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The analyses, comments, and other opinions contained in this monograph are those of the authors 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 crisis endured by North Koreans in the mid-1990s was a major event that shook their lives to the very core. Since then, North Koreans have turned to a variety of new survival strategies in order to accommodate the results of the crises - the extraordinary occurrences of famine, poverty, and threats to their safety - into their everyday lives. The crisis resulted in an absence of the state, which was filled by the market. With this, a new market spontaneously developed and emerged, whereby North Koreans carried out productive activities in order to maintain their livelihood. Furthermore, the ways and methods of eating, dressing, living, and resting, as well as the people's relationships to the state, to their families, and to their neighbors, along with their habits of thinking, deciding, and communicating, all underwent a major overhaul. The changes experienced by the North Koreans in their everyday lives, which have been subsequently interpreted, enlarged, and transformed by the people, are directly connected to the changes in North Korea's larger state system and structure.

Action and structure meet in the things we do in our everyday lives. Structural conditions, which define the actions of individuals, operate in our everyday world, and it is this everyday world where individuals interpret the institutions and rules that both control our actions and transform them, through the interaction of compromise and conflict. In this process, actors are not just subordinate to the structure. They appropriate their everyday world in their own way.<sup>1</sup> Micro-power exists in our everyday lives and, at the same time, individuals can confront this power and retaliate with their own form of micro-resistance. The subject does not remain inactive or isolated in the realm of everyday life. Rather, the tension and irony of dominance and resistance are represented in this sphere.<sup>2</sup> In this way, the everyday world is where the micro conditions that allow structure to be reproduced and transformed are put in place.<sup>3</sup>

To take a holistic look at North Korean society, which has been undergoing changes recently, it is necessary to look at more than

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<sup>1</sup> “Appropriation” was a core concept used by Henri Lefebvre to describe overcoming the everyday. It refers to possession but it describes the act of possessing as owning something someone else had or a collective group had. It also refers to possessing something that was taken away from oneself and given to another then brought back. In essence, it refers to the idea of controlling and subjectively managing one’s own body, desires, and time, instead of handing them over to someone else. Park Jung-ja, “Explanation of Concepts,” (2005), H. Lefebvre, *La Vie Quotidienne Dans le Monde Moderne* (1968), trans. Park Jung-ja (2005), pp. 36-39.

<sup>2</sup> Kim Ki-bong, “Ju-che and the Politicization of North Koreans’ Everyday Lives,” *The 1<sup>st</sup> North Korea Daily Life Research Discussion Collections, Searching for a Paradigm in Researching the Ordinary Lives of North Koreans* (Dongguk University North Korea Daily Life Research Center, 2008), p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting to see that historical-sociological theories that explain the dynamism of action and structure, as well as Giddens’ “structuralization” concept, are related to how social lifestyle patterns are fundamentally repetitive. Through the buildup of repetitive everyday activities over a certain stretch of time, structure results as the medium of social customs.

just the political discourse or changes in North Korea's systems; it is also important to focus on the "actual lives" of the people. By reconstructing the actual experiences of the North Koreans and by understanding the interaction of political power and dominant relations in the realm of actual reality, we can understand the essence of the dynamic changes seen in North Korean society today, which seem trapped by static ideological discourse or political power.

Existing North Korean research has focused on policies, discourse, and strategies, with their perspectives mainly being limited to either the structure or the politics. These studies can not properly identify the various social changes that are occurring from the bottom up, nor can they capture the interaction and dynamism of the various social factors and actors that bring about the social changes, as the studies mostly treat the people's everyday lives as a subordinate domain of politics.

This paper aims to analyze the basic data of the everyday lives of North Koreans to fully understand the changes occurring within North Korean society. In so doing, this study will examine the influences of "everyday politics" on the North Korean system.

Commonly, the term "everyday lives" takes into consideration the life of an average individual or a collective group in that society, and it refers to the repeated lifestyle pattern that is evident over a long period of time, as opposed to separate, sporadic instances. Furthermore, "everyday lives" also refer to a continuity of actions, carried out without purpose and often unconsciously. However, this common definition is also debatable. For instance, should the focus solely be on lower class citizens? Or should the definition be more encompassing, including the lives of elites, bureaucrats, and social leaders? Should extraordinary events and occurrences also be included in the definition, along with regular, repeated events that dot the lives of North Koreans? There has yet to be a full consensus

on the definition of “everyday lives” among scholars, and each researcher is currently employing a different meaning for the term.

This paper does not see the terms “everyday” and “non-everyday” as conflicting concepts. Rather, it takes into consideration the connection between ordinary and extraordinary as well as the convergent nature of everyday lives.<sup>4</sup> This research will delve into the lives of North Korean residents, including power elites, and it will analyze how they absorb the shock of structural change in their production, reproduction, and leisure time. Furthermore, the study will also analyze how North Koreans contemplate these changes in their everyday lives. The study also seeks to look into the major connective links between the changes in the lives of North Koreans and the changes in the North Korean system. The study focuses on the dynamic process of how North Koreans underwent the changes in their lives by examining the actions and strategies they pursued following socio-structural fluctuations, such as the economic crisis and the rise of market forces, which uprooted the everyday lives of the people. Rather than offering a critique on the harsh, oppressive structure endured by the people of North Korea, this paper focuses on the various strategies<sup>5</sup> undertaken by the North Koreans to sidestep the forces of power and domination.

This paper utilized a qualitative research method that centered

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<sup>4</sup> Everything converges into ordinary life, through its everyday workings. The ordinary overpowers the extraordinary, such as wars and revolutions. North Korea’s economic crisis did lead to a collapse of the ordinary lives of its people, but their lives, which formerly revolved around the planned economy, gave way to ones revolving around market exchanges. This has led to a renewed balance in their ordinary lives. Every event and every extraordinary occurrence converges into the everyday. This convergence is possible because every human being has the everyday tendency to preserve oneself. Hong Min, “The Direction and Methodology of Research on the Everyday Lives of North Koreans,” *The 2<sup>nd</sup> North Korea Daily Life Research Discussion Collections*, p. 19.

<sup>5</sup> Hong, *ibid.*, p. 16.

on in-depth interviews with North Korean defectors. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured interview with 41 North Koreans who defected after 2005.



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## **II. The Lifestyle of North Koreans**

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### **1. Daily Activities of North Koreans**

Before the economic hardships of the 1990s, the ration system and the organized lifestyle system, which revolved around the workshops and homes, more or less functioned normally. Before the crisis hit, North Korean residents kept to set a lifestyle pattern of working at their place of labor, resting and reproducing, doing household chores, and participating in social mobilization and political study sessions. At the center of it all were the hours of productive labor the people normally carried out in their enterprises.

Since the “arduous march,” with the workplace order being restored, the daily lives of North Koreans have undergone several changes, in terms of their social classes, jobs, and individual situations, according to their level of commercial participation and their food ration stability. Even after the year 2000, because of electrical problems and the unsteady supply of resources, factories have not been able to operate at full capacity. Therefore, most

laborers in manufacturing continued doing normal work when working conditions allowed. Conversely, when they didn't, laborers worked on the farms or in mobilized labor. Because factories could not afford to provide full daily work hours for the laborers, many of them sold items during the afternoon or took on other methods in order to generate personal monetary profit so as to make a living.

Office workers are controlled in terms of their work hours, not their output amount, so, unlike laborers in manufacturing, it is not easy for them to leave their workplace even though they may not have work to do. However, their labor hours are made up not just of the basic tasks they must complete in their place of work but also of farming the land allotted by various agencies and businesses, raising cattle, running a private business, and other means to eke out a living and to replace the lost rations.

Unlike laborers, farmers find it relatively more difficult to acquire free time, which is why their lifestyle pattern is similar to that of the 1980s. The biggest difference between their lives now, as opposed to prior to the economic crisis, is that the time they spend on the plots of land they till in the mountain regions or on the land allotted to them by the association now take up the most important part of their daily lives. There are also other changes that have taken place. Daily self-criticism sessions are being shortened, and indoctrination sessions are being cut back or replaced with concentrated Saturday study sessions. These changes take different forms, as they are decided by the food situation on the farms and the decisions made by the farm directors.

Members of the intellectual class, who must keep to fixed working hours, must, even if formally, obey these strict hours. Therefore, their lives are also quite similar to the ones they had before the crisis. However, many intellectuals are also being found using part of their time, especially in the afternoon or after work, to make additional money for their own survival. This can depend



on food ration supply and the management style of the leader, head researcher, or hospital dean of medicine for whom the laborer is working for. Before the food crisis, these intellectuals spent their spare time working on increasing their professional knowledge or expanding on their field of study. However, after the food crisis hit, they turned to labor to survive.

Bureaucrats are spending more time on tasks related to controlling the market, censoring non-socialist propaganda, and punishing criminals for drug use, gambling, and other illegal and criminal activities.

The people who do not go to work, but engage in small-scale commercial activities, are mostly homemakers. They lead busy lives filled with various mobilization activities, household chores, and commercial activities to make money for their families.

After the economic crisis, North Koreans were forced to cut back drastically on their leisure time. Most residents do not have much time for leisure, as they must work during the day and support themselves and their families with a second job the rest of the time. In particular, women are not getting any leisure time, much less any time for the rest they need to reproduce. As for how they spend their leisure time, it is worth noting that watching South Korean videos has become a popular pastime among North Koreans despite the harsher societal controls.

## **2. The Food, Clothing, and Shelter of North Koreans**

Food, clothing, and shelter are the most important elements that comprise the lives of North Koreans. What they eat, what they wear, and where they sleep make up the everyday lives of these people in and of themselves, but they also make up the foundation for other activities.

Before the “arduous march,” North Koreans looked after

themselves with the wages and the food rations the state gave them. Back then, their food, clothing, and shelter were more or less similar to each other's. However, after the "arduous march" and after the regime's ration system began to break down, more and more North Koreans began depending on the market for their livelihood. The more North Koreans relied on the market, the bigger their income gap became. The in-depth interviews conducted showed that there was a huge gap in the food, clothing, and shelter in North Korea, according to social class. The reason the gap exists along class lines is because the North Koreans' income range has increased as the market got bigger. While some North Koreans are enjoying a monthly income of several million won, there are still those residents who must go an entire month on a few thousand won. In this way, North Koreans are experiencing a qualitative difference in their food, clothing, and shelter situations, which is something they have never experienced before.

Let us first examine their lives in terms of food. While in South Korea, the expression goes in order of "clothing, food, and shelter," in North Korea, it is "food, clothing, and shelter." That is how important food is to them. In fact, North Korea has been unable to solve their food crisis situation, which began with the "arduous march" in the mid-1990s and is still ongoing. The North Korean defectors who participated in the interview escaped the North between 2005 and 2008. They have experienced how the food situation improved and then worsened again after 2000. The interviewees replied that, despite the partial improvements and subsequent deterioration in North Korea's food situation, the overall situation has improved tremendously from the days of the "arduous march" and from when the food ration system was working. They agreed that, overall, the number of North Koreans having rice has increased.

There is a big difference in the kinds of food consumed by North

Koreans according to their income level. Upper class residents can use the market to buy and consume rice and various other foodstuffs. They eat out at restaurants, and they do not hesitate before purchasing ice cream, squid, or other snacks. Middle class people are those who “can have rice but do not enjoy other foodstuffs to their heart’s content.” People in the lower class do not have rice on an everyday basis. This group can include people of various levels of poverty. For instance, there are those who eat corn with various grains as their main staple. Some have noodles three meals a day, while some have potatoes in place of rice. The extremely poor are faced with a difficult situation where they “have breakfast then beg for lunch, have lunch then beg for dinner.” The extremely poor, who must constantly worry about each meal, often have to make do with liquor dregs, powdered maize, and grass porridge.

After 2000, North Koreans experienced an increase in the gap between rich and poor, not just in the foods they eat but also in the clothes they wear. The clothes they wear provide an instant, telling look at their lives and at which end of the income spectrum they dwell. In terms of clothing, there wasn’t much of a difference before the arduous march. However, after the market became activated and the income gap began to widen, consumption patterns evolved very differently between the rich and the poor. Upper class residents easily spend upwards of \$100 on a Japanese dress or other foreign label clothes. They buy new clothes every season, and they dress for fashion. Meanwhile, the middle class mostly purchases clothes from China, for their comfort and affordability. However, with lower class residents, it is difficult to even purchase one new dress a year. Sometimes, they wear the clothes thrown out by the rich.

In socialist North Korea, housing was distributed to the residents according to the ration system. The size of the house represented

the influence of the owner within North Korean society. However, since 2000, North Korea's houses began to be seen more as a symbol of wealth than of power or influence. Because it is now money and not a high position within the administrative body or the communist party that gets people a good house, the housing situation has changed. This change can be confirmed by looking at the real estate situation in North Korea, how houses are bought and sold, how they are bought for investment purposes, how they are built by individuals, and how wealthy towns are springing up in different neighborhoods.

The houses North Koreans live in now constitute a valid gauge in determining whether a North Korean is in the upper, middle, or lower class. Wealthier North Koreans live in large, spacious homes, and they buy houses for investment purposes as well. Meanwhile, poorer North Koreans are forced to live in cramped houses with no bathrooms. This severe income gap can be seen in the different homes people live in.

The houses of the wealthy are not just big and spacious. They are well equipped in terms of electricity, heating, and water supply. The rich build new homes or own two or more homes. With more capital available, more and more upper class residents are buying bigger and better homes, and this means that the poor, who cannot afford these homes, are forced into tiny, inferior living quarters. Some families have to live together in a small house without proper heating.

This situation is spreading through the two processes of "sale of homes" and "remodeling of homes" in North Korea. The sale and exchange of homes in North Korea is illegal, yet the practice is widespread. The sale and exchange of homes can only occur when a buyer (demand) agrees to purchase a home put up for sale by the seller (supply). Another method is to have one's own house built. The exchange and new construction of homes can be deemed

legal as such with the regime's tacit approval or support.

With North Korean's wealthy residents building new homes, purchasing homes for investment purposes, and buying and selling houses, a "residential area for the wealthy" gradually, and naturally, came into being. These areas have the tendency to form "near stations, close to markets, and in easily accessible places." In North Korea, shelter is no longer something distributed by the state. Now, homes are something individuals can purchase based on their own financial ability.



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## **III. Everyday Lives of North Koreans**

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Because of the economic crisis and the subsequent organic marketization that followed, the everyday lives of North Korean residents have changed according to their social class and job grouping. Part III examines the survival strategies and the minor details of the lives of North Korean residents, as broken down into the working class, intellectual class, power elite class, emerging commercial merchant class, and women.

### **1. The Everyday Lives of the Working Class: Illegal, Survival, Day Labor Jobs, Brokers**

The major terms that must be learned to fully understand the lifestyle pattern of the North Korean working class since 2000 are “illegal,” “survival,” “day labor jobs,” and “brokers.” In the mid-1990s, when North Koreans were faced with threats to their very survival, factories shut down and the regime ordered the

people to “fend for themselves.” In that context, the working class led lives wherein the legal and illegal co-existed. Because factories were not operating at full capacity because of the lack of electricity and other materials, most laborers had to make do by selling items at the market, working from home, and doing other work for a day’s pay. Their actual, normal jobs had been pushed to the periphery, and they were now working to produce food and secure wages at different departments, industrial establishments, and farms. Under the banners of “self-reliance” and “solving the survival issue,” illegal work, working at individual and family plot farms, legal work, and working at cooperative farms were all taking place simultaneously. Illegal labor became more and more important, as North Koreans needed it to make ends meet. Because of this, North Koreans were investing more time into illegal labor, which blurred the line between punishable illegal labor and non-punishable illegal labor.

The actual, normal jobs of the workers were pushed to the margins due to the North Korean regime’s tacit consent that allowed “the operating of labor organizations to help people make ends meet,” and that gave “more autonomy to lower-ranking bureaucrats.” In the process of this, North Korean laborers and farmers created an unofficial survival system. In 2002, after the July 1<sup>st</sup> Economic Management Measures were announced, the regime’s institutionalized “self-reliance” policy admitted the inability of the state’s economy to provide public assistance or distribution to the people and ordered each enterprise and industrial establishment to come up with their own survival measures. Because of this, North Korea’s workshops and enterprises developed with organizations to help their workers and members meet their everyday needs.

This process also gave relatively more independence to the enterprises and workplaces, while also affording more autonomy to lower-ranking bureaucrats. Furthermore, more laborers were



registering themselves as “August 3<sup>rd</sup> laborers” in their factories or paying cash in return for working at their jobs.<sup>6</sup> They made their money by working from home or at a marketplace, through various personal or illegal activities. They then paid the amount as settled by their workplaces in return for actually doing the time. Of course, this situation varied across regions and units.

Through a bottom-up self-reliance survival structure, North Korean laborers have adjusted somewhat to a life of scarcity, which has been forced on them since the mid-1990s. This change took different forms across different regions. In Pyongyang and Hwanghae Province, where the power-holders of North Korea mostly live, the ration system was still in effect, however unstably. Surveillance and control were still strict in these areas, so reliance on central power was still relatively heavy. On the other hand, border regions like North Hamgyong Province and Shinuiju saw less strict central authority control. In these areas, residents established their own method of independent survival.

Since the mid-1990s, normal labor has not taken place. North Korea’s “workplace labor world” is disintegrating, and new forms of unstable, marginal working, such as day jobs and illegal, tacitly consented labor, have sprung up. Marginal working refers to labor that pays the barest minimum people need to keep up their livelihoods, labor that is not construed as official economic activity and thus does not appear in statistics, and labor that occurs on the periphery, outside social norms. According to the survey conducted as part of this paper’s research, the North Korean interviewees answered that various marginal jobs were created after the economic crisis, such as disciplinary teams, farmers of small plots of land, tenant farmers, housekeepers, painters, mobilization

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<sup>6</sup> August 3<sup>rd</sup> laborers or small business workers existed prior to the 1990s but it was after the mid-to-late 1990s that they established themselves in North Korea as everyday labor forms.

labor proxies, private tutors, hired laborers, foreign currency company employees, August 3<sup>rd</sup> crews, domestic workers, and others.

Deviant work, wherein people use socially, morally, and legally unacceptable means to make a living, is also included in marginal working. Deviant working can be classified into unapproved work or tacitly consented work, according to whether or not it complies with legal, illegal, or social norms. Among them, the one job area that is worth noting, especially with regards to North Korean laborers, is “illegal, socially understood” labor. In the lives of North Korean laborers, breaking the law and breaking social norms do not always mean the same thing. Some of the major, illegal, newly created jobs that have become widespread through tacit social consent are day labor, including various odd jobs that people take on for cash or food, seasonal labor, maid work, wage earning, tenant farming, private tutoring, and mobilization labor proxy work. The marginal work that is illegal and highly deviant includes drug peddling, prostitution, and gambling.

“Brokers,” who are responsible for hiring in this marginal labor structure, have surfaced as major traders in the labor market. Since 2000, with food rations cut off for ordinary laborers and all but cut off for those employed in mining, steelworks, and other major state-owned key industries, a rudimentary labor market began to form, especially with the rise of tenant farmers and commercial contractual laborers. This is when “brokers,” who introduce laborers to their employers, first came onto the scene. With an increase in day labor since 2000, brokers were estimated to be highly active in border areas. Individual brokers, as well as people with many connections like directors at industrial establishments, merchants, and lower-ranking officials of state agencies, worked as part-time brokers. Although they worked in different ways, with the rise of day labor jobs after 2000, these brokers were known to work actively in border regions.

In this way, normal labor was being relocated to the fringes, and various day labor jobs and jobs that value competence became more prevalent. Furthermore, human connections and other “social capital” were rising in importance in North Korean society, which gave way to the rise of differentiation within North Korea’s working class. The level of economic support given by relatives living abroad, the level of economic activity and linkage, the level of closeness to power and authority, and the level of work ability and productivity determined the level of differentiation. The disparity that was apparent in the ordinary lives of North Koreans surfaced as an important trait in the lifestyles of North Korea’s working class.

## **2. The Everyday Lives of the Intellectual Class: Side Jobs, “Goods Collection,” Peddling of Knowledge, Illegal Activities and Bribery, Joint Production, and Labor Tax**

North Korea’s intellectual class is responsible for producing and communicating the necessary technological knowledge needed to maintain the workings of North Korean society and reproduce the people’s ideology. They work in fields that include education, science and technology, culture, and press/publication. Before the economic crisis, the intellectuals enjoyed social respect along with economic stability. The crisis that hit North Korea in the mid-1990s impacted the lives of all North Koreans of every class, but the intellectuals had to endure a particularly severe change to their way of life. They were forced to search for various survival methods to combat the threats to their lifestyle. This new way of life, which was first established during the time of the arduous march, continued on even after 2000. With the expanding market forces, their way of life became even more differentiated. The terms

that serve to express the ordinary lives of the North Korean intellectuals are “side jobs,” “goods collection,” “peddling knowledge,” “illegal activities and bribery,” “collective production,” and “job tax.”

During the economic crisis, factories and industrial establishments could not run their operations. Therefore, most laborers were able to leave their jobs and find other means of making money. However, doctors, teachers, and other intellectuals who worked in the social service sector and provided knowledge and technological information to the masses could not help but remain tied to their jobs. However, after several intellectuals became ill or died trying to stubbornly stay on at their jobs during the time of the arduous march, many intellectuals began to agree that it was no longer acceptable for them to do so. Some intellectuals chose to transfer to another job, to change their occupation altogether, or to engage in commercial activities without being pressured in the workplaces. Most intellectuals used their spare time or took time out from their working hours to engage in economic activities to make more money, rather than leaving their jobs altogether. This means that teachers, doctors, and researchers stayed on at their normal jobs, but they also took on second or even third jobs, which were mostly commercial. Through these side jobs, the intellectuals and their families were able to earn at least as much as the wages or rations they received from their normal jobs. In some cases they earned even more.

In order to engage in these private commercial activities outside the realm of their normal jobs, intellectuals needed to secure as much personal time as they could. They either made personal use of their labor time or struck up “deals” with the director in charge to secure the time they needed to engage in commercial activities. These deals were often agreed upon between individual members and those in charge of their departments and, in return, the

individuals paid the heads a certain percentage of the profit they made in cash. In certain schools and hospitals, the department head turned a blind eye to the individuals who failed to show up for duty in order to make money on the side, or they allowed only a minimum number of workers to stay while letting the rest leave work early. In this way, they shortened the working hours of the workers or were able to give them more free time.

Reporters and other workers who had relatively more freedom with their jobs and were able to move freely found it easier to find side jobs in the market. However, teachers, doctors, and others employed in such professions were tied to their workplaces and had difficulty utilizing personal time. Therefore, it was more difficult for them to actively engage in commercial activities. These professionals found ways to maintain their livelihood by relying on the networks they had established through their occupation. For instance, it became widespread for teachers to rely on their students and their parents to maintain their livelihood. After the economic crisis, the state budget on school education was decreased, which meant that the bulk of the costs arising from public education, including everything from textbooks, uniforms, the school supplies used by students, fuel, desks, the maintenance and upkeep of school facilities and supplies, had become the sole responsibility of parents. The costs of maintaining school facilities as well as the supplies or cash secured through “goods collection” like recycled steel, scrap copper and waste paper were helping teachers to make ends meet. Aside from the school’s official efforts to acquire materials, teachers relied on powerful and financially well off parents to get the items they needed, while also receiving support to make their lives more comfortable.

Doctors and reporters also made full use of their patients or news sources to receive material support. Patients often offered food or meals to the doctors in their region to show their gratitude, and

rich or influential patients sometimes offered money or food to the doctors in return for quality service.

Other than receiving material support by making good use of their personal networks, teachers and doctors sometimes took on side jobs. In this case, they received help from parents and patients to purchase raw materials cheaply or even receive help in securing a sale network. They conducted business in their workplaces as well, e.g. selling education materials or medicine. These teacher-parents (or students) and doctor-patient relationships could only be sustained if the teacher/doctor stayed on at his job. Once the doctor/teacher left his post, the relationships no longer took effect. These personal relationships were powerful motivators that kept intellectuals at their jobs instead of letting them seek elsewhere for new jobs.

One characteristic of the mental labor undertaken by intellectuals is that it allowed them to deal with knowledge and information not readily accessible to physical laborers. In socialist North Korea, the knowledge, information, and technology known only by intellectuals were not sold individually to their clients but were rather provided to the masses at large, through schools, hospitals, laboratories, and other state institutions, in the form of public service. The reward intellectuals got for their mental labor and public service was provided collectively by the regime. However, because food rations and wages were not being properly handed out, intellectuals were finding it difficult to survive on their normal, day-to-day jobs. Therefore, they had to turn to peddling the information, knowledge, and technology they had for private profit. In a word, they became knowledge merchants.

One example of selling knowledge for profit was the private tutoring offered by teachers. The advent of private education in North Korea, which occurred in the mid-to-late 1990s, was a revolutionary change. Private tutoring did exist before the 1990s,

mainly in the arts and sports, but it occurred mostly sporadically. After the arduous march, these sessions became more widespread and, since 2000, have expanded to various different fields and established themselves in a markedly different way than before.

In the case of doctors, medical expertise was offered privately for profit. These private sessions could be like any of the other normal services offered by the hospitals, such as diagnosis, treatment, and childbirth support, but in most cases, they took the form of treatments that were illegal in North Korea, such as birth control and abortions. This is why patients who requested these private sessions tended to prefer professional doctors who were highly qualified.

With the popularization of television and computers, computer education has also become important. Therefore, technicians who specialize in electronics have also become more in demand. Experts in IT engineering, computers, and electronic engineering made money by offering computer lessons, computer repair services, and TV and electronic device repair services. Artistic talent could also be turned into a product for profit. There were instances where instrumental musicians offered private tutoring sessions, and some artists used their talents to create cultural products, which they then sold for personal profit.

Relying on personal networks on the job to get the support they needed, or selling their knowledge and information for private profit, mostly occurred in the blurred line between the legal and illegal. There are many instances where people crossed over to the illegal area. One example was the situation where doctors would steal the medicine the state provided to hospitals and they would sell it at the market. However, while there were cases where individual doctors who stole drugs were punished, criticized, or stripped of their title as physician, there were cases where the theft was done collectively by several people and it was tolerated. These

activities, while illegal in the strictest sense, were perceived as customarily legitimate.

Aside from intellectuals separately trying to find ways to make money, schools, hospitals, and other institutions also came up with methods for supplementing the income of their members. One example was how the agricultural crops produced jointly in cooperative farms were given to the members to use as food or sent to the institutions to help with their management. In schools and other institutions, small plots of land nearby were tilled to grow maize, beans, potatoes, other cereal grains, and vegetables. The produce was then supplied to the members of the institution, so that they could use it for food. The workers of such administrative institutions were mobilized to till the soil, and sometimes, in the case of schools, students were brought in to help out.

After the economic crisis, the economic position of the intellectual class declined overall, and more and more intellectuals turned to their personal relationships. This resulted in a drop in their social standing and level of respect. The drop in social standing, not just the drop in their economic standing, was related to the fact that their job was to produce the ideologies and spiritual values of society and that their role was to educate the masses on these values and pass them on to future generations. While more people were critical of the role of North Korean intellectuals as mere functional intellectuals, the intellectuals themselves were gradually becoming aware of the changes in society and becoming critical of the problems within North Korean society.

### **3. The Everyday Lives of the Power Elites: Parasites of the System**

In North Korea, the term “power elites” refers to those above a certain rank, such as above the position of manager in the Central



Party and above the position of secretary in the Local Party. Among power elites, 680+ core elites are located in the Organization and Guidance Department, Propaganda and Agitation Department, South Korean Affairs Department, Foreign Relations Commission, People's Armed Forces Department Political Bureau, and the General Staff Department.

In North Korea, the officials live strictly controlled lives. Because the supply system regulated by the state collapsed after the economic crisis, the living standards of the officials also dropped. In particular, lower-class officials, ranked below middle-ranking officials, have had to endure difficult lives. It is commonly said that the class of middle-ranking officials has collapsed as well. The power elites in North Korea have become severely bipolarized into either high class or low class.

There are also differences in lifestyle according to the ranks of the elites. Lower-ranking officials focus on procuring the necessary means of survival, while high-ranking officials, who are ranked as department head or higher, are busier finding ways to protect themselves and keep from losing their current positions. Among power elites, those ranked below the position of bureau head are chiefly concerned with getting the money they need to survive. They often engage in deviant activities that can be considered corrupt.

Power elites do receive food rations, but unless they are high-ranking officials, their food rations are insufficient, meaning they must also engage in other methods of making money, just like the members of other classes. Because their departments, enterprises, and units must depend on self-reliance so, too, do the living standards of the officials, according to the capabilities of their units. With budget allocations to each department not being carried out well in North Korea, the various departments and commissions typically have their own company that earns foreign

currencies. Power elites also dabble in corrupt deviant behavior in order to maintain their livelihood. Typically, these behaviors take the form of misappropriating the properties owned by state institutions, misappropriating the profits made through foreign currency earnings, and the acceptance of bribes. In the context of the market slowly replacing the official food ration system in North Korea, more and more powerful officials are colluding with the market to make a profit. They leverage their power to embezzle state supplies. North Korea also runs operations for foreign currency earnings in their army, state institutions, enterprises, and schools, and the officials engaged in these dealings oftentimes fabricate the amount earned to embezzle the rest for personal gain. The most frequently occurring and the most organized method of procuring living costs is through the misappropriation of state-owned materials. Officials steal raw materials during the management process, and the profits are then officially distributed to the members of that institution.

After the economic crisis of the 1990s, the burden was upon the departments, enterprises, and units to become self-reliant in the procurement of what they needed. Therefore, the living standards of officials also became dependent on the capabilities of their units. For example, officials at the Ministry of Marine Transport, who find it easier to use their ships and ports to bring in foreign currencies, live relatively affluent lives, while the officials at the Ministry of Construction and Building Industries and the Ministry of Land Administration have lower living standards because the economic downturn has dampened the construction sector. The authority warranted by social rank and position in North Korea has been rendered meaningless, and living standards are made or broken depending on the different duties of the officials. Those departments that do well with foreign currency earnings are well off, while those that do not are not.

The economic crisis has resulted in the loss of authority of the power elites. With the socialist planned economy paralyzed, the administrative organization within North Korea's Cabinet lost its place and the social standing and authority of the power elites declined.

Internally, power elites are divided into second generation and third generation elites. They come from different historical experiences, so they have different values. The third generation elites are firmly determined to carry out economic reform and to revive the economy.

North Koreans exploited under the rule of officials hold strong grudges against the elites. North Korea's power elites fully realize this grudge and the potential for revolt in the masses. Therefore, they are constantly on the alert for the people's backlash.

The consciousness and behavior displayed by North Korea's elites in their ordinary lives can be explained by the concept of "institutional parasitism." X. L. Ding remarked that the resistance movement that occurred in China during the Deng Xiaoping days all took place within the organizations of the system. The intellectuals and experts within the system used the personal connections, resources, and organizations they had to lead China's resistance movement.<sup>7</sup> The concept of "institutional parasitism" allows us to look beyond the bisected formula of state versus civil society to look at the mutual infiltration of the state and society into each other, the mutual infiltration of official, quasi-official, and unofficial organizations into each other, and the complicated interactions between society and politics. North Korea's power elites are participating in illegal moneymaking activities while, at the same time, realizing the ironies within their political system and pursuing

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<sup>7</sup> X. L. Ding, *The Decline of Communism in China: Legitimacy Crisis, 1977-1989* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 35.

change. This can also be explained by that concept. It is difficult to say that North Korea's new third generation elites are merely viewing the state institutions as a means for them to participate in deviant behavior. Once North Korea's third generation elites can be free to make autonomous policy decisions, North Korea's policy direction could quite possibly lean more towards reform and openness.

#### **4. The Everyday Lives of the Emerging Merchant Class: Competition, Crime, Bribery, and Change in Rules**

North Korea's emerging merchants refer to a newly risen class in North Korean society, as their name suggests. Their introduction is closely connected to how the market was created, allowed, and expanded in North Korean society. These merchants first emerged in the early days of the "arduous march," when people were struggling with poverty and looking for ways to survive. When the July 1<sup>st</sup> Economic Management Measures and other policies gave permission for the creation of a market, these merchants earned their "economic citizenship." After the market became more activated, some merchants were able to move up the ladder to the upper class of society, and this led to a differentiation within the circle of merchants. Those merchants who work in companies that deal in foreign currency earnings, or those who have sale stands set up in the collective markets, are able to enjoy a life of plenty while accumulating riches. Those merchants who were latecomers without much capital must hop from place to place outside the market like "grasshoppers" and worry about their next meal. One of the changes worth nothing in the differentiation that occurred in the merchant class is the rise of "merchant magnates" who can determine the price of rice in North Korea.

The key terms used to describe the everyday lives of the emerging

merchant class are competition, crime, bribery, and change in rules. Whether or not the merchants make lots of money or not so much, currently, their lives are “unstable” at best. When we look into the lives of these merchants, we see that they work every single day, their days ending only after dark, and they must constantly compete with other merchants. It is difficult for them to get any rest. These merchants were the first group of people to experience “fierce competition,” which had heretofore been non-existent in socialist North Korea. Everyday, their numbers grow, so they must work without rest to sell a little more than the merchant next to them.

The irregularity of their lives and the various crimes that threaten female merchants are some of the obstacles that stand in their way. The irregularity mainly occurs with merchants who do “reselling,” or profit from the price differences between regions. They must travel to faraway locations, which isn’t easy given the poor state of North Korea’s transportation system. Female merchants, who often have to travel with heavy bundles of items, are sometimes sexually harassed or attacked on the road. These are some of the hurdles that stand in their way.

The lives of North Korea’s merchant class are unpredictable, and they sometimes cross the boundary of what is considered legal. This happens because illegal activities banned by the regime are likely to bring them more profit and, because of the growing number of market participants, competition has intensified. North Korea’s foreign currency company employees say that it is impossible to break even by exporting North Korea’s agricultural crops. Therefore, they are forced to adopt illegal activities. Some of the most profitable illegal activities are selling antiques, “reselling” automobiles, and selling illegal drugs. Some merchants run restaurants while also running a brothel on the side to raise more money. When such illegal behavior becomes a part of their

daily lives, bribery manifests itself. The July 1<sup>st</sup> Measures did give the merchant class an “economic citizenship,” but because the market is still officially within the framework of the planned economy, the merchants’ business often clashes with the rules set by the North Korean regime. The merchants typically try to solve these situations with “bribes,” and this is why bribes play an important part in the lives of the merchant class. Aside from illegal activities, such as smuggling or river-crossing, merchants also have to offer up bribes for other endeavors, such as acquiring official papers or a business permit to allow them to cross regions.

North Korea’s merchant class leads insecure lives, and they must suffer huge losses because of the frequent changes made to North Korean policies. After announcing the July 1<sup>st</sup> Economic Management Measures in 2000, the regime relaxed some of their market regulations over the next few years. However, after 2005 and 2006, North Korea once again strengthened its regulatory hold on the market. Some merchants, who had invested in new businesses, suffered huge losses because their activities became impermissible under the new policies.

North Korea banned single women under the age of 40 from doing business in the combined market starting from the second half of 2007. This subsequently lowered the prices of sale stands in the market, which dealt a huge blow to the merchants. The frequent changes to what merchants were allowed to sell at the market also added to the difficulties. For example, industrial goods were allowed for sale when the combined market first opened in 2003, but regulations were strengthened recently. Many merchants who had invested in those items suffered huge losses.

Because of such frequent policy changes, the merchants came up with their own ways to guarantee their livelihood. For example, at Sunam Market in Chongjin, merchants collectively gathered to stage a demonstration in early 2008 to protest the heavy market

regulations. Merchants also found ways of dealing with these regulations on an individual basis. For example, young female merchants forged marriage certificates in order to be able to do business at the markets. After the regime banned single women from engaging in commercial activities, some female merchants faked wedding pictures of themselves to quit their jobs and work in the markets. This is because married women under the age of 40 who are caught doing business are punished with fines or having their goods taken from them, while single women caught doing business are punished more severely by being thrown into labor training camps.

## **5. The Everyday Lives of Women: Support, Harsh Labor, Women's Rights, Independence, Discrimination, Standing Alone**

Before the economic crisis, North Korean women did housework, raised the children, and participated actively in socialist construction movements. They attempted to stay faithful to the roles given to them. They kept up a life of being a revolutionary and a good housewife with traditional values, as the regime requested. However, after the 1990s, when the food ration system began to break down, families were forced to survive on their own. Women's lives changed completely. The key terms used to describe the current everyday lives of North Korean women are support, harsh labor, women's rights, independence, discrimination, and standing alone.

The food and economic crises that began in the 1990s forced North Korean women to take the lead in providing for their families in place of their husbands. The fact that women had to take on these roles is largely dependent on the idea of division of labor according to traditional gender roles, which state that women must

obey their husbands, look after their young, and do the housework. Furthermore, the social notion that it is embarrassing for men to pursue commercial activities also brought about the change in women's lives.

Women support their families by taking on duties such as working in commerce, cultivating small fields and gardens, raising cattle, working domestically, or running small businesses. The most widespread form of activity is working in commerce. Through trading and selling goods, women can maintain the livelihood of their families and save up money. This is why, unlike before, more and more women are participating in this activity without worrying about how society might view them. North Korean women do commerce in various ways. Some go to the markets everyday to sell small amounts of food, clothing, and other necessities, while some work as "itinerant peddlers," by selling industrial or indigenous goods in different regions. Many women buy items for cheap and then "resell" them at higher prices. Some work for foreign currency company employees to sell legal items like shiitake mushrooms, matsutake mushrooms, or bracken, but some make bigger profits by smuggling illegal items like drugs, antiques, and automobiles.

With the economic crisis continuing, North Korean women are carrying a bigger burden of being forced to look after the home while also bringing home the bacon. With the worsening economic crisis, socialization measures to support women's housework and the raising of children are not being properly carried out. Therefore, North Korean women are saddled with an ever-growing pressure to work. In particular, women's housework burden has grown tremendously as more women are trying to grapple with the food shortage. These women, who are burdened with household chores and other work, desperately need rest, but what little spare time they have is taken up by daily self-criticism sessions, indoctrination



sessions, and labor mobilization.

North Korean women, who are forced to labor to provide for their families, often suffer from poor health because of their physically demanding workload. The food crisis which began in the 1990s, and worsened since then, drove many North Korean women to malnutrition and anemia.<sup>8</sup> However, even in their horrible states of health, women had to work many hours to provide for their families. This made their health worse. The psychological stress that came with having to support their families also added to their physical and mental pain. Because of poor nutrition, North Korean women's reproductive health deteriorated sharply. Their childbearing abilities declined due to lack of nutrition, and there have been many instances of miscarriages and stillborn babies. According to the "State of the World Population 2007," North Korea's proportion of maternity deaths (the number of women who die out of 100,000 from pregnancy, childbirth, and reproductive complications) was 67, which places North Korea 60<sup>th</sup> in the world. Its newborn mortality rate (the number of babies under one year old who die out of 1,000) was 42, and its total birthrate (the total number of children a woman has during her lifetime if she gives birth at the same rate as women in other age groups) was 1.94. This is lower than the world average which is 2.56.<sup>9</sup> Because the economic crisis led to a collapse of the healthcare system, women have turned to illegal birth control methods and abortions, which can severely damage their health.

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<sup>8</sup> According to the nationwide survey conducted in 2002 by UNICEF and WFP together with the North Korean regime on the nutritional health of children and mothers, 1/3 of mothers were found to suffer malnutrition and anemia. In the same research done in 2004, 1/3 of mothers were again found to suffer malnutrition and anemia. Lee Geum-soon, et al., *2008 North Korean Human Rights Issue* (Seoul: KINU, 2008), p. 244.

<sup>9</sup> UNFPA, "State of World Population 2007," p. 87, [http://www.unfpa.org/swp/2007/english/notes/indecators/e\\_indicator1.pdf](http://www.unfpa.org/swp/2007/english/notes/indecators/e_indicator1.pdf).

Because the food crisis made it necessary for families to provide for themselves on their own, the traditional home life that centered on the male head of the household underwent visible changes. With the food crisis worsening, husbands turned to commercial activities or even housework to help their wives. Women had more of an influence in the home because they also helped support the family. These cases hint at a weakening of traditional patriarchal power. There are numerous opinions regarding this dissolving of patriarchal power, which began with the economic and food crises. In broad terms, the opinions divide into two camps: one side argues that patriarchal power has weakened, while the other side argues that it is still going strong and, if anything, has gotten even stronger. There are divergent opinions on this issue because the case-by-case situations differ from home to home. Both opinions have some truth to them. However, what is clear is that with more women working to support the family in the midst of the food crisis, their voices have gotten stronger. Another clear fact is that the way society views women in North Korea is slowly changing. This change in perspective stems from feelings of gratitude and pity for the women who work tirelessly and sacrifice themselves to support their families. Furthermore, the South Korean soap operas that North Koreans watch, as well as the stories they hear from China about the changing status and role of women, have helped to bring about a change in the way they view their women.

However, the idea that women are inferior to men is still prevalent in this society and, therefore, it is difficult to say that the traditional male-oriented lifestyle and the division of labor according to gender roles have lost their place in North Korea. While it is true that the influence of North Korean women has risen since the food crisis and that society is beginning to view its women in a different light, most North Korean women continue to obey and follow their husbands as the “head of the household”

to “maintain peace at home.”

The responsibility of supporting their families fell on North Korea’s women after the food crisis, and this led to a subsequent decline in their health because of their intense physical labor. On the other hand, it also served as an opportunity for them to gain economic independence. By engaging in various economic activities, including doing commerce work, women were able to support their families and save money. Their economic independence gradually grew. This was strengthened as more women turned to commerce. In the process of maintaining their livelihood through commerce, women acquired know-how and various business strategies, including utilizing their social public/personal networks, procuring capital, doubling their profit, and choosing goods that would most likely help them make a profit. They traveled to various regions, including border areas, to trade with different merchants, including Chinese merchants. Together with men, these women also were brave enough to try their hand at smuggling illegal goods under the guise of earning foreign currencies. Through commerce, women were able to bring home money and save up money. With this, they gained the confidence that “women can do it too,” and they began to see themselves in a new light.

Despite their enhanced social status and economic independence, North Korean women still suffer sexual discrimination when it comes to job-seeking and getting new positions. This is apparent in the inequality and the wage gap among different jobs. Women typically work in fields like welfare, commerce, childcare, education, communication, and culture, which offer lower wages. These fields have a higher percentage of female workers than male workers.

For North Korean women, the early 20s, considered the appropriate marriageable age in North Korea, hold major significance. Staying single or getting a divorce has long been viewed as an abnormal

thing to do. However, with the onslaught of the economic crisis, it is now common to find North Korean single women in their 30s, and more and more women are looking favorably upon the single life. Divorces sought by women against their husbands are also on the rise. Women are seeking to stay single because of the harsh economic difficulties. It is already difficult for them to support themselves; they do not want the responsibility of getting married and starting to provide for their families as well. With the worsening food and economic crises in North Korea, the divorce rate is climbing. There are more women who file for divorce against their husbands now. Because many women travel to distant regions for work, this leads to a breakdown in home life. Sometimes, women engage in affairs. Other reasons for divorce include domestic violence and the husband's failure to provide for the family.

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## **IV. The Changes in North Korean Society as examined through the Everyday Lives of its People**

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Part IV examines four elements of change: in North Korea's social classes, in its social networks, in control and resistance, and in the people's consciousness, as they relate to the changes in North Korea's macro-social structure in the context of the changes in the everyday lives of its people.

### **1. Changes in Class Structure**

Before the economic crisis, North Korea's class structure was determined by a political standard, rather than the economic standards of wage and fortune. After the crisis, a huge income gap formed, and this situation resulted in economic standards replacing political ones in determining the class structure of its people. When we look into the changes in the lives of North Koreans, it is clear that the household income gap arose from such factors as market participation, level of accessibility to goods in the market, useable social networks, and early capital. This in turn

is becoming the standard for the reshuffling of the class structure in North Korea. According to the testimony given by North Korean defectors, the income gap between classes became marked after 2000 and the end of the arduous march. In 2004 and 2005, there was a “sharp division” between economic classes. Since it is impossible to obtain the numerical statistics of North Koreans’ actual wages and consumption levels, it is difficult to divide the classes using corroborative data. However, it is possible to figure out, albeit generally, the major standards in class division and class distribution using the testimony of the interviewees.

According to the testimonies of the North Korean defectors, since 2000, North Korea’s economic classes can be divided into upper, middle, and lower class. When necessary, the upper class can be further subdivided into upper and upper highest class, and the lower class into lower and lowest bottom class. Class distribution has slight differences in region and time, but since 2005, the situation can be largely broken up into: 5-15% upper class, 30-40% middle class, 50-60% lower class in the big cities, and a small minority upper class, 20-30% middle class, 70-80% lower class in the rural areas.

The basic standard used to divide the different classes is consumption level, in particular in the food they eat and the spare food they have. The upper class consists of people who “have their rice with pork,” the middle class of those who “do not go hungry and can have rice or at least rice mixed with maize,” and the lower class of those who “find it hard to make ends meet,” “have rice on some days and porridge on others,” and “live on grass porridge.” In terms of the spare food they have, the lower class consists of people who have almost no spare food, the middle class are people who have the money to purchase food at the market or at least have enough spare food to last them a few days, and the upper

class are people who have no problems getting food on their own.<sup>10</sup> There are apparent differences in what they consume and the amount they consume. More North Koreans are defining their identities through consumption and this class distribution pattern, and some are ostentatiously showing off what they have.

What of the changes occurring within the class structure? There are three characteristics that can be seen in the changes taking place in North Korea's class structure, as determined by the changes in people's everyday lives. Firstly, the average consumption level has gone up, due to the rise in income that households acquired by taking on other jobs. However, the absolute gap in living standards between the classes has widened. This could be a factor that can worsen the relative poverty of the lower class and add to the social frustration they feel despite the relative rise in consumption.

Secondly, class mobility has become more striking. Some power elites and party officials are shifting their focus from political power to economic power by making use of the black market and their ties to public power. Among urban laborers, some have risen up in their class to be included in the middle class after displaying their talents at commerce.

Thirdly, factors like the ability to acquire early capital with the help of relatives living abroad, the timing of market entry, personal competence and the ability to adapt to the market order, the ability to obtain information, the ability to secure the needed goods and the advantage of gaining entry in the market, and political networks to obtain exemptions from punishment for engaging in illegal activities are determinants on whether or not a person can ascend the social ladder.

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<sup>10</sup> Choi Bong-dae, "Marketization of Personal Sectors in North Korean Cities and the Economic Class Differentiation of Urban Households After End-1990s," *Modern North Korean Studies*, Book 11 Issue 2, p. 11.

## 2. Changes in Social Relationships

The economic crisis and a bigger market brought changes to the social networks of North Koreans. North Korea maintained food and housing rations to tie the residents to their public networks, such as their workplaces and communities.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, North Korea established neighborhood units, workers' unions, women's union, and youth leagues as well as other organizations along with party organizations and powerful bureaucratic networks to control the people's lives. The collapse of the ration system freed the people from the shackles of these public networks. When the physical foundation for control - the ration system - failed, the existing public networks all weakened and personal and unofficial networks took their place. The existing psychological, moral, and social ties were dismantled, and market commerce established itself as the new major survival method to replace the ration system. A new network was formed around this market commerce. Human networks that connect people who produce various handmade and industrial goods in their homes, people who supply the raw materials to these producers, people who sell the finished products at the markets, people who bring in goods from China and other

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<sup>11</sup> Jang Se-hoon classifies North Korea's social networks into collective networks, personal networks, and public networks. Collective networks have been formed before the differentiation of individuals, state, and society, and they refer to the emotional ties people have with each other that are based on the collective interests of the small groups. Personal networks refer to the social relationships people have with each other that formed after civil societies were established. In personal networks, relationships are calculating and non-emotional. Public networks refer to the social networks formed when the bureaucratic organizational system formed within the state society moves over to the civil society. These networks are managed from the top down. Jang Se-hoon, "Changes in Social Networks among Urban Locals in North Korea," *Korean Sociology Book* 39 Issue 2 (2005), pp. 106-107.



regions, wholesalers, and retailers have surfaced as the pillars of the newly formed networks in North Korean society.

With the influence of personal networks growing, public networks and collective networks are either deteriorating or becoming subsumed by these networks.<sup>12</sup> In industrial establishments, the head worker or experienced worker forms teams to hire workers privately much like how foremen hire construction workers in capitalist societies. This is one major example where public networks become a part of personal networks so people can make more profit. Teachers who take on side jobs and purchase raw materials or sell their goods to parents, or doctors who misappropriate the medicine in their hospitals to sell to patients are other examples.

Personal networks are forming on top of collective networks based on their families, because people are less likely to fail in the market economy if they strike up personal networks with people they can trust, especially since there are no institutional safety nets in place for engaging in economic activities. These social relationships are based on tradition, but they have the dual nature of also being modern relationships that are formed for economic profit.<sup>13</sup>

Social networks are important routes in distributing social capital, and the fact that there is active movement among the classes in North Korea means that the significance of social networks is growing. Stable social networks can become a production element because they can contribute to producing and circulating productive information and, furthermore, they inspire trust between people.<sup>14</sup> Social capital refers to the social relationships one can develop

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 126.

<sup>13</sup> Lee Woo-young, "The Possibility of Personal Discourse Forming Within the North Korean System," *Research on Personal Realms of North Korean Urban Locals* (Hanwul Academy, 2008), p. 168.

<sup>14</sup> Yong-hak, *Social Structure and Action* (Nanam Publishing, 2003), p. 356.

through intra-class exchange, and it can offer the opportunity for people to quickly expand their relationships. More specifically, family ties, friends, alumni, hometown friends, neighbors, certain smaller groups, and party constituents all come under this definition. For a social class to acquire social resources means that the class will obtain social reputation and establish a close, exclusionary social network. Social capital can be social networks, and they can also refer to the resources and the abilities an individual can obtain through the social network he is a member of.<sup>15</sup>

Since 2000, market-oriented economic activities have been activated, and social networks have become a kind of social capital in North Korean society. This has had great influence on the living standards of North Koreans, as well as class mobility. Other than the networks formed for commercial purposes, relationships with relatives or relationships with bureaucrats established personally or through bribes are also important networks. With family relationships, North Koreans can receive support from relatives living in China, Japan, or elsewhere overseas to help them gain entry into the market order.

Another network that is significant in the lives of North Koreans is the relationship people have with bureaucrats, who wield daily and direct influence on the people. North Korean defectors pointed out that networks of foreign currency company employees, or other merchants form alliances with bureaucrats in the State Security Agency or Ministry of Public Security. These agencies are the departments responsible for censorship and control, and are useful in gaining an advantage in generating profit. The bigger the profit is, the higher the rank of the official. Within the power structure, the party and prosecutor officials become negotiation targets. These

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<sup>15</sup> Kim, p. 46.

networks come under the scope of “blats,” which are unofficial networks that form in socialist societies. However, because the participants engage in bribery and other monetary compensation in return for exemption from punishment for deviant behavior, information, and other advantages, these channels have turned into personal networks based on material gain.

### **3. Control and Small-Scale Resistance**

North Korean society, in terms of everyday life, is not a society where political power dominates over everything. Rather, people engage in deviant behavior or other resistant behavior in order to escape the norms enforced by the regime and the grip of dominance. In the everyday lives of North Koreans, the residents respond to the regime’s control in various ways, including cooperation, participation, sympathy, acceptance, compromise, reserved acceptance,<sup>16</sup> toleration, apathy, ignorance, detachment, rejection, and resistance. As is evident, the behaviors span all sides of the spectrum, from active cooperation to active resistance. Before the economic crisis, when labor and resting hours were more or less guaranteed to the people, North Koreans typically either cooperated or sympathized with the regime’s methods of social control. However, because the state can no longer guarantee the safety of its people in this extreme situation, North Koreans are moving more towards escaping to private domains, deviating, or resisting in their everyday lives.

Deviating from or resisting against social control occur in the form of compromising or negotiating to make ends meet, engaging

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<sup>16</sup> “Reserved acceptance” is a term used by Alf Lüdtke after he analyzed the daily lives of laborers under Nazi oppression. The laborers kept a distance between themselves and politics and attempted to establish their own private domain to pursue their private interests and satisfy their desires.

in illegal activities, dealing in extremely illegal activities including smuggling or drug trafficking, privately enjoying a capitalist culture, and not complying or unfaithfully complying to daily self-criticism sessions, political education, or other forms of ideological control. Since the economic crisis, the control and surveillance of political power in the everyday lives of North Koreans have become more fragmented. The motivation behind constantly breaking and fragmenting this political power lies with the issue of satisfying the basic requirements of living.<sup>17</sup> Because it is no longer possible to maintain their livelihoods by diligently going to work, North Koreans have taken to various deviant behaviors to make ends meet. For instance, they cultivate illegal lands, give cash to their workshops to be exempt from work so they can sell goods at the markets, engage in personal labor, or steal raw materials, goods, or products from their enterprises. In some instances, when enterprises are unable to supply food to their workers, the inspectors are lax when people steal raw materials. In a sense, they are turning a blind eye to thefts by workers, because the workers' actions can be justified since they need the goods to maintain their livelihoods. During the arduous march, when the state could not guarantee the survival of its people, North Koreans turned to commerce and other illegal activities to guarantee their own survival. That was their passive way of coping with the situation at hand. The deviant behaviors that have been occurring since 2000, however, are actively justified. This is a clear example of how North Koreans have altered and re-appropriated national discourse.

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<sup>17</sup> Kim Jong-wook, "North Korean Studies and the Relationship between the Oppressor and the Masses," The 1<sup>st</sup> North Korea Daily Life Research Discussion Collections, *Searching for a Paradigm in Researching the Ordinary Lives of North Koreans* (Dongguk University North Korea Daily Life Research Center, 2008), pp. 49-50.

The deviant behavior people engage in to make money often has to do with commerce. Some people avoid surveillance or attempt to secure sale stands at the markets. On a larger scale, some people acquire permits to conduct international trade or give and take bribes to engage in the smuggling of illegal goods. This has become commonplace. The North Korean regime, to respond to this situation, enforces controls on commercial activities, especially controls activities going on at the markets. Controls on the markets include limiting the hours markets can stay open, limiting the items that can be bought and sold, and enforcing an age limit on people who can do business. The age limit is increased when the food situation gets dire, and it is decreased when the food situation improves or if the market becomes too active.

A second form of deviance and resistance is to deal in illegal activities, like theft, smuggling, gambling, and drug use, which are strictly banned by the state. After the economic crisis, theft and misappropriation of public goods rose in number, and the legal controls over these deviant behaviors were alternately weakened or strengthened depending on the social mood. From the late 1990s to early 2000s, the punishment for deviant behavior was expressed clearly, and the residents who were punished for these crimes were accepted back into society through tolerance policies. Since 2004, with the influx of foreign trends that came into North Korea, the regime began enforcing strict surveillance and censorship measures, particularly in the border areas, to prevent deviant behavior. The party organization, the national security department, and the security department organized the Investigation Patrol to conduct surveillance on illegal activities. Surveillance on homes has also become stronger.

Recently, punishment has been strengthened against people who engaged in non-socialist illegal activities, but even when caught, most criminals can get their punishments lifted or decreased if they offer bribes or use their personal connections. However, crimes like

drug trafficking or smuggling antiques are regarded as heavy crimes, in which case the punishments are more severe. Therefore, these merchants must have guaranteed connections with persons of authority or have the financial ability to pay huge bribes. They must have “the means to do the job.” Even when charged with crimes of this magnitude, “some people are caught and some aren’t.” As a result, in the minds of North Koreans, there is a very thin line between legal and illegal behavior.

A third form of resistance in the everyday lives of North Koreans is the decrease in participation rate in political education and other organizational activities used to create political consent. North Korea issues controls through its schools, workers’ alliances, women’s alliances, and other social organizations to get the necessary consent of the people to keep the system in place. This control method is more developed in North Korea than in any other society in the world. Despite this, however, during the time of the arduous march in the mid-to-late 1990s, the party, work, and organizational activities, including political education classes, became completely lax. Attendance at general life meetings and political education classes dropped sharply, and the meetings and classes were more of a formality than anything else. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the situation became even weaker, but since then the political education system has been revamped, and control was strengthened. Recently, North Korea has been stressing the bolstering of socialist conscience to prevent collapse of the system in the face of ongoing marketization and the influx of capitalist ideologies. However, organization activities and political education classes have not recovered to the level before the economic crisis. Even before the crisis, North Koreans did not just comply with the regime’s attempts at over-politicization, but rather, they wasted their time at political study sessions or did not attend the daily self-criticism sessions diligently. They frittered away the time given

to them by their leaders to spend on learning rules. In this way, they placed a distance between themselves and the regime's domination. This detachment has taken on an even more extreme form in their fight for survival in the face of the economic crisis.

A fourth form of resistance has become more widespread recently and, of all the non-socialist activities, the regime is placing even tighter controls on this one. It is the private enjoyment of banned capitalist culture, which has been dubbed "yellow wind." Chinese merchants have brought in many VCRs to North Korea, and they have become more commonplace. Along the border areas and in the big cities, more and more residents are watching South Korean movies and soap operas. This is having a decisive impact on the weakening of socialist conscience among residents. It is a popular pastime among locals in big cities like Hamhung, Chongjin, as well as border areas, to watch South Korean soap operas and movies, which are called "tapes from below." Illegal videos are typically circulated in schools, apartment complexes, and in the workshops, or other easily accessible areas for North Korean residents. There are many instances where junior high school students or college students swap CDs, and this has become a social issue in North Korea.

Despite the strong controls enforced by the regime, North Koreans continue to enjoy videos and other forms of capitalist culture in their spare time, and this is another way of coping with the politicization of their daily lives. This is a personal and non-political method of resistance compared to outright political resistance. However, because North Korean society receives little to no information about the outside capitalist world, this method of resistance can have political implications because, as the regime correctly fears, South Korean movies and soap operas can bring about changes in the consciousness of North Korean residents. Through this personal pastime of watching soap operas and movies,

North Koreans experience “a secret moment of awakening.” These activities are not just times when individuals focus only on themselves, but also social implications.<sup>18</sup>

#### **4. Mistrust of the State and Deepening Materialism**

The fact that the ordinary lives of North Koreans have gone from state-dependent to market-dependent has drastically influenced the consciousness and values of the people. These changes to their consciousness, that took place after the economic crisis, have resulted in mistrust of the state and materialism.

North Koreans were forced out of the state’s safety net and made to endure extremely difficult situations. This was the psychological reason behind their detachment from the state and the party. This division has become marked with the rapid advent of marketization. For the 50 years since liberalization, North Koreans relied on the ration system and the social security system to meet their food, clothing, and shelter needs. In the mid-1990s, after the state went bankrupt and was no longer able to guarantee the basic needs of the people, the people had to leave the safety net and find ways to fend for themselves. The people who stayed on at their workplaces as the regime implored through political education classes and official discourse ended up starving to death or living a life of poverty. On the other hand, those North Koreans who were early starters in the commercial business were able to create wealth, lead sufficient lives, and use this as a means to gain a higher political and social foothold. This change fostered mistrust for the state. North Koreans now say that the firmest belief they got out of the 2000s and the arduous march days was that “if you

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<sup>18</sup> Detlev Peukert, *Inside Nazi Germany: Conformity, Opposition, and Racism in Everyday Life*, trans. Kim Hak-i (Gemagowon, 2003), p. 377.



believe in the state, you lose your life.”

Since 2000, after the economic situation improved somewhat, some regions and several laborers in the defense industry continued to receive rations, but state rations have now come to mean “something you go to for two meals or five meals when they can afford it, but not something you absolutely depend on.” Some foreign currency company employees supply meals, holiday rations, and results-based incentives in place of the state, as these were all things the regime used to supply in the past. Because of this situation, in the minds of North Koreans, the enterprises they work for or their family members work for have to come to replace the role of the state. They “do not think of depending on the state for survival.” Rather, they “pull themselves up by their bootstraps” and think of themselves as being “responsible for their lives, their families, their children, and their parents.”

The psychological distance people feel between themselves and the state is manifested in mistrust and grudges against the party and their leaders in a way that was unimaginable before. The people’s criticism against political power usually takes the form of grumblings or complaints, rather than direct verbal attacks against their leaders or the system. These grumblings and complaints are seen more as an expression of their discontent regarding their economic difficulties rather than as a denial of the socialist system. However, some North Koreans are more keenly aware of the social changes. They feel the effects of the market order dominating their daily lives along with the deterioration of people’s dependence on the state, and this awareness results in a confusion of the state’s identity in their minds. The defectors said that North Koreans call the time when they used to receive rations “the past,” “back when socialism was still intact,” and “the old days.” Through this, it can be estimated that in the minds of North Koreans, there is a distinct line drawn between the days when

socialism was in full force and when the market order took deep root in their lives.

For the ten or so years following the arduous march, North Koreans have experienced organic marketization and exchanges with Chinese nationals. They have come to see that reform and openness are the only options that North Korea has for its future. Some residents argue that North Korea must reform and open its doors along with China to usher in economic development. Some say that openness will be possible once anew party leadership is put in place. Of course, these opinions differ across regions. In border regions and other areas where outsiders have easy access and information flows freely, there are many discontented people. They express their discontent to their families or close relatives. However, in the rural and mountainous areas that are relatively isolated from the outside world, the situation is different. Furthermore, despite these changes in their consciousness, the people know that openly voicing criticism against the system or state leaders is a serious political crime. Because that can endanger their own lives as well as the lives of their family members, they have yet to voice outright criticism against their leaders or organize resistance movements.

The changes in their everyday lives brought with them changes in the consciousness of the people, and another example is the widespread idea of materialism. Feelings of materialism are closely related in a way to loyalty to the state and the idea of state identity. North Korea, a socialist state, has traditionally viewed commercial activities in a negative light. However, with commercial trade and the market flourishing, the way people view money and commerce has changed completely. Commercial activities are no longer something to avoid; they have become a thing of envy. Through their experiences with business dealings, North Koreans have come to understand the importance of money and the way it works. In

the past, people were rated on which positions they held in the party, military, or political circles, but now, they are rated on how much wealth they have. Materialism has changed the way people view patriotism, and this was agreed upon by all the interviewees.



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## V. Conclusion

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This paper examined how North Koreans came up with various new ways to fend for themselves and guarantee their survival in the face of such challenges as the collapse of their day-to-day lives and the threats to their survival, which were brought about by the economic crisis that began in the mid-1990s. North Koreans found ways to cope, including staying loyal to their jobs while shirking normal work hours to engage in private commercial activities, utilizing personal networks and bribery to make money through illegal activities, getting together with friends to discuss their political complaints, and enjoying banned South Korean popular culture in secret. These actions do not constitute outright resistance against the state's dominance, but they also do not mean full compliance. The North Koreans engage in "micro-subversive guerilla warfare, in which they alternate between twisting and crossing."<sup>19</sup> In the realms of production and reproduction, and in

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<sup>19</sup> Jang Se-ryong, *Michel de Certeau's Everyday Life and the Culture of the General Public* (Seoyangsaron, 2004), p. 236.

terms of action, social relationships, and consciousness, dominance and resistance are simultaneously ever-present. This is the duality North Koreans face in their everyday lives.

When North Korea's socialist structure was still normal and intact, the people's response to political dominance was more acceptance and adaptation, less resistance. The recent changes to their everyday lives show the possibility of their response moving to the opposite end of the spectrum. However, the changes in the lives of North Koreans do not necessarily pose a threat to the North Korean system. In the process of guaranteeing their survival, North Koreans engage in minor and major deviant behavior. Taken as a whole, these behaviors play a social function in that they allow residents to maintain their livelihood, create jobs, and rid themselves of psychological distress, which are things the regime can no longer fully provide. By opening a route to guarantee the barest minimum living conditions and to satisfy their daily needs, the possibility of daily resistance evolving into political resistance has been successfully averted. Because of this, the state either ignores or allows these unofficial, illegal actions, and activities to a certain extent, and it continues to enforce ideological controls and institutional regulations so that the situation does not get out of hand and become a breeding ground for subversive behavior. Where this situation will lead to next will depend on the "state's ability to effectively pulverize civil society."

By looking at the recent changes in the lives of North Koreans, it is evident that politics is a part of their lives while, at the same time, their lives are becoming freed from politics, as North Koreans continue to distance themselves from power as a way to respond to the politicization of their everyday lives. This can seem like an escape from the state system, which has been responsible for feeding, clothing, and sheltering the people, as well as defining their relationships and behaviors and shaping their thoughts. Upon

further observation, it is a reinstatement of the “everyday life” which has been thus far rendered obsolete by the system. However, upon closer inspection, it is evident that the “market” has become yet another “system” that has replaced the state and is gaining in influence. The market is not only changing the hourly rhythms of the people’s lives and the way people eat and live, but it is also rapidly changing the way people form relationships and the way people think. The removal of politics from the lives of North Koreans seen in North Korean society today is “market-oriented,” in terms of its driving force and direction. This power of the market can serve as the power for North Koreans to fight the dominance of the state, but there is also the possibility that the state might absorb the influence of the market by suffusing it with state power.

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