships operated widely in North Korea. In the past, social capital referred to human relations which could be used to overcome the uncertainty inherent in every planned economy as a form of economic network, connections ensuring one's status in political life, and community networks conferring various advantages in social life. However, the character of social capital in the 1990s evolved into a more practically appropriate form to explain the social relations which could be used to solve the problem of maintaining an individuals'

livelihood.<sup>22</sup> The wide application of acquaintance networks in North Korea in the aftermath of economic difficulties created a number of social and economic costs; absenteeism from work and evasion of political education classes being examples. Payments in lieu of attendance at work and bribery of middle and under level officials and workplace managers to engage in private business. Min Hong has conceptualized the idea of ‘bureaucratic capital’<sup>23</sup> which refers to the mobilization of official powers (through bribery or personal connections) which can be manipulated to control political and livelihood activities.

Sometimes officials operate parasitically in the profit creation system of markets as well as tolerating the violation of rules for the purposes of livelihood activities. They take bribes and assist in the issue of travel permits and the management of markets, family handiwork enterprises, and self-employed businesses. High ranking officials intervene actively in the distribution of business profits and economic investment or they conspire with economically powerful individuals or groups.<sup>24</sup> These activities

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<sup>22</sup> Min Hong, “Socialist Ethical Economy and Village Organization in North Korea,” p. 40.

<sup>23</sup> A refugee is explaining about the case of negotiation for living activity as follows: “When 80% of members participate in the activities of the Chonghwa (daily self criticism session), it is held. When a member misses three times a month, the member gets punished. In our light industry workplace, over three times absent results in being fired. When they are fired, they should work elsewhere. The benefit of a light industry workplace is loose control different from other workplaces. Only when we absent many times, we get controlled. When I went to Chungjin, I could not come back before daily self criticism session. So after I came back, I bribed the supervisor with 5 packs of tobacco. The supervisor told the chairman that “I sent him” and the chairman did not say anything about it. However you should be careful not to stand out or not to give so meager a bribe. Also you should not be caught by police doing so many illegal acts and theft or murder during business. Be careful not to get caught.” (C4, escape in November 2003, Haamkyung-bukdo)

exceed the securing of mutual convenience based on acquaintanceships, and the boundary between this behavior and bribery becomes vague. Economic difficulties have minimized the reciprocal collaboration among people and have forced them to devote themselves fully to their economic activities. Now people use acquaintanceships and networks actively not just to earn a living or for greater convenience, and money has intruded into the situation. We can find precedents in the former Soviet Unions after the massive political and social changes which occurred. Blat appeared after the change in the former Soviet Union and was used to make money, acquire better jobs, obtain access to the government facilities to engage in business activities, favorable decisions by officials and inside market information, in other words, to increase individual's private fortunes. Post-Soviet Russians, after the major changes, applied blat in the same way as operated in the Soviet Union, but it transmuted into a form of corruption, as 'exchanges' were realized in the new free market system and money became involved in previously non-monetary interrelations.<sup>25</sup> Nobody can guarantee that the unofficial network in North Korea will not follow the same path of the former Soviet Union where blat became synonymous with corruption and bribes.

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<sup>24</sup> The following testimony of a refugee provides such an example. "Kim, Jong Il supplied 100 Japanese trucks of 10 ton to carry potatoes to Daehongdan county. It should be used for the public work. When the trucks go to Chungjin in empty, common people should pay money to load them with potatoes, but the officials can use them for free. The drivers are connected with the officials." (C4, escape in November 2003, Haamkyung-bukdo)

<sup>25</sup> Klavs Sedlenieks, "Cash in an Envelope: Corruption and Tax Avoidance as an Economic Strategy in Contemporary Riga," Karl-Olov Arnstberg & Thomas Borea, eds., *Everyday Economy in Russia, Poland and Latvia* (Stockholm: Sodertorns hogskola, 2003), pp. 40-41.

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### **III. People's Lives in the Domain of Reproduction**

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#### **1. Revitalization of the market and expansion of consumption activities**

After the economic difficulties, especially during 'the Arduous March,' the government's supplies of food almost stopped in most areas. From the latter half of the 1990s, food distribution resumed in part, but people's necessities including food were supplied from the market and no longer from the government-operated stores or distribution centers. According to the refugees' testimony, distribution was not normalized even after the 7.1 economic measures.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> A refugee says the following about the food supply situation after 7.1 economic measures. "Our provincial library received food several times after economic measures because it is related with education so government cares about it a little. People usually did not get any distribution and buy food at the market. They received the ration ticket but the distribution office did not supply anything for the ticket. Sometimes on holidays, they supplied the amount of 10 days, 5 days and

Since the economic difficulties, the revitalization and expansion of the market have mainly influenced the people's life in the domain of reproduction. An across-the-board breakdown of the governmental food distribution system in 1995 served as a source of momentum of market revitalization. Though there were regional differences, around 1998 when North Korea declared the end of 'the Arduous March,' the marketplace settled down as a transaction space a little precariously but clearly.<sup>27</sup> Now, the market is revitalized, "making a faint sound like frogs croaking in the distance." (C4, escaped in November 2003, Haamkyung-bukdo)

Two political measures to promote market revitalization were the 7.1 economic reform measures in 2002 and market enlargement measures in March 2003. The 7.1 measures induced a major change in the operation and management of the existing economic system. The 7.1 measures chose the distribution method depending on the outcome desired, introduced an assessment system of business management by 'earning,' planned for healthy finances and a reduction of government subsidies, and increased wages and prices sharply.<sup>28</sup>

In contrast with what the public media of North Korea said, the people in North Korea did not feel any differences in their standards of living after the 7.1 measures. Rather, some people say that life became harder than before. "All the prices increased to the same level of the market prices, and then the market prices leaped rapidly. Even so, the government did not give anything more, enterprises

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so forth. On the new year's day, they distributed the amount of 3 days." (L3, escape in June 2004, Haamkyung-bukdo)

<sup>27</sup> Bong-dae Choi and Gap-woo Gu, "Dynamics of Revitalization of North Korean Cities' 'Marketplace,'" *The Crisis and Change of North Korean Cities* (Paju: Hanul Academy, 2006), p. 130.

<sup>28</sup> Korea University's Primary subject study team, *7.1 measures and North Korea* (Seoul: Nopygipy, 2005), p. 25.

did not give full wages, and prices went up, so people could not do anything except scream in frustration.” (H3, escape in November 2003, Pyongyang).<sup>29</sup>

North Korean people did not feel any sense of an economic improvement in their standards of living through the 7.1 measures. Even though workers’ wages increased 20 times due to the 7.1 measures, because the prices increases surpassed the increase in wages, the real purchasing power of the people was dramatically weakened.

It was rather the market enlargement measures of March 2003 which brought about the market revitalization and the increase in the availability of goods. These were the follow-up measures of the 7.1 measures. Some measures included changing the name of ‘farmer’s markets’ to ‘market’ or ‘general market’ and expanding the range of goods in private circulation to include industrial products. Refugees say that people’s lifestyles changed as the market expanded. In other words, people’s lives, previously dependent on the government distribution system, changed to “live by your own effort,” and the circumstances have helped them to do this (K7, escaped in November 2003, Haamkyung-namdo).

While farmers’ markets in the 1980s had limited their functions to conservatively assisting the national commercial distribution network as the economic place to realize the people’s secondary desires for consumption, the present market place has become settled, playing a semi-official but important role in people’s lives.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> A refugee says about the procedure of vanished expectation people once had after 7.1 measures like following. “I felt it has changed largely. Even the people who threw away the job and did the business came back to the work because they felt that they could live with their occupation. In the library I work for, there were some people coming back. After a few months, however, they left their workplace again because the food supply was not normalized.” (L3, escape in June 2004, Haamkyung-bukdo)

<sup>30</sup> Bong-dae Choi and Gap-woo Gu, “Dynamics of Revitalization of North

According to the testimony of refugees, since the 1990s, the market places' weight in people's consumption patterns has increased rapidly. One refugee said "There were just a few displays in the government-operated stores, and we bought 100% of goods from markets." (S2, escaped in September 2003).

The expansion in commercial transactions due the revitalization of markets raised the standard of living of certain classes, and this was connected to the improvement in the level of consumption and the eruption of a desire to consume. The desire to consume was expressed in food, clothes, accessories, and house interiors. When economic difficulties were severe, the people ate vegetable gruel and corn, but some people who made money through business or using the authorities and connections had access to "various seafood like octopus, Alaska Pollack, and pan-broiled pork, steamed eggs, and wild green salad"<sup>31</sup> on the table, and also could have "beef, pork, fried flatfish, and red shrimps" for their lunch boxes.<sup>32</sup> The rich "drink coffee and eat tropical fruits." (K7, escaped in November 2003, Haamkyung-namdo). The desire for various consumer goods created the distinction between 'Yongsung Beer' and 'Pyongyang Beer' (P1, escaped in October 2003, Pyongyang), and also preferences developed sufficiently to create distinctions not only with contents but also packaging. Since the easing of economic difficulties and markets were revitalized, the consumption levels of ordinary people have developed.

The propensity for consumption of the classes which gained riches through business was represented by "a large house and a big car" (K7, escaped in November 2003, Haamkyung-namdo), "5 shining pieces of furniture (cupboards, blanket chest, wardrobe,

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Korean Cities' 'Marketplace'," p. 132.

<sup>31</sup> Bo-heum Baek, *The Hot Wind of Lanam*, pp. 289-294.

<sup>32</sup> Moon-chang Kim, *Aspiration*, p. 252.



bookcase, and shoe chest) and 6 home appliances (refrigerator, washing machine, television, stereo, electric fan, and camera)” (H3, escaped in November 2003, Pyongyang). According to the North Korean civil law articles 59 and 63, people can possess and inherit houses, home appliances, cultural properties, household goods, and cars in North Korea. Some rich people buy a large private house or purchase materials and build their own house. However it is not desirable to reveal the purchase of a large house to the public, so people feel compelled to say “we moved to a new house just for convenience.” They “should not reveal that there was any money exchanged.” (K7, escaped in November 2003, Hammkyung-namdo). The rich have different households. The property which is most revealing of the standard of living is home appliances. “When people solve their food problems, then they want to buy a refrigerator and television” (C7).<sup>33</sup> Some people who made money through business have “Japanese home appliances, TV, refrigerator, cassette recorder, video recorder, and damper” in their house (S3, escape in April 2004, Haamkyung-namdo). *The Hot Wind of Lanam* describes such a house in this way; “In the room whose floor is covered with green vinyl carved in a chrysanthemum pattern, there stood a wardrobe with a Sipjangsaeng<sup>34</sup> design on it, a blanket chest screened one side of the wall, and a television sat on the lacquered black round table. An ivory colored refrigerator was running with the faint humming sound of bees. Kyung-doo Kwak bought a self power generator.”

The expansion of consumer lifestyles and ostentatious displays of wealth and status symbols are a common phenomena in the transition phase of socialist systems or socialist states experiencing

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<sup>33</sup> Bong-dae Choi and Gap-woo Gu, “Dynamics of Revitalization of North Korean Cities’ ‘Marketplace’,” quote from p. 135, again.

<sup>34</sup> Ten longevity symbols which Koreans believe to bring long life and good health.

reform and opening. After the transformation of the political and social system, Post-Soviet Russia stood testimony to the way in which the luxurious consumption patterns of high-ranking officials in the former Soviet Union continued under the new system. The elites displayed their social position in the new political system in the same way as in the former Soviet Union.<sup>35</sup> In China, when in the process of undergoing opening and reform, consumption became the code by which distinctions could be made between generations, gender, proximity to the authorities, urban and rural, place of residence and coastal and inland regions.<sup>36</sup> In planned economies which feature rigid distribution systems, restrictions and shortages of goods meant that only the most privileged were able to differentiate themselves from others through consumption. The expansion of markets created the physical conditions by which the desire to consume could emerge. This desire was limited in collective consuming; therefore people's desire to display their wealth and social position by possessing the status symbols was evidenced through differing patterns of consumption.

Another change which the expansion of the market brought was changes in collective values. It can be argued that the existing ruling norms which can be described as collectivism underwent a degree of change in an evolving social situation rather than this process being described as collectivism simply changing to individualism and mam monism. Such altered norms can be more accurately described as 'utilitarian collectivism.' A 'Utilitarian human' who embodies such altered norms has appeared in novels too. Hwa-won Lim's "5 P.M." which was published in the early 2000s and Chang-ruel Byun's "Ripen Ear," which was published in 2004 are

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<sup>35</sup> C. Humphrey, *The Unmasking of Soviet Life: Everyday Economies after Socialism* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 2002), p. 62.

<sup>36</sup> Kevin Latham, "Rethinking Chinese Consumption," C. M. Mann, ed., *Postsocialism* (NY: Routledge, 2002), p. 227.

typical examples. These two novels are very interesting in that they deal with similar characters from precisely the opposite perspective.

There are two characters, Sung-hee who values the happiness of the group and others above everything else and her friend, Hae-ryun, who acts in her own interests in Hwa-won Lim's novel, "5 P.M."<sup>37</sup> Hae-ryun is a common character type in North Korea where 'individualistic utilitarian' attitudes have become more widespread due to the expansion of the market place in the aftermath of the economic difficulties. Nevertheless the novel's main characters, a man who wanted to take care of his old teacher, who lives alone after leaving her teaching post, and the man's daughter who is willing to also help take care of her father's teacher as if she were her own grandmother instead of her father who died suddenly, and Sung-hee who is not related to them but gives up her important appointment to go out to meet them, none of them calculate life and their experiences in terms of losses and gains. Hae-ryun whose speech is peppered with references to "cost, self-interest, etc." believes that Sung-hee giving up her own appointment to help others should apply cost theory to her life, calculating the 'cost' of the work. Selfish people like Hae-ryun are portrayed negatively in the novel. Rather, Sung-hee, who helped orchestrate a strangers' meeting instead of going to meet her boyfriend who she has not seen for 6 months declares that she received more than what it 'cost' her, is portrayed as a positive model human being giving priority to the happiness of the group instead of individual profit.

However, in Chang-ruel Byun's "Ripen Ear," published 4 years later the main character who has the nickname 'Hong Calculation' (because she always calculates the profits and losses in all situations), is portrayed positively and with warmth.<sup>38</sup> The main

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<sup>37</sup> Hwa-won Lim, "5 P.M.," *Chosun Moonhak*, 2000, No. 1.

character, Hwa-sook Hong, said to the team member who was late for the daily self criticism session after the day's work in order to feed her baby in the day care center that "We have to calculate the oil cost used for the tractor at that time as well as a truck full of manure which was not delivered." Moreover, she is described as recording exactly all work and the amount of labor per production unit exactly in her notepad. She even counted how many corn grains her team has grown. Hwa-sook is described as a calculator and gets nicknames such as 'Hong Trouble' and 'Hong Calculation.' Some people speak ill of her saying that she can "take out the liver from a flea and split a single grain of hulled millet," but all the misunderstanding that she endures disappears at last, and she is recommended as a new team's leader because she was valued as a woman having "talent to lead a team able to deal with the new economic management system and the principles of team management."

The main character of 'Ripen Ear,' Hwa-sook Hong, is a person reflecting upon the changes experienced by a North Korean rural community by the introduction of competition theory. She pursues her individual interests but critically, her interests do not clash with the group's interests. She is pictured as a 'Ripen Ear' pursuing benefit and creating harmony between groups. It is interesting that this reflects the changes in collectivism in that the pursuit of individual interests is sanctioned as long as it occurs within the limits of collectivism, valuing and prioritizing groups over individuals and portraying numerous examples of individuals' sacrifice for the welfare of the group. These novels reflect the transformed realities of North Korean society and present people as agents of 'preventive change.'<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Chang-ruel Byun, "Ripen Ear," *Chosun Moonhak*, 2004, No. 1.

<sup>39</sup> Gui-nam Noh, "North Korea Literature of Jung-il Kim's era," Jong-hee

## 2. The Rupture of the Traditional Patriarchal Family

The economic difficulties in North Korea made women's lives worse. The socialization of housework and the rearing of children was unproductive, so women had to work extremely hard. Especially to solve the problem of food shortages, their workloads increased considerably. On the other hand, cooperative activities between husband and wife such as business ventures increased, so men began to help more with household chores, and women's voices were strengthened within the family.<sup>40</sup> After the economic difficulties, women began to take full responsibility for and control of their lives, and husbands took part in housekeeping and the rearing of children. Therefore each person's role and consciousness within the family changed. These phenomena happened in a concentric manner and affected mainly the middle and under classes both of whom are especially sensitive to economic problems.

Before the economic difficulties, necessities such as food and fuel were distributed from the enterprises which men worked for, so the head of the family had the responsibility to guarantee the family's lives. However, this distribution system collapsed in the face of the economic difficulties, and men's work became less important for the family's lives. During the period of economic difficulties, women could not be bound with housekeeping and the rearing of children in the midst of such extreme distress. Instead of the head of the household who should maintain their dignity or stick to their post, women started to sell food such as rice cakes and noodles, handmade daily necessities, wild greens from the

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Kim, ed., *The Understanding of North Korea Literature 2* (Seoul: Chungdong Guwol, 2002), p. 145.

<sup>40</sup> Soon-hee Im, *Food Problem and the Change of North Korean Women's Role and Consciousness* (Seoul: Korea Institute for National Unification, 2004), pp. 49-77.

mountains, firewood, and anything else at the market places to earn a living for the family. The enhancement of women's economic role in maintaining the family improved women's standing in the family, and also the image of women's primary role as housekeeper and raiser of children has undergone considerable social change.

The change of women's reality was also reflected in literature. In the novel, *Aspiration*, there is "a wife who always considers herself as the head of the family having all the rights to decision making in the family, and despises her husband."<sup>41</sup> There is a reason she has a strong voice. She is the chief cook in the public restaurant, so the family can "eat, be clothed, spend money, and live as well as any others in these hard times."

Recently many novels about family relationships and women's social roles have been published in North Korea. In La-soon Lee's "The Weight of Happiness," the main character, Yoo-kyung, who works as a researcher with her husband, tries to give up her job because it is difficult to manage both her job and her housework, but her husband disagrees with her decision.<sup>42</sup> Yoo-kyung experiences conflict between her occupational conscience and her role as a mother. Later she realizes that she is "a scientist before a wife," and goes back to the laboratory. At last she succeeds in her research with her husband, and keeps repeating the mantra that "the woman who has a great burden at the forefront of society is the happiest woman." This novel describes North Korean women's reality of living with the burdens of having to make a living in a ruined economy. It does not deny the fact that the reality that women experience is an unfair one, nor does it ignore their accumulated suffering. However, there is no escape from this

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<sup>41</sup> Moon-chang Kim, *Aspiration*, p. 29.

<sup>42</sup> La-soon Lee, "The Weight of Happiness," *Chosun Moonhak*, 2001, No. 3.

reality. The author emphasizes the way in which women can be happy when they perform their social duties by carrying ‘the burden of the times’ on the backs.

Kyung-sim Maeng’s “The Letter Not Sent,” also deals with women’s social roles in a similar way.<sup>43</sup> This work is in the form of letters which a woman sends to her husband. The main character, Yoo-kyung, was persuaded by her husband to give up a research project which needs her and settled down with a family after getting married. She became “a vine eating into the fresh trunk of the tree” and “a bird in the cage of a cozy and happy home.” “The love of a family was everything to her and the caresses of her husband was all the happiness she got.” However, her husband believed that her career success and being allowed to give top priority to her job represented her “deviating from the right track in life.” Yoo-kyung settles down with her family who disregards her social role, but when she discovers that her college classmate, Joon-hyuk applied to the same job to complete the research she gave up, and his family is having to live separately because of this, she agonizes over the choice she has made. Yoo-kyung reflects on her actions, neglecting her social responsibility for her private happiness and leaves for the mine leaving her husband to finish the research. Finally Yoo-kyung succeeds in her research after taking many tribulations, and her husband begs her forgiveness.

This novel appears like a scolding feudalistic reflection of society and shows males limiting women’s role in the domain of the family, but on the basis of North Korean women being shown as taking responsibility for the support of the family through housekeeping and earning a living, they are more accurately seen as ‘super women’ in the face of economic difficulties.

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<sup>43</sup> Kyung-shim Maeng, “The letter Not Sent,” *Chungryun Moonhak*, 2004, No. 8.

The representative work which reflects on women's social role and patriarchal family relationships is Hyun-chul Jung's "Scent of Life," published in 1991. This novel is about the confrontational relationship between the father, Chun-ju Ahn, who holds traditional views and the son, Young-ho, who is progressive, and centers on the husband and wife's relationship from a female perspective. With the issue of choosing a marriage partner providing the momentum and focal point for conflict, Young-ho resists his father's conservative ways of thinking. Young-ho's mother wanted to be an artist, to make the most of her talents, but she did not choose a career, suppressing her hopes and talents to help her husband. Through her help, Chun-ju Ahn, became a doctor at a young age and succeeded in his studies.

Young-ho conflicts with his father because of his marriage plans, and his opinions on the desirable relationship between husband and wife and the role of women which appear in his diary. Young-ho thinks that every person has their own worth and it is the worth given by the society as well as the family. The natural demands of social human beings, to share their worth, is a person's solemn obligation and duty which nobody can take and indeed must not take. Young-ho says that women also have "a duty to society" and the women who regard their husband's status, honor, and success as theirs are "the shame of the era." Besides this, he criticizes the "ineradicable thought" demanding women obey and the praise heaped upon obedient women as good "wives." He thinks that the marriages of such people reflects not the sublimation of love but "vassalage and inequality." The son's criticism does not focus on only the father. He confronts a socially quite common notion that takes the unfair relationship between husband and wife for granted and the mother passively accepting the conservative relationship with her husband, not realizing the inequity of "unilateral assistance" without any form of critical thought. The following



words of Young-ho's speak for the theme of the novel, "A married couple should help each other and become a greater unit, not sacrificing or losing one part. The family built through such a process, in other words, the family trying to help each other with sincere love and dedicating their own share of their individual worth can be a faithful cell to make our society strong and firm."

The novel is one which exhibits the most feministic view among all the North Korean novels published up until this point. However the criticism of and reflection upon patriarchal family relations does not target the patriarchy of the whole society including patriarchal and paternalist relationship between the government and the people, or between the leader and the public. The criticisms of the authoritarianism of the family head, conservative views of womanhood, and old-fashioned views of the family are limited because it seems to support a form of "family revolution" including the notion that women struggling to advance all the family members' social position means that she is performing a function within the greater context of contributing to the revolution.

Moreover, in the most recent North Korean novels, a husband often helps his wife with housework such as preparing meals and doing laundry, etc. Sometimes husbands who "prepare all the meals" rather than just helping with housework appear in the novels.<sup>44</sup>

As women's role in economic activities has increased recently, sharing housework with men is becoming more common. However, there are multiple perspectives possible on the sharing of housework and married couple's relationships. Some novels describe a husband helping with housework and loving his wife in a positive light, but still the husbands' natural arena is not home

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<sup>44</sup> Wol-nuy Byun, "The Green Ground," *Chosun Moonhak*, 2001, No. 3; Kyung-chan Yoon, "The Green Dream," *Chosun Moonhak*, 2003, No. 2; La-soon Lee, "The Weight of Happiness."

but the workplace, and wives are described as beings which follow and obey their husband not as equal human beings. Hee-nam Lee's novel, "A Tale About a Family," published in 2004 shows these multiple points of view through several characters.

The husband, Su-nam Park, "has never had a quarrel with his wife" and respects his wife using polite language with her all the time. He often does the laundry and prepares meals. Even though his friends make fun of him about this, he does not care and feels proud of himself helping his wife. His friend says to him "Why do you value your wife so much? There is a proverb that a husband should tame his wife after they get married." and warns against him "giving himself up to his wife." Let's look at Su-nam's wife. From the friend's point of view, she has smiling eyes with double eyelids and is a traditional woman giving pleasure to others due to her sweet and lovely character or with her eyes. She replies to the helping husband that "When did you start to be so insignificant and small minded? The housework is in charge of the home minister. You can just concentrate on the work of the excavators." Her virtue is "treating her husband with respect," and the proof of her respect are the "various meals in the husband's lunchbox" made by her with her whole heart. Su-nam's wife dies by accident while herding goats as a part of a domestic work team instead of her husband who was busy working in the factory with the damaged excavators without having the time to take care of his family. Her final words were "repair the excavator." Su-nam sat on the driver's seat of the excavator with a fancy cushion and gloves made by her. Su-nam's wife has been built up in the image of a traditional woman but within the context of the strength required of womanhood which the era demands.

Recently North Korean novels often use divorce as their subject matter. This is because women's participation in commercial activity has increased and their position in the family also has

improved, so they can make their voice heard in the family. Another reason is that family disintegration has increased due to frequent relocations from region to region for business. There are some divorces which came about directly or indirectly through the food problem. While one spouse travels to other places for business or escapes to China or another country, the spouse who remains behind sometimes becomes unfaithful and seeks a divorce. There are also divorces cause by a husband's economic incompetence. Especially during 'the Arduous March,' large numbers of women filed divorce papers because of their husband's incompetence. It is known that divorce is permitted but the person who files for divorce is fined in order to impose some kind of control over divorces after the 7.1 economic measures as the divorce rate increased.<sup>45</sup>

Likewise novels sometimes reflect the social circumstances of the rise in divorces increase and family disintegration. Hae-sung Kim's "Key," published in 2004 depicts a woman who decided to get divorced from her husband who was sentenced to corrective education because he stole factory materials which he used privately and damaged the factory's equipment, but later she forgave her reformed husband and was reconciled with him. The novel deals delicately with women's self consciousness, divorce, and the tolerance of the society for the people who are sentenced to corrective education. When the wife was worrying about the divorce, there was tension between the socially accepted idea that she should behave "like a woman and a wife" and her own desire to live a "happy, simple, and harmonious life." The main female character is determined to choose her self-consciousness as a woman and her desire rather than the socially acceptable idea to live separately. It reflects women's growing consciousness as

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<sup>45</sup> Soon-hee Im, *Food Problem and the Change of North Korea Women's Role and Consciousness*, p. 38.

women taking charge of the family livelihood in the wake of the economic difficulties. Later the husband came back from his corrective education and he was a changed man. The situation reverses itself, and a new conflict starts. The husband tries to change her mind with great sincerity, and she worries about whether she will accept the reborn husband or not. This is a conflict between a just cause of whether it is right to forgive him and the women's self consciousness.<sup>46</sup> Finally she considers her own fault that she did not keep her love for her husband, and at last she accepts him back. This represents the moment when the women's blooming self consciousness is sacrificed for the social issue of the understanding given to recipients of corrective education.

Since the 1990s, not only women's role but also thoughts on marriage and acquaintanceships with the opposite sex have changed, and liberal attitudes to acquaintanceships with the opposite sex and love marriages are developing. According to the testimony of refugees', the couples in love "worried about attracting too much attention before, but now they show off their relationship" and it is very often the case that they can be seen holding each other's hands (S3, escaped in April 2004, Haamkyung-namdo). These tendencies have been evident since the 13th World Festival for Youth and Students hosted in Pyongyang in 1989. Another reason can be found in the frequent travel to China and other foreign countries to do business or get food during the economic difficulties because the trend towards openness (referred to as the 'yellow wind') has developed through these contacts and experiences.

These trends are reflected in the novels, so recent North Korean novels describe the love between man and woman in rather bold

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<sup>46</sup> Gui-nam Noh, "People's Lives," Compiled by Sejong Institute for North Korean Studies, *The Social Culture of North Korea* (Paju: Hanul Academy, 2006), p. 411.

terms and in some detail.<sup>47</sup> While previous novels placed an importance on the ideological agreement dealing with acquaintanceships between man and woman, but since the 1990s, North Korean novels treat various forms of love such as the combination of emotion and desire, devotion, the camaraderie of the old era, and as an agreement based on faith.<sup>48</sup> In particular, the novels which attempt to unravel the emotions of love like “a multivariate function,<sup>49</sup> so to speak, the emotions of love connected with language, behavior, appearance, and the body as the object of love,” accompanied with bold and rich descriptions have increased tremendously. It is in the series of other novels dealing with female problems that we can most clearly see the gushing forth of private desire. The matter of man and woman’s love has changed from the subject of enlightenment to something of everyday reality by describing the complex and concrete nature of the emotion in such detail. The fact that North Korean literature plays a role in public education and that dealing with men and women’s love straight forwardly in North Korean literature is reflective of the great changes of the society where private desire and the arena of individual life is expanding.

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<sup>47</sup> Taek-ryung Kim, “Hometown,” *Chosun Moonhak*, 2003, No. 11; Young-nam Hong, “The Green Hill,” *Chosun Moonhak*, 2003, No. 11; Moon-chang Kim, *Aspiration*. There are these expressions.

<sup>48</sup> Tae-ho Oh, “Looking for the Love Method of North Korean Style - Concentrating North Korean short novels of 2000s,” Jong-hoi Kim, ed., *The Understanding of North Korean Literature 3* (Seoul: Chungdong Guwol, 2004)

<sup>49</sup> Hwa-won Lim, “5 P.M.,” p. 53.



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## **IV. People's Lives and Social Relationships**

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### **1. Social Stratification and Social Mobility**

The suspension and outright collapse of the distribution system and the weakening of the public planned economy of the 1990s brought the expansion of the market system, and people started to be linked to the market in various ways. The income gap by household due to the way that household was connected with the market brought a new classification according to economic class.

According to the leading research on the regional cases of Chungjin, Shineuju, and Haesan, the development and specialization of the economic class happened at the end of the 1990s when the marketplace was revitalized. The degree of proximity to the process by which goods were circulated in and out through the cities was a deciding factor in the ways in which people could participate in the market and was a critical factor in deciding each household's income. For instance, the upper class includes workers earning foreign currency and also includes the large numbers of

intermediary traders connected with the workers. The middle class includes wholesale traders of food and industrial goods and domestic subcontractors hiring small numbers of laborers. Family subcontractors, traders in marketplaces, peddlers, street vendors, and day laborers belong in the lower class.<sup>50</sup>

The consumption pattern of a household is what North Korean people actually use to classify economic class. “Pitiful people with nothing” belong in the lowest class whose “food is just corn, a few strands of noodle, and salty water without any oil.” This class has “no money, so they cannot do anything other than noodle selling which needs only a little money,” and their household goods often consist of only “a few bowls” (S3, escaped in April 2004, Haamkyung-namdo). On the other hand, the upper class possesses not only the necessary food for their own household but also surplus food. They have all kinds of high-grade household goods as well as electronic goods and foreign currency. In the novels, a person of the upper class is described in these terms; “he has never starved and he enjoyed a luxurious life” even during ‘the Arduous March.’<sup>51</sup> There are various sub-strata of the middle classes, between the upper class and the lower class, classified according to their ownership of consumer goods and surplus food.

Therefore, how does the formation and movement of each

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<sup>50</sup> Bong-dae Choi and Gap-woo Gu, “Dynamics of Revitalization of North Korean Cities’ ‘Marketplace,’” pp. 131-132. A refugee said following about the differentiation of classes appearing on the circulation process of market goods “now the traders are divided by classes. The market merchants get a little profit by selling goods which get from here and there all day long. Other traders having a little capital buy tobacco from the wholesalers and sell them. The wholesalers buy the goods from the bigger dealers. Since 2002, the trade has been organized and fined, and the ideal circumstances for trading was realized when marketplaces were revitalized and legalized and price has been increased.” (K7, escape in November 2003, Haamkyung-namdo)

<sup>51</sup> Bo-heum Baek, *The Hot Wind of Lanam*, p. 346.



economic class happen? Several determinants of class formation are hinted at through the refugees' testimony. First, the suspension of various social security systems and the distribution system meant the destruction of the basic safety net of life, and the numbers of the poor who could not adapt to the new market rules increased. Before the economic difficulties, all the social security systems which operated under the socialist system such as free education, medical service, pensions including the distribution system guaranteed people's lives, safety, and a minimum social and cultural life without any special efforts on the part of the individual. People just needed to keep their jobs. However, the economic difficulties caused the operation of all the social safety nets to cease, so people's lives and safety became the responsibility of the individual. If they could not prepare any alternative plan for their lives or they were inflexible in the face of new realities or new lifestyles, they became impoverished.

Second, the people who became aware of the new emerging patterns of life earlier on were able to form the economic upper class. They are referred to as 'Donju (the owner of money)' in North Korea. Refugees talk about the two economic extremes which occurred as a result of the economic difficulties in these ways; "This is a Donju's house (the rich), that is a poor person's house. In this way they are distinguished precisely. Korean Japanese, Chinese emigrants, and shrewd people in business become Donju" (K7, escaped in November 2003, Haamkyung-namdo). "People adapting well to business" or the people easily gathering up riches by using their status become Donju (the rich) (P1, escaped in October 2003, Pyongyang). The Korea Workers' Party's managing staff, the Ministry of Public Security's officials, and small and medium sized company executives have many opportunities to make big money. On the other hand, laborers have limits to making money because they can only use their bodies (C4, escaped in

November 2003, Haamkyung-bukdo).

The characteristic appearing very often in the process of the formation of economic classes in North Korea after the economic difficulties is the cozy relations between politics and business, so-called ‘the close ties between a black market economy and the authority of government officials.’<sup>52</sup> The political ruling class is converting their political power into economic power in the course of market expansion. The authorities and leadership elites in North Korea enjoyed more privileges than other classes, but since the onset of economic difficulties, their status has decreased relatively because economic success has become of more importance than political advancement like acquiring membership of the Korean Workers’ Party.

Nevertheless, the accumulation of capital without the acquiescence of political authority poses great risks, so the rich make connections with the authorities to avoid inspection by the Ministry of Public Security or the Korean Workers’ Party, and create cooperative relationships with the ruling authority in order to coexist. For example, they ‘contribute’ a huge amount of money to support industry or organize the supply of gifts for high-ranking officials on national holidays to avoid inspections by governmental agencies. Sometimes the rich use the method of involving influential men from the authorities in their business. The economic upper class appear to be familiar with the symbiotic relationship between the profit allocation of business or economic investment and the improvement in their status in the political system.<sup>53</sup> The

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<sup>52</sup> Woo-gon Jung and Ju-chul Lee, “North Korean Social Safety Net and Reorganization of Class Structure in Cities,” p. 186.

<sup>53</sup> Bong-dae Choi, “The Change of People’s Consciousness and Class Structure,” Young-chul Jung, Sung-ho Go, Bong-dae Choi, *The Change of North Korean Society Since 1990s* (Korean Broadcasting System, 2005), pp. 207-210.

Donju (the rich) pursue economic profit with a degree of security by getting the protection of the authorities through maintaining close relationships with political authority. In the past, the staff of agencies, like the State Security Department, and the Social Security Ministry did not engage in business directly and “take traders’ profit, but recently they engage in business directly.” With the help and the intervention of the authorities, it is possible to move goods in bulk crossing one or two provinces using public transportation (K7, escaped in November 2003, Haamkyungnamdo). The collusion of financial capital and political authority permits the accumulation of large amounts of capital with greater safety and speed.

The collusion by political authority (primarily the Korean Workers’ Party’s officials) and the economic upper class describes well the nature of society in North Korea after the economic difficulties. It also reveals the possibility that market expansion in North Korea could follow a similar pattern to that of the nomenklatura (the privileged class in the former Soviet Union) which became a new political and economic ruling class in the process of transition in the Soviet Union.

Third, the decline of the intelligentsia (teachers, doctors, and white collar employees) can be seen. Since the onset of the economic difficulties, many people of this class, accustomed to social respect and having relatively high status believed that the market is anti-Socialist, and felt unable to throw themselves into the market place because of their social reputation. As a result they experienced decline in status and now occupy what is financially the lower class positions in society. They were lacking in adaptability to the newly changed situation, and they had no effective skills to exploit in terms of market business practice. They could not adapt themselves easily to a market centered system because they are “too honest and have the tendency to stick with

their given fields.” (K7, escaped in November 2003, Haamkyung-namdo). During ‘the Arduous March,’ the intelligentsia suffered the highest death rates from starvation among all classes. Finally the intelligentsia’s occupational status has experienced a great decline. “Before, if people had graduated from Kim Il Sung University or Kim Chaek University of Technology, they could work as government employees immediately, but now even doctors have to sell their books for rice and go to the mountains and gather sticks because the value of the science department has collapsed,” (P1, escaped in October 2003, Pyongyang). The frank testimony of this refugee shows clearly the degraded status of the intelligentsia.

While the decline of the intelligentsia has been noted, the ordinary workers’ economic competence has improved and their feeling of relative deprivation has decreased. At the same time, there is the possibility for the emergence of ‘the new middle class’ through the rise in the prestige of certain occupation groups. Laborers came within range of the second economic class because of the failure of all the social security systems including food supply, but the quality of their life has exceeded that of the intelligentsia such as engineers and teachers through their greater involvement with business and trade.

However, the honest and naive among the working class did not improve their lives (H3, escaped in November 2003, Pyongyang). The distribution system was dysfunctional and prices rose sharply after the 7.1 measures, so laborers who had no income except wages had more difficult lives (S3, escaped in April 2004, Haamkyung-namdo; C4, escape in November 2003, Haamkyung-bukdo). The differentiation between classes which occurs is dependent upon the degree of their commercial activity and their adaptability to the market system as compared to other laborers.

## 2. The Relaxation and Restoration of Social Controls

After the economic difficulties, the weakening of the national distribution system undermined the ‘organized reliance’ of people who had managed their lives by depending upon the leader’s patriarchal distribution policy. The distribution system performs the function of social control by limiting people’s movement and placing them in their place of residence and job as well as controlling all necessities including food. Additionally, it has the ideological function of giving legitimacy to the socialist system and inspiring paternalism in that the government and the Korean Workers’ Party are seen to take care of people’s lives and livelihoods along with providing a free education system and free medical service.

The pursuit of independent survival forced by economic difficulties freed people from this ideology to some extent. The people who had to struggle to make their own living by business and other means could not help but be absent from work. When they went on long distance trips, they could not attend political education and daily self criticism session (Chonghwa) either. In addition, the movement of people to other provinces and frequent circulation of people introduced a great deal of new information by means other than through official sources.<sup>54</sup> As a result, the

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<sup>54</sup> The following refugee’s testimony shows the direct example of new information and thoughts working as a momentum of the change of consciousness. When the people travel to other places for business, they can contact the new information and thoughts. “Among our proverbs, there is a words that a gadding idiot is better than a sitting hero. Even he is stupid, if he wanders around, he can experience, listen, see, feel more. I am going out to do business, all through the country. At the western coast, I saw a fly sheet near the truce line at first. One day I went to someone’s house for business by accident. When I was alone at the house, I came to listen to the broadcast to the north while looking for the radio frequency. They said North Korean government is a military dictatorship.

existing control system on people changed to the point that political education and the organizational life of labor groups have undergone considerable relaxation and loosening.

As the economic difficulties became more serious, various organizational activities and the rate of attendance at the events including political education have decreased. A refugee (K5, Hoiryung, Haamkyung-bukdo) said that the attendance rate for mobilization and political education classes was 80~90% before, but it dropped to 50% after 'the Arduous March.' It is difficult to generalize these figures, but the response to political education in factories has declined dramatically after economic difficulties. Right after the death of Kim, Il Sung, people attended daily self criticism sessions (Chonghwa) even if they were starving to death, but after 'the Arduous March,' a general meeting of the Korean Workers' Party could not often be held at the planned date (L1, Chulsan, Pyungahn-bukdo). The daily self criticism session became a mere formality, and the degree of criticism of absentees became less.<sup>55</sup>

People's attitudes to political education have changed. One

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I have never doubted about our government and Kim, Jong-Il and I was always proud of our country until that time, but they said the North is a military dictatorship, more than 3 million people in the North have starved, the North is a prison without bars and so on. Shock ... . I felt shock at that moment. I felt that our government was a mass of contradictions." (H5, escaped in July 1997, Haamkyung-namdo)

<sup>55</sup> The following refugee's testimony shows the change of the political education and daily self-criticism session most clearly. "When the Korea Workers' Party asks people to come to the meeting, the party cannot force people like before, even people said that they cannot go to the meeting. In previous days, absenteeism from the meeting was a big problem which would get you criticized. When someone goes out to do business in the market, others speak ill of them behind his back, but they cannot criticize them in public." (L2, escape in August 2003, Moosan, Haamkyung-bukdo)

refugee states that “Even though our life is usually hard, if we listened to the lectures, we became faithful again, so we used to look forward to things getting better” (K5, Hoiryung, Haamkyungbukdo). Another thinks that political education is “useless” (H2, escaped in 2003, Saebyul, Haamkyungbukdo). Even members of the Korean Workers’ Party or enthusiastic workers sometimes “think about other things such as business or their houses, while listening to the speech or propaganda.” (S4, Onsung, Haamkyungbukdo). In some serious cases, they risked criticism in not attending at all (K2, escaped in December 1998, Chungjin, Haamkyungbukdo). One refugee (K2, escaped in December 1998, Chungjin, Haamkyungbukdo) who often missed the political education lectures said “I didn’t care about the criticism. They did not kick me out of the factory, I just faced the criticism once.” It shows that self-criticism and mutual criticism at such meetings became mere formalities in the same way that political education became formalities during ‘the Arduous March.’

The degree of relaxation of organizational life exhibits great variations by individual and region. One refugee from Pyongyang said “The most important thing is political organizational life whether the situation is hard or not, so I have never missed the regular organizational meeting such as the daily self criticism session, lectures, and Saturday study, and Pyongyang was as firm as a rock. We can live without rice, but cannot live without organizational life.” (P1, escaped in October 2003, Pyongyang) However, when integrating all the refugees’ testimony, even in the big cities like Pyongyang, it becomes clear that generally, organizational life was relaxed during ‘the Arduous March,’ and the control of government and the Korean Workers’ Party was weakened.

By the end of the 1990s, however, since overcoming the worst of the crisis, the organizational arrangement of the Korean Workers’

Party and labor organizations started, and the organizational control has strengthened again. A refugee testified that “to survive I did not take part in organizational life during ‘the Arduous March,’ but the awareness that I should take part in organizational life again because the situation is getting better. I have to be loyal to my country and the party. Also I have to participate in organizational life eagerly. There are many people who are also participating.” (H3, escaped in November 2003, Pyongyang)

Not only the absence from political education, but also deviant behaviour such as theft and misappropriation of public property has increased. With these tendency, the standards of punishment for such crimes became clarified; on the other hand, the degree of social understanding for those who suffered legal punishment became strengthened. Hae-sung Kim’s short novel, “Key,” published in 2004, deals with the problem of social understanding and sympathy towards a person who was convicted of a crime, and shows his divorce as well. The main female character is a woman in the process of divorcing her husband who is convicted of appropriating public equipment and causing an accident. She is determined to get divorced, but the husband, Choong-kook’s father, expresses regret after his corrective training and tries for ‘a new start.’ The secretary of the local Korean Workers’ Party cell encouraged Choong-kook’s father and scolded the people doubting that Choong-kook’s father is in fact a new man, saying “Don’t look at people so badly. Why don’t you support him rather than criticize him?” Finally Choong-kook’s father joins the party on the spot by working hard. The following words of the secretary of the party cell encapsulate the theme of the novel. “Our party never turns away even from a criminal when he regrets his crime and as such he stands or falls with our party. The party accepts and cherishes him.”

In Gil-son Kim’s “A Girl Bringing on the Breathing,” a woman



who remains an optimistic and enthusiastic worker even when her father makes a mistake and gets convicted appears as a character. These novels reflect the social circumstance of increasing crimes of survival in the midst of reduced public order during the economic difficulties.

The phenomenon of a weakened state of rules and control appearing in North Korea after the economic difficulties, on the one hand, reflects the chaos of values and rules due to the changes in the social order. On the other hand, living conditions became so poor that people couldn't survive without violating laws. One refugee explained about the circumstances saying "people who were obedient to the government and law died of starvation. People who didn't steal, didn't commit theft, and didn't lie all died. If they are survivors, it means that they didn't follow the law." (K9, escaped in February 2000, Haamkyung-bukdo). The deviation of people during economic difficulties was not a form of resistance against the system but a deviation for the purposes of survival, therefore, oppressive and physical methods of control can enlarge people's complaints. Therefore the lowering of standards of punishment for crimes and the increased sympathy and understanding shown to such people came to the forefront as important issues.

### **3. Succession of Generation and Innovation**

In the beginning of the 1990s, North Korea faced a new crisis not only because of the economic difficulties but also the introduction of western influences after the World Festival for Youth and Students hosted in Pyongyang and the collapse of the socialist countries. The reason North Korean literature in the early 1990s paid attention to the problem of conflicts between generations is to give testimony to the difficulty of the achievement

of revolution to the younger generation which had never experienced the hard period of reconstruction after the colonial era, and the Korean War. It was also a precautionary measure focusing on the third generation (those in their forties) and the fourth generation (those in their twenties)'s succession of the revolution achievement by maintaining the attitudes of the second generation which led to the postwar recovery and the first generation which led to the liberation of the nation from under the yoke of Japanese colonialism.

The critical confrontations between the older generation and the younger generation is expressed through the dichotomy of the ideal and the real, spiritual strength and scientific technology, autonomy and openness, and the isolated North Korea and rapidly changing world situation. All this reflects the urgent and practical problems facing North Korea now.<sup>56</sup> In the 1990s, intergenerational conflicts could be distinguished sufficiently to make certain differences from the previous periods. Among them, the most obvious difference was the exact division of the first, second, third, and fourth generation; previously it was divided simply as the older generation and the younger generation.<sup>57</sup> The novels published in the early 1990s<sup>58</sup> emphasized the generational progression of the revolutionary spirit through the second generation telling the fourth generation about the construction of the nation during the Chonlima movement (its own version of the Great Leap Forward) after the war. The passing on and inheritance of the old generation's

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<sup>56</sup> In-hwan Go, "The Collapse of 'the Giant' and the Destination of North Korean Novels," *Moonhak Soochup*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (2003).

<sup>57</sup> Jae-yong Kim, *The historical understanding of North Korean Literature* (Seoul: Moonji Publishing Company, 1994), p. 306.

<sup>58</sup> Sung-duk Lee, "The Letter to Son," *Chosun Moonhak*, April 1992; Lee-tae Yoon, "Yesterday and Today," *Chosun Moonhak*, June 1991; Soo Kang, "Always Like the Day," *Chosun Moonhak*, June 1992.

revolutionary spirit has been emphasized continuously in novels until the end of the 1990s. In Yu-guen Seok's "Aim," the main character, Jung-gu, holds the teacher's hand and assures him that he is going to fight hard to "live like the first, second, and third generations that devoted their lives as well as blood and sweat for the future"<sup>59</sup>

While the conflicts appearing in novels in the early 1990s are usually related to the general collapse of socialism, the later 1990s novels show a new point of view regarding the succession of the revolutionary spirit. Since the onset of economic difficulties, on the one hand, the generational conflicts in novels are related with the attitudes associated with overcoming 'hardship,' on the other hand, they reflect social changes such as women's emerging economic importance and improvement in status, development of modern technology, and the foreign cultural influences which accompanied the economic difficulties. The former refer to the succession of the generations, the latter emphasis the revolutionary role performed by the new generation.

Recent novels dealing with the generation's succession and revolutionary problems are searching for desirable attitudes that can serve their readerships in 'the Arduous March' through the second generation's experience of the Chonlima movement and the rebuilding undertaken in the aftermath of the war and the first generation's partisan activities against colonial Japan. Hong-chul Kim's "Unripe Corn," contains a scene where the parents of the third generation put unripe corn ears, the symbol of poverty and sorrow of the colonial period, on the wedding table of the fourth generation child asking them to "remember today which is was only possible through the hardship and suffering of others and eat with thanks even an ear of unripe corn and keep your faith in

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<sup>59</sup> Yu-geun Seok, "Aim," *Chosun Moonhak*, 1999, No. 2, p. 75.

socialism.”<sup>60</sup> This scene emphasizes the succession of revolutionary spirit from the first and second generation to the third generation, and implies that this spirit should continue to be inherited by the fourth and succeeding generations.

The recent novels underline the way in which the third and fourth generations follow and learn from the models of the first and second generations, but some novels show a reversal in the status of the revolutionary generation and the new generation. For example, in Hyun-chul Chung’s “Scent of Life,” there is a confrontation between father and son due to their different views on marriage and different characters, but the son leads the father to break with his conservatism and eventually changes him, so that in the end their conflict is resolved. In this and similar cases, it is the fourth generation that teaches and corrects the second generation.

Heung-ik Kim’s “Living Fossil,” published in 2003, describes the present North Korean circumstances as the coexistence of a “beautiful world of the young endlessly struggling toward a new era” and “the old world’s fossil like adherence to the past and representing the past” like “discolored books.” In the novel, the symbol of the old generation, Joo-seok Shin, is a model worker “devoting his whole life to the group unsparingly and throwing himself into the work of the group.” He is the person who helped to solve the food shortages experienced by his colleagues by mudfish farming in his backyard, but he neglected the unfolding reality because he was unfamiliar with the uses of modern technology. As a result, his intelligence is unable to bloom. Joo-seok Shin refused the suggestion of introducing an inspection process using computers in the production of building materials. The new generation engineer, Kang-moo Lee, tells him that this is the era of information technology and he should not disregard

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<sup>60</sup> Hong-chul Kim, “Memory and Wish,” *Chosun Moonhak*, 2000, No. 9.

this fact.<sup>61</sup> Joo-seok Shin in the novel is not a negative character like “harsh bureaucrat or individualist.” Rather he is “a good worker supporting the Korea Workers’ Party.” The fact that such a person is portrayed negatively in any way indicates that this is a time of “destiny” for North Korea and is a critical moment in the development of a “high technology era.”

In Kyung-shim Maeng’s “Guarantee Tomorrow,” we have the father, Seok-hoon, representing the old generation, and an inspector of the local mine, and Sung-min, representing the younger generation, confronting each other over the appropriate blasting technique to use at the mine.<sup>62</sup> Sun-hee, a young leader, of the new generation appears in the role of intermediary, settling the father and son’s conflict. The settlement of conflicts comes when the new generation understands the old generation’s sacrifice and devotion, and also the old generation accepts the enterprising thinking of the new generation armed as they are with scientific technology; finally it is the older generation that changes their attitude in the novels.

Other novels, however, present character patterns similar with Ji-seok Shin as positive role models. Seok-chul Kim, the leader, in “The Blizzard is Hot,” is described as a positive character ignoring the suggestion of a young member of an shock brigade that they should use a power saw and leads the other members to “undertake the logging work given to them only by themselves.” Young-hwan Lee’s “Willow,” shows a conflict between the young generation who wish to follow individual desire and the older generation faithfully thinking about the welfare of the group. The new generation, ‘I’ resents their ‘fathers’ for not understanding the

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<sup>61</sup> Heung-il Kim, “Alive Fossil,” *Chosun Moonhak*, 2003, No. 3, p. 53.

<sup>62</sup> Kyung-shim Maeing, “Guarantee Tomorrow,” *Chungryun Moonhak*, 2003, No. 5.

value of talent, ambition, and personal goals. At last, however, 'I is influenced by the older generation's demand of having "the courage ready to die" and "not hiding or trying to escape from reality."<sup>63</sup>

Such a mixture of values displays the reality of North Korea, where society has to adapt to the real conditions of pressure for reform and opening, attempting to maintain the attitude of self-reliance and revolutionary spirit whilst engaged in the "work in progress" of building socialism. In short, North Korean society has so few reserves of power to achieve comprehensive change. North Korea needs forward-looking attitudes in relation to modern science and technology to build a 'strong and great country' and overcome their economic difficulties, however, the reality is that North Korea faces a dilemma because it cannot depend on only science and technology. To keep their system in the midst of a changing reality, North Korea had to apply the revolutionary spirit of the first generation and the second generation. This reality is symbolized by the image of "a fish in formaldehyde keeping its shape over the decades" like Ju-seok Shin in "Living Fossils."

While the old generations in the novels are "gigantic trees whose long embracing arms are supposed to be sawed" like the main characters' identity in "Guarantee Tomorrow," the younger generations have modern technology, enterprising spirit, and flexible attitudes, but they are lacking in the 'heart' which the old generations had. On this point the older generation and the younger generation are mutually complementary. Therefore the conflict between the older generation and the younger generation in recent novels from North Korea can be solved by only reference to a dialectic procedure such as the observation in "Guarantee

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<sup>63</sup> Young-hwan Lee, "Willow," *Chosun Moonhak*, 2001, No. 2.

Tomorrow,” that when a new branch is inserted into the old tree, the new branch grows and becomes part of the old tree.





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## V. Conclusion

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As mentioned above, the changes in North Korean people's lives have been examined separately in the domains of production, reproduction, and social relations in the period following the economic difficulties. The changes in North Korean people's lives exhibit the characteristics made in the transition toward market-oriented economies evidenced elsewhere. However, it is not only economic changes such as the introduction of a capitalistic economic system but also it is related to wider problems of modernity such as the changed relationships between men and women which were formerly conservative and patriarchal in nature. It has, in addition, a complex character connected with the issue of post-modern era which pursues individual desire and a discriminative identity free from the control and enlightenment of a modern socialist system.

The structural products of the socialist system are working as a motivating power operating upon people's lives and this will continue even after the expansion of market system. The

representative example is the dependence on existing informal networks. The informal relations built under the old socialist system will have an influence on an actor's identity and behavior this is evident now in the midst of a still expanding market. It becomes the mechanism guaranteeing the continuity of life in the midst of rapid social changes following economic difficulties.

Meanwhile, North Korean people's lives after the economic difficulties have changed in the course of their interaction with the political and economic system. Market expansion measures, the 7.1 economic reform measures, and the revision of the legal system were attempts to partially accept market mechanisms in the view of system, and these measures are designed to prevent rapid change of the principles keeping North Korean society intact by reflecting the change from the bottom. In which direction are such movements going? Is a gradual opening and expansion of the market system going to happen or will we see a rapid change of the social structure? The answers to such questions can change depending on the shifting shapes of compound variables; these comprise both international and local political, social and economic variables such as the nuclear problem as well as the purpose of the government's policy and the interaction of the people faced with an emerging market.

One thing is certain. The introduction and expansion of a market system itself cannot be expected to improve people's lives and lead to the democratization of North Korean society immediately. This can be inferred through the fact that the existing political power structure has a tendency of weaving an economically unfair system with an emerging market without any meaningful, rapid internal change. The conversion of the system will not bring about the disconnection of the social ruling class, but rather the privileged class will be able to transform themselves quickly and continue to rule again as seen in the case of the former Soviet Union.

We have to develop a positive economic and social cultural interchange of cooperation between North Korea and South Korea, since this could lead to positive changes for North Korean society and standards of living; this is a more desirable and healthy way for peaceful coexistence between North and South Korea. The changes in North Korean people's lives has happened in the context of social mobility and communication caused by economic difficulties. Local autonomous entities or the multidimensional interchanges of the people should be expanded independently from the political and military arenas. This should be done with the aim of supporting a healthy civil society, overcoming the oppression of the 'system' of North Korean 'life.'

In addition, support to the most vulnerable classes of North Korea society should be maintained over the long term, giving appropriate regard to the humanitarian issues involved. A growing economic gap between the rich and poor, with the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer, is manifesting itself in North Korea, as a result of a weakening of the social safety net. Given this, the suspension of humanitarian supporting on North Korea might bring about a serious deterioration of the quality of the standards of living of the most vulnerable classes. It could, in addition, work as a force of social pressure, sparking a sudden turn of events, as opposed to the more desirable course of a gradual and long-term opening and reform.



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