

**REPRESSION IN NORTH KOREA:
UNDERSTANDING THE CULTURE OF NON-
RESISTANCE**

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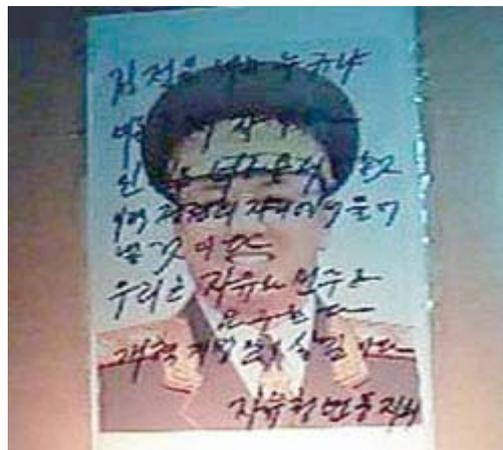
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David Min Sun Kim

ABSTRACT: Despite seemingly ripe conditions for social change in North Korea, namely due to rising discontent, alienation, and economic independence among average citizens, the ruling regime's stability has remained remarkably unchallenged. Explanations pointing out 'coercion and indoctrination' only go so far to account for this paradox. This study thereby delves deeper into sentiments of discontent among average citizens living under this system of repression utilizing theoretical disciplines found in conflict studies. With a careful eye for methodological complexities, this study draws from interview testimony of North Korean defectors, along with data from secondary sources, to identify elements of the North Korean cultural reality that theoretically suppresses impulses for defiant action. In particular, through a critical discursive approach, evidence shows that government repression through restriction of political freedoms and harsh punishments have become to an extent condoned or normalized. Furthermore, evidence also finds an elevated importance of the traditional societal structure of social hierarchy that further plays a role in preserving the status quo.



[Figure 0.1] Rogue video footage of a defaced portrait of Kim Jong Il (Visual: Kim, S. 2011)

INTRODUCTION

“Hell” is a strong word for a place to live. For example, one North Korean doesn't hesitate to describe his homeland as a “living hell of repression”(Ogawa and Yoon 1999:94). North Korea is also depicted in a photomontage called “Post Cards from Hell” by U.S. based think tank, Fund for Peace, who officially ranks North Korea as the 22nd most “failed state”, or nation whose institutional incompetency threatens total collapse (2011). Needless to say, life in

North Korea is not pleasant for many, and that is largely due to its notorious model of severe government repression. For generations, North Koreans have experienced wide scale starvation, invasive state surveillance, political and economic discrimination, arbitrary imprisonment, state sanctioned violence, and deliberate lies by their ruling regime. Anything interpreted as acts of defiance against the regime, including even the most trivial gestures of disloyalty, can be met with harsh repercussions. A more telling characteristic of this hyper-immunity against dissent in North Korea are the vast prison camps, so heavily populated and far reaching, that they resemble small cities¹. Reports estimate that around 100,000 to 200,000 live (and die) in prison camps (KINU 2010, Amnesty International 2011).

One could wonder if anybody living in “hell” would ever rise up and change things. Around 2006, a rare piece of footage uncovered the presence of brave, dissident sentiment against North Korea’s regime, showing a portrait of its leader, Kim Jong Il, defaced by an inflammatory message. It reads “Kim Jong Il, who are you? You are a tyrant. People will not forgive you, and we will bring you down from power. We want freedom and democracy. Open policy is the only way for us to survive” (*Dispatch Undercover in the Secret State* 2009). Note that depicting North Korea’s leaders in any manner that is less than flattering can be punishable by death.

At first glance, this message of defiance is characteristic of the many historical movements of resistance against repressive forces that threaten people’s fundamental rights and freedoms. Conflict theorists might point out that North Korean people’s basic needs (i.e. security, means of subsistence, and fair access to political and economic participation) are being violently deprived, thus creating an impetus for conflict between the populous and the government² (Azar 1990:9). Scholars have related the North Korean people’s struggle with that of other reformed communist states such as Russia, China, and Eastern European nations (Suh 1998)³. Others have forecasted that the contemporary wave of resistance sweeping across North Africa and the Middle East, will eventually reach North Korea (ChosunIlbo 2011). Many analysts have even forecasted complete national “collapse”⁴ (Eberstadt 1995:139 in

¹ The existence of prison camps is heavily detailed in many studies. In general the word “prison” can be synonymous with “gulag” or “detention center” in North Korean named *gyohwaso* and *gwanliso* respectively. In the case of this study, the term prison camp will be used as a blanket term to describe regular citizens’ notions of detainment, isolation from society, and imprisonment in harsh conditions.

² By “conflict theorists” I refer in particular to Azar and his theory of “Protracted Conflict”, and Ted Gurr and his notion of relative deprivation that explains the creation of grievance and mobilization (Azar 1990, Gurr 2007).

³ Parallels with former communist countries are abundant in related academic literature. Political and government control mechanisms are among the most striking similarities (*see* Suh 1998, Lankov 2006), however debate surrounding North Korea has in many cases shown that the comparisons fall short at North Korea’s unique context of successful isolation and cultural uniformity.

⁴ Noland identifies a group of scholars known as “collapsists” (2006:12). He adds that even the U.S. and South Korean political analysts of the then Clinton and Sam administrations respectively were preparing for collapse.

Noland 2006:16). But despite an extensive understanding of North Korean society, even the world's most respected scholars have found their predictions to be ultimately refuted by the Kim regime's continued dominance.

So how then does one account for this enigma? To many, the answer is all too simple: either North Koreans are physically coerced into submission, or the people are 'brainwashed' into obedience, loyalty or ignorance. But these are simplistic assumptions made without a deeper look into North Korean society which finds that there is a much more nuanced picture of North Korean consciousness. As a starting point, there does exist a great deal of evidence that North Koreans are dissatisfied, disobedient, and skeptical toward the government. At the same time, this phenomenon alone has not induced sentiments of resistance and regime-defying social movements. This paradox thus requires a much more comprehensive exploration.

Unfortunately, studying North Korean society poses many real challenges. A long held policy of military secrecy and national isolation has left it impossible to observe and analyze properly. Finding an accurate picture of life in North Korea can be as difficult as studying chemical components of distant galaxies. Worsening matters is that most scholarly literature on North Korean society comes from economics or political science⁵, with very little perspectives on its sociology and human behavior. Nonetheless, the nation has leaked many opportunities to explore it, namely from the wealth of information emerging from North Korean defectors, which thereby forms the basis of my research.

So the central question then is: how can attitudes of discontent toward the regime be better understood at the grass roots level to explain the continued stability of its rulers? With a very careful eye for methodological complexities, this investigation applies social scientific theories in conflict studies, to shed light on the real attitudes of disaffection for the regime while theorizing on the possibility of dissident movements. I argue that it is highly important to demystify more westernized assumptions on North Korean consciousness, and reexamine societal attitudes towards acts of repression through a more ethnographic perspective on beliefs, values, and norms of everyday life. North Koreans, after all, have been sealed off in a chamber of unilateral ideas and filtered information. This necessitates a more reflexive approach to their unique cultural reality, in particular its discursive elements. It is these elements that effectively form a "culture of non-resistance" to suppress defiance against the regime despite pervasive attitudes of discontent.

North Korean citizens' unique socialization and lifestyle is riddled with observable

(Noland 2006:16)

beliefs and values that have allowed them to tolerate, cope with, or ignore many forms of repression while living out their lives under the so-called 'iron fist'. An overview of evidence elicits two basic arguments. Firstly, many North Koreans have grown relatively accustomed to the many forms of repression and injustice identified in analytical literature, particularly toward restrictions on political freedoms and human rights. Of course North Koreans would cherish living in a society that is free of so much government control, but they mostly subdue any impulse for critical thinking on politics and society through their desire to fulfill everyday needs. Secondly, though the rules of society have been rearranged by the post-famine free market evolution, evidence shows that there is still a major resilience in the implied social structure that has effectively maintained the status quo. Mobility within the system remains of high importance for most North Koreans when speaking of the things they value, and very few give serious thought to the idea that the often unfair system can be revolutionized by popular force.

The content of this paper is as follows: 1) *A description of the methodology and discussion of research.* This section highlights methodological issues surrounding data collection and using refugee testimonies. It will also clarify the central research puzzle and its corresponding terms and concepts. 2) *Overview of historical context and evidence of existing discontent while highlighting guiding theoretical frames.* North Korean society has a profound historical context that requires clarification, in particular, the existing evidence of discontent and the many frames through which it can be observed. 3) *Findings on Cognitive/discursive elements with regard to attitudes toward repression.* While paying close attention to North Koreans unique socialization, this section focuses on beliefs and attitudes towards identified elements of repression: the actors of repression; lack of personal, political, and economic freedoms; and violence and punishment. 4) *Structural elements and everyday values with regard to repression.* Describes how the structural organization of society greatly effects human action, defining socio-economic ends, and limiting avenues of regime defiance. 5) *Conclusions.* This section summarizes research findings while providing possible implications for the future.

Data from this study is taken from field work conducted in Seoul, South Korea, facilitated by an internship at a human rights organization for North Koreans. In depth interviews with escaped North Korean defectors provide detailed insight into the consciousness of average North Koreans, which is then triangulated with existing academic data to add greater validity to its unique findings. Unlike most research on North Korean society, this exploration does not set out to discount nor verify evidence of these socio-economic shifts (also known as the *what?*). Instead it acknowledges the abundant evidence of change, and examines the finer

details of belief systems, discourse, and thought processes involved in this progressive shift in thinking (the *why* and the *how*). Despite its limitations to validity and generalizability, this study nevertheless derives its significance through being a carefully devised snapshot of North Korean consciousness⁶.

⁶ ADDITIONAL NOTES: This investigation will provide a good deal of background context, such as language, history and other elements of culture, that would otherwise be apparent to scholars on North Korea. Regarding names, traditionally with Korean names, surnames come first followed by the given name. Given names are two syllable chunks conjoined with a space, no space, or a hyphen. For example, my last name is Kim and my given Korean name is Min Sun. Names of North Koreans defectors will be written traditionally, surname first (e.g. Kim Min Sun, Kim Minsun or Kim Min-Sun). Anonymous defectors will be marked as anonymous with a number or just last name given such (e.g. Mr. Kim). Authors with Korean names will have an anglicized form (e.g. Min Sun Kim, Minsun Kim or Min-Sun Kim)

I. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

1.1 Research Puzzle, Terms and Concepts

The basic research puzzle is as follows:

What are the cultural/discursive elements that better explain the current nature of North Koreans' current attitudes of discontent toward the North Korean regime?

Accessibility issues have made it difficult to target a specific group, for example by geographic location, so finding a group for this investigation thereby relies on a blanket category: 'average North Koreans'. These people come from what can be called 'common societies', or what others may refer to as "the second society"⁷, made distinctive by a certain degree of lawlessness or independence from the ruling government both economically and ideologically. These are societies where independent markets typically thrive, especially from imported foreign goods. Its participants frequently interact with the outside world directly and indirectly by consuming foreign media and by intermingling with citizens who have experienced life abroad. These societies are typically found in, but are not exclusive to, the northern provinces close to the Chinese border. People from these societies also enjoy a relatively good amount of free agency in daily life, which creates a potential allocation of time and resources toward illegal or anti-government activities. 'Average citizens' also include the "poor" of society as well as the so called "rich" or "merchant" class⁸ that now enjoy a level of privilege similar to party members and other loyal subjects closer to the government⁹. This therefore excludes the privileged and selected loyalists, such as citizens of the capital city Pyongyang, considering their afforded welfare and protection by the central government¹⁰. Further excluded are the extremely repressed segments of the population, for example confined in prison camps or detention centers, as little workable data exists on them. They can also be assumed to be the least likely to break from their intensely guarded situation.

The "government" or "regime" in this case refers specifically to North Korean people's

⁷ The term "second society" can be found in Suh 2009. Most academic literature refers to the very same concept, if not the same definitive term.

⁸ These classifications, 'rich', 'poor', 'merchants', are based on how defectors frequently conceptualize groups in society during in depth interviewing.

⁹ Haggard and Noland theorize the potential "explosiveness" of a clash between the newly wealthy and the political classes : "If our findings of tepid support for the regime coupled with perceptions of rising corruption are correctly descriptive of society, then political situation is potentially explosive" (Haggard Noland 2011:124)

¹⁰ It is considered a privilege to live in Pyongyang. It has also been referred to as "paradise" though the rest of North Korea has been named paradise as well. A BBC Documentary *A State of Mind* documents this well while pointing out that Pyongyang is not representative of North Korea as a whole(2004).

conception of the political body in charge: the leader Kim Jong Il and the top officials in his immediate command. This distinction is important because from a different perspective, the “government” can encapsulate much more aspects of society, for example through the government’s regional and local branches, the military, security personnel, educators in party ideology, and designated party loyalists. North Korea’s central organization also conveys the idea that these diverse components of state are all unified under the command of the regime which is not necessarily the case in the eyes of refugees. Most telling are the sharp differences in reported attitudes towards different elements of state, for example from stark comparisons of the current administration of Kim Jong Il to the past administration of Kim Il Sung. There is also a perception that the security personnel, or police, operates somewhat independently from government which further suggests that North Koreans do not see the government as a pervasive and unified body.

The word “discontent” in this case will be nuanced. Although there is substantial evidence of dissatisfaction for Kim Jong Il and the regime, there is too little information to indicate the likelihood of collective resistance based on that information alone. For instance, if a person does not consider themselves an ideal “socialist”, it does not necessarily mean they are nonbelievers of the reality prescribed by the government. And just because someone breaks the rules, it does not mean they are doing so to spite the ruling regime. Thus I do not conflate *disobedience* with *defiance* as I argue that the widely held cynicism toward the regime does not spark the consciousness of being “repressed”. Relevant attitudes of discontent will generally come up as lack of faith in institutional ideology, negative assessment of regime performance, blame toward the regime for public shortcomings, awareness and disgust for state committed atrocities, and feelings of moral outrage or injustice.

Overall, this study characteristically emphasizes an extremely reflexive approach. Being conscious of research limitations was equally as important as adopting an open-mind toward a group that has been forcefully isolated from the rest of the world for so long.

1.2 Research Setting

The main vantage point for research was from within an internship at Citizens’ Alliance for North Korean Human Rights (NKHR), a Non-government Organization based in Seoul. There, this exploration was assisted in a number of ways. For example, it significantly benefited from the guidance and factual authentication by experienced researchers

who have extensively interacted with *thousands* of North Korean defectors or refugees¹¹ in South Korea through surveying, interviewing, refugee assistance services, cooperation for special events, and forged personal friendships. Their insight allowed for greater accuracy in generalizing claims derived from my own in-depth interviews by providing a solid base of comparison. In addition, I was able to forge closer relationships with North Korean refugees through the organization, establishing a level of trust with my contacts and enabling me to acquire better quality data including permission to record interviews¹². Moreover, a wealth of additional literature was available including access to archival data containing translated reports of defector accounts which corroborate the presented analysis.

Detailed perspective is provided by 8 interviews conducted with North Korean defectors living in Seoul, South Korea. Among them 4 were formal, recorded interviews where there was a comfortable agreement to publish personal details. Respondents were asked to describe their personal background, history, and most importantly their opinions and perspectives of their *formerly held* outlook on society while living in North Korea. Interviews were also semi-structured. A list of focused questions was followed for each interview, but responses were elicited more organically (See Annex). To get an idea of values and beliefs, one cannot simply ask what those are. So verbal questions were improvised to lead the respondent into that area by asking about their related personal experiences, for example how they came to defect, what examples of state media they remember most, or how they thought to maintain their everyday economic survival. Working at the organization allowed greater contact time, for example during special events, where a concerted effort was made to establish close and friendly relations with the interviewees. In the end, interviews were much longer in duration and responses were more comfortable and trustworthy. The other interview testimony comes from informal questioning, conversations, and statements from various defectors encountered during the course of research which were subsequently documented in field notes.

Finally, any reference to “interviewees” in this paper will refer to the interviews done specifically for this investigation. Key elements hone in on the *way* their opinions changed about the North Korean regime, because most defectors, like most North Koreans, originally harbored praise or support toward the government starting at infancy. Interviewees are not solely intended as an accurately representative sample of the entire population of 27 million in North Korea, but rather they are a “snapshot”, qualitatively demonstrating the given evidence in

¹¹ It is important to note here, that the word “defector” and “refugee” will be used interchangeably. Some researchers, like Joanna Hosaniak, say they prefer not to use the term “defector” as it does not properly describe their situation living in South Korea.

¹² When asking to record interviews with North Korean defectors, the researchers of NKHR took safety and confidentiality precautions very seriously.

action and detail.

1.3 The Defector Debate

Any ethnographic exploration into a society that cannot be directly observed will inevitably suffer from validity issues. This study stands on the notion that the best source of information on North Korean society to date comes from the people who live there, hence testimony from North Korean defectors serves the basis for this research. Studying closed-off societies through its escapees has been done much in the past since the Soviet Union¹³, and similarly, much information can be derived from the many North Koreans living in South Korea and China. As of 2010, well over 20,000 resettled North Koreans have resettled in South Korea (figure 1.3.1)(KINU 2011), and an estimated 500,000 North Koreans have for a period of time lived in China since the mid 1990's (Lankov 2009). This reliance on defectors is however not without its pitfalls, which makes anticipating and solving these challenges a concurrent research goal.

Number of North Koreans Re-settled in South Korea

Gender/Year	~'98	~'01	'02	'03	'04	'05	'06	'07	'08	'09	'10	Total
Male	235	563	506	469	626	423	509	570	612	668	604	6,379
Female	71	480	632	812	1,268	960	1,503	1,974	2,197	2,259	1,819	14,028
Total	306	1,043	1,138	1,281	1,894	1,383	2,018	2,544	2,809	2,927	2,423	20,407

Unit: Persons (Source: The Ministry of Unification)

(Figure 1.3.1 visual taken from: KINU 2011 in Lee, Hosaniak 2011)

One major concern is how defectors can represent a seemingly extraordinary segment of North Koreans, and are thus an unrepresentative sample. Prominent researchers, Marcus Noland and Stephen Haggard point out that North Korean defectors are likely to report the highest levels of dissatisfaction toward the government, presumably related to their reasons for leaving the country in the first place (2010). Haggard and Noland have also suggested that defectors are people with a greater amount of resolve than the average North Korean to have traversed such treacherous circumstances to leave their homeland, including risk of capture,

¹³ Bauer Indeles and Kluckhohn (1956), did the first large scale refugee generalizations for the Soviet Union. Gregory Grossman, Pickersgille, and Gur Ofer, did other reports on the 2nd economy in USSR. Jerome Cohen studied Chinas penal system through refugee testimonies. (in Haggard Noland 2011)

imprisonment, and torture (Haggard Noland 2011). These observations however do not always apply. Refugees encountered for this study generally span across different social classes. This counters the notion that refugees only come from an extraordinarily specific fragment of the population¹⁴. At the same time, reasons and circumstances surrounding their defection differed from each individual. All the same, defectors are ultimately direct products of North Korean society which makes their experiences and insights undeniably useful.

Other issues with defectors include extracting reliable factual data. To start, many defectors suffer from post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)¹⁵ (Jeon et. Al 2005, Lee et. al 2001). In general, the extraordinary struggles of many refugees create problems in getting in-depth or accurate details. North Korean refugees would hypothetically find it easy to twist facts about their past since there are very few mechanisms to fact-check their testimony in their new life¹⁶. Scholars Noland and Haggard observe that North Korean defectors tend to exaggerate their level of education and general social standing in society (2011:15). In addition, refugees might harbor painful memories or shamed histories¹⁷. A commonly sensitive subject is families, in part due to the regime's deterrence mechanisms against defection, which involve punishment by association, or collective punishment of family members and other close contacts of those who defected¹⁸. Head NKHR researcher Younghwan Lee summarizes the importance of sensitivity toward the common problems in North Korean refugees:

“Usually researchers simply think that by having a conversation with North Korean defectors, they can draw good information for their research, but it is not true. Because before having a conversation, or going into an interview, they have to spend more time with the interviewee and really understand their background, for example, their family background, and whether or not they have successfully adapted in South Korea, or if there is any other people [family] remaining in North Korea. That makes a huge difference for their research because North Korean defectors tend to tell the truth when they gain trust with the interviewers.”

¹⁴ Haggard and Noland confirm this in their own study “Early defectors were typically elites- higher ranking party or military personnel- many of whom took strong ideological positions vis-à-vis the North. Over time demographics of refugee population have shifted dramatically and now include an ample representation of workers.” Their study also tackles generalizability dilemmas through “statistical multivariate analysis.” (2009:4)

¹⁵ In a clinical study of approximately 200 North Korean defectors living in South Korea, the prevalence of PTSD reached 29.5%. A similar study suggested that many traumatized by the great famine in the late 1990's were particularly vulnerable, finding that about half of respondents suffered from PTSD (Jeon et. Al 2005, Lee et. al 2001).

¹⁶ A fellow researcher and friend described her experiences mentoring a young North Korean girl who gave contradicting stories about her school life in North Korea. This anecdote was brought up during one of several debates I had with her over the weaknesses of relying on defector data. One way to account for this is in Younghwan Lee's book, *Child is King of the Country*, where he uses cross examination techniques by gathering a sample of children that were part of the same region's schooling system (2009).

¹⁷ NKHR researcher Joanna Hosaniak states that in her experience, a frequently used protection mechanism is to tell personal stories in the third person, often describing their own personal experiences in great detail all the while pretending these events happened to a friend or neighbor. This is apparent in the NKHR report on battered women in North Korea (Lee, Hosaniak 2011)

¹⁸ Two anonymous defectors had spent time in prison camps. They were both allegedly punished for family members escaping, such as one's grandfather. As part of my organizations protocol on sensitivity while eliciting defector testimony, I was also taught not to talk ever bring up family unless the interviewee does so by themselves.

To exacerbate research dilemmas, North Korean defectors in South Korea are well accustomed to being subjects of research and can simply give information to “go through the motions” often giving nondescript answers while becoming exhausted from constant questioning. Younghwan Lee also stated that defectors have been requested by academics, government agencies, NGO’s, and journalists on average four times to be subjects of interviews and surveys and other studies¹⁹. Another documented problem is that respondents may feel obliged to give answers that the researchers want to hear. In a study done by NKHR, investigating difficulties for North Koreans to assimilate in South Korean society, refugee respondents often felt a “duty to please” and refrained from giving answers that implied disappointment or dissatisfaction while stifling their own beliefs that might glorify their homeland (Hosaniak, Lee 2011:13). Many did not want to appear ungrateful for the generous assistance they receive in South Korea²⁰.

Because of the unpredictable nature of defector testimony, some authors abstain from using it altogether, instead, relying on more easily observable data such as published North Korean media, or information collected from humanitarian NGO’s (Haggard and Noland 2011:4). B.R. Myers and Suk Young Kim for instance focus more on images and narratives found in state wide propaganda and extract societal beliefs from them (Myers 2010, Kim S.Y. 2010). They argue that these representations are not merely elite ideals, but are rather representations of the nation’s discourse, and thus representative of common consciousness. But while it is important to observe and interpret some of the most powerful mechanisms of influence, it still does not, in my view, fully account for peoples *reactions* to the state’s mythical projections, especially given the evidence of ideological shifts²¹. The conflict of ideologies remains a core consideration for this study.

Finally, it is important to bear in mind that defectors favor confidentiality considering that they are technically guilty of treason under North Korean law, which can also mean harsh punishment not only for themselves but for the family members or other close relations still living in North Korea. This complicated the task of finding willing refugees for interviewing.

¹⁹ Author’s interview with NKHR researcher Lee Younghwan.

²⁰ “Assistance” received in South Korea is relatively generous. South Korea was always talked about as an aspiration for many at-risk North Koreans living in China. As soon as defectors land in South Korea, they are automatically given full benefits of citizenship, undergo a three month education and integration program (*hanawon*), are provided with roughly ₩20,000,000 won (KRW) (\$16,000 to \$18,000 USD). I have observed these hanawon centers myself as a visiting English teacher. Off hand, the facilities were very well kept, and services provided seemed very high quality.

²¹ A good example is that many North Koreans have changing attitudes towards state centered beliefs, when defector respondents have favored living in the United States over other countries. The U.S. is by far one of the most demonized countries in propaganda literature (Haggard, Noland 2011, see *The Evil of U.S. Imperialist Jackals* 1983).

II. THE BACKDROP OF DISCONTENT

2.1 Historical Context and Academic Debate

North Korean society is now an ugly shadow of its former prosperity, negotiating economic ruin starting from its famine in the late 1990's, which wiped out close to 3-5% of its population (approximately 600,000-1 million people), and effected countless others through malnutrition (Haggard, Noland 2007). The famine was the onset to North Korea's economic evolution to sprawling grassroots capitalism, contradicting the very fabric of its long held socialist ideology²². A second society emerged and by 1997, only an estimated 6 percent of the entire North Korean population relied on the public ration distribution system to feed themselves (Woo-Cummings 1997). The past decade has seen a newfound conflict of interests between the government and its people as the regime attempted to reassert control over this new economy, for example by seizing food production and cracking down on markets, but ultimately succumbing to its resilience to stand on its own (Lankov 2007, 2009). Rampant corruption and bribery has partly held this new system together and continues to this day²³ (Shin I.C. 2002:88, Kim B.Y. 2010). Currently, North Korea sits in the wake of its most explosive policy backfire, a nation wide currency reform in 2009 which effectively obliterated the value of people's money. These successive government incompetencies are likely to be burned into the minds of many North Koreans²⁴, which then form the setting of discontent for this investigation.

But economic needs aren't the only items to factor into controlling discontent; the system of ideological programming also serves as a core component. As most know, North Korea is well known for its successful propaganda apparatus, perpetuating government ideals, life concepts, philosophies, and facts and information through out its people to ultimately justify its status quo. Scholars alike all cite the guiding principles of *juche*²⁵, the political philosophy of national self reliance, which has helped give way to the "cult of personality" surrounding North Korea's eternal president Kim Il Sung and his son now currently ruling, Kim Jong Il. Along with myths of extraordinary achievement by their leaders, came other worldly myths such as their nation's dominant position on the world stage, and the evil and abject nature of the

²² Based on a comprehensive analysis of the organs of government, McEachern concludes, "Ideology no longer guides North Korean politics. The Party is just another bureaucracy of much lessened importance, and pragmatism filtered through Kim's bureaucracy and worldview describes better the functioning of the state. The totalitarian model in North Korea died with Kim Il Sung" (McEachern 2007:4)

²³ As of 2002, 70-80% of goods are estimated to be obtained from the black market (Shin 2002:88)

²⁴ Much more is explained in great detail in Hassig and Oh's work (2009)

²⁵ *Juche* is defined as "a quasi religious moral system that purports to explain the purpose of life" (Barry 1996: 118 in Noland 2006:16)

outside world. North Korean defectors do not hesitate to use the term “brainwashing” to describe their indoctrinated beliefs from infancy, saying they begin their lessons, “from the moment a babies eyes open.”²⁶

But evidence shows the government’s ideological monopoly is diminishing, in part due to the inundation of new information (Lankov 2009). Most all defectors, and likely many North Koreans, have at some point in their life broke their unquestioning allegiance to their leaders, perhaps similar to how the myth of Santa Claus disintegrates for many in the west. But they all acknowledge that their attitudinal shift was very gradual, given the sheer amount of ideas that were solidified in their mind. Observing this has reminded me not to assume that propaganda influenced beliefs are results of simple “gullibility” or “trickery”, or in other words, that lies can be easily dispelled simply with counter information. The ideology has become so encompassing that to most North Koreans it has become as simple as reality itself. Later we see that this reality is observable through an analysis of their discourse.

Researchers have affirmed the changing tides of North Korean attitudes. A survey of thousands of defectors in a study by Chang, Haggard and Noland showed that among defectors, many North Koreans have deliberately expressed a high level of dissatisfaction with their regime (2008). Most all ‘disagreed’ or ‘strongly disagreed’ that the North Korean economic situation was improving and mostly agreed that security restrictions were tightening, while denying that the governments true intentions were to improve conditions for the general public (10:2008). Attitudes would likely be more heavily frustrated since Haggard and Noland’s survey took place before the currency reform disaster, which suggest public displeasure is even further aggravated.

Hassig and Oh wrote one of the few pieces of literature that understand North Korean citizens’ consciousness from a more sociological perspective (2009). Utilizing the testimony of hundreds of defectors, they conclude that “North Koreans are ‘double thinkers’, who like most citizens had learned how to mouth the teachings of the regime while harboring quite different ideas in their minds” (2009:1). The average North Korean cannot be described as loyally subservient citizens nor closeted rebels. Many North Koreans have shown to be able to “read in between the lines” and apply skepticism to the information they receive either from the regime or other sources. Despite political leanings, Hassig and Oh conclude that North Korean concerns are typically found in the economy of everyday life (2009:102).

But information on North Korean consciousness stops here and literature on the nature

²⁶ Author’s Interview with Jang Oksung. I believe this has been a learned saying among many North Koreans. Another defector living in China interviewed in Dispatch’s documentary, *Undercover in the Secret State*, said the exact same thing (2009).

of attitudes toward the government is very lacking. While defector testimonies are plentiful, they are mostly interpreted by economic and political perspectives, neglecting crucial perspective on North Korean citizens' realities using social scientific theory²⁷. Countless studies and defector testimonies have done a thorough job of reporting on the *what*, for example evidence of human rights abuse or, as mentioned above, whether or not people still harbor allegiance to their regime. But very little, qualitative analysis delves into *how* and *why* discontent exists. Hence, addressing this shortcoming underlies the significance of this study.

2.2 What do North Koreans value?

Further setting the stage for this investigation, I highlight North Korean values to explain rationales for discontent and potential resistance. Hassig and Oh approach the term 'values' as "a culture's ideas about what is good and bad - provides very basic guidelines for behavior, although people do not always follow them, they are usually open to interpretation and modification according to circumstances"(2010:171). They find that North Korean values favor "social conformity and less on individualism than do most modern societies." Americans by contrast favor "efficiency, hard work, freedom of choice and the rights of minorities and individualism" (2010:172).

In terms of what North Koreans think are life essentials, work and safety appear to be the most important to them. An NKHR study of 'values' held by North Korean refugees found that 90% of respondents marked 'work' to be either 'important' or 'very important', more than any other categories such as 'financial security', 'freedom of religion', 'romantic relationships', 'children', and 'pursuing hobbies'(Hosaniak, Lee 2011:34). Though 'work' eclipsed the importance of all categories, 'personal freedoms' and 'living in a democratic country' were still marked as important to the respondents. When respondents were asked why civil and political freedoms were still highly valued, they admitted that they acquired this more "liberal attitude" only *after* arriving in South Korea (Hosaniak, Lee 2011:35). Interestingly, interviewees in my own investigation report similar responses when prompted to talk further about the value of civil and political freedoms. One of the recurring themes of this study was the way acquired

²⁷ Existent bias have been noted. In Jae Jean Suh's critique the quality of research has not been very satisfactory. "South Korean research suffers from serious theoretical and methodological biases... This is only partially due to the fact that the object of study is a closed society not open to free academic analysis. Studies on North Korea have also been heavily hampered by anticommunist ideology. Many continue to be managed and utilized by the government as a means of promoting anticommunist sentiment... I believe the most important factor hampering our understanding of North Korea is the nature of the researchers themselves." (Suh 1998:16). Myers notes a "sharp left-right divide" where research "tended toward interpretations of a country where ideology plays no role" (Myers 2010:12)

experiences in South Korea rearrange refugees' outlooks on what they value in life and helps deconstruct preconceived assumptions on what causes discontent.

In essence, this study assumes the notion that values are key factors in discontent since the violation of peoples values would presumably be a source of grievance toward the regime. Most of all, it acknowledges that values can be culturally distinctive, and hence the injustice of oppression cannot be assumed without consideration of these crucial differences.

2.3 North Korean Discourse

A key interest of this investigation is to illuminate the effects of nationalist discourse on citizen consciousness. At first glance, Gramsci's notion of "cultural hegemony" seems relevant to the example of North Korea where ruling elites create an all encompassing culture that, by design, preserves the interests of the ruling class. Other theories however will better characterize the North Korean society, for example Giddens duality of structure, or the way in which social structures dictate individual human agency (1984). "Structures" are basically rules of social life ascribed by higher powers and the dynamics of group relations in society. Ultimately these structures create a system through which the individual constantly interacts within their set structures that forms their own consciousness and determines their subsequent actions. And while structures are limiting, they are not static entities, so individuals have some freedom to exact change through their own conscious choices. North Korea is incredibly applicable given its state centric influence that weighs heavily on the course of daily life. The structures in this society are profoundly explicit considering the clear divisions of power systematized through social background and status. In North Korea, the heavily enforced restrictions limit avenues of human agency, which thereby merits a structural approach to help understand it.

Structure is further marked by the staunch nationalist discourse otherwise known as a "propaganda campaign" with the power to affirm devotion to North Korea's leaders, mobilize people to work, and demonize forces that threaten the hardened social order. Giddens reveals the role of discourse and institutions brought on by structure. For example, 'signification' instills meaning and principles in everyday realities. 'Legitimation' occurs to determine norms of everyday life including what is and what isn't acceptable (1984). These discursive forces have the power to forge beliefs, establish notions of right and wrong, and implement historical narratives into the national psyche. The state and its institutions thereby become the starting

point for discourse and hence the language of everyday life. And as this ‘language’ emanating from societal structures reaches salience, it thereby becomes observable and researchable, which would then provide a key point of investigation in North Korean society, particularly highlighting the forces that perpetually legitimize its set structure.

Another key interest is the discourse surrounding acts of repression and violence. Vivienne Jabri states, “violent conflict is itself structured through the actions of agents situated in relation to discursive and institutional continuities which both enable war’s occurrence and legitimate it as a form of human behavior” (Jabri 1996:4). Applied to North Korea, there has been an intense legitimizing effect on violence and aggression toward their enemies such as USA, Japan, and South Korea²⁸. One interviewee recounts playing ‘war’ when he was a child, pretending to shoot American soldiers with his toy gun²⁹. But this investigation wishes to take this notion a step further, by applying how this legitimization of violence becomes directed toward the enemy from within: normalizing violence and other harsh measures against its own people. Legitimacy in this case follows Weber’s definition, “The concept of legitimacy entails that a social order is accepted as valid either due to its historicity, to its emotional value or to instrumental reasoning.” (Weber in Schroder and Schmidt 2001). Acts of repression by the state such as imprisonment, or execution, are thus theoretically legitimized through discourse, even if it entails aggression against those on the same team.

Utilizing these frames this investigation will beg to ask questions, what does the average North Korean believe is ‘truth’ in their understanding of society and the rest of the world? According to North Koreans, what *is* society and how *should it be* based on their beliefs, values and interpretations of reality?

²⁸ According to scholar on North Korea, Il-Chul Shin, “The North Korean psychology is very different from other people. They have become accustomed to war, aggression, and militarism” (2002:21). Examples of glorified violence against these U.S. is not hard to find, see *the Evil of U.S. Imperialist Jackals* (see Annex A3). During my visit to the North South armistice line, North Koreans are said to have celebrated the infamous “Axe Murder” incident where American G.I.’s were surprised attacked by North Korean border guards equipped with an axe.

²⁹ Question and answer with anonymous 2.

III. DISCOURSES OF REPRESSION

Politically minded defectors who describe the regime as “totalitarian” naturally draw attention, especially from journalists and staunch political advocates. One of the most famous defectors with strong, politically charged language was Hwang Jang Yop, a formerly high ranking Korean Workers Party (KWP) member and close affiliate of Kim Jong Il and Kim Il Sung. In a column written not long before his death he writes, “Kim Jong Il has turned his entire country into a huge prison; a place where a few million people starve and he enslaves the rest.” (Kim, T.H. 2011). Moreover, the article “An Appeal from two North Korean Refugees Hiding in Russia” expresses utter distaste for the way North Korea is run from the stand point of lower profile defectors. One was a farmer who described himself as “being cheated by the government” saying, “North Korea is a dreadful society of dictatorship and regimentation” “North Korean dictators squeeze blood and sweat from the people and build luxurious villas at scenic locations for their pleasure.” (Ogawa and Yoon 94:1999) But while these impassioned opinions often use more *political* concepts describing exploitation, repression, and point out the absence of freedom, democracy, and justice, this style of language is actually very far off from my own observations of how North Koreans conceptualize their own society³⁰. Complaints about the intrinsic flaws in the system are not essential items in normal North Korean conversations about government, nor are they common in defectors’ testimonies when describing the reasons for their plight. The way North Korea has become heavily politicized has perhaps obfuscated the moderate opinions held by a large number of North Koreans who characteristically place their values farther from fighting tyranny and closer to securing simple economic livelihood. North Koreans come from a very unique cultural reality that conceptualizes freedom, autonomy, equality, justice and other basic human rights far differently than the way other cultures would. While most can hypothesize that the unfair violation of these innate freedoms would serve as a large source of discontent, one important departure has to be made: while North Koreans yearn for improvements to their daily lives through greater freedoms, many do not consider themselves entitled to their so-called ‘rights’. For this reason among others, overthrowing the government would not necessarily be conceived as the

³⁰ Younghwan Lee comments on this piece saying, “Language that connotes ‘dictatorship’ or ‘fascist’ is nothing that had been heard in my experience, I would think that this brand of politically charged discontent was likely established while living abroad.” (it is important to note here that faulty translation of defector testimonies are common, with this in mind, on the topic of conceptualizing dictatorship, Lee says “The closest thing in my experience to the word “dictatorship” was the description of the “bourgeois proletariat” in state media. Then again, translations should only be taken with a grain of salt”

overarching panacea to their problems.

To get a better feel for this, one must look into their discourse and guard against assumptions that repression, like human rights violations, do not always translate to the same form of discontent expressed for example in other historical resistance movements. Ironically, North Korea is officially a party to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and has defended its human rights records by arguing its cultural distinctiveness through “our style human rights” (KINU 2010). Of course what the regime fails to mention is that the people are hardly aware of what their rights are to begin with, let alone the meaning of the term “human rights”. Unanimously none of the interviewees were ever educated with the term (*inkwon*) the Korean word for human rights³¹ (a common word in South Korean dialect as opposed to North Korean). Interviewees commonly say they had never even heard of human rights in North Korea nor were they ever familiar with a similar concept of one’s inalienable rights.

In this way, discourse can grant legitimacy to a regime, even in unfavorable circumstances where legitimacy seems threatened. This section further explores how this works by looking at how North Koreans conceptualize forms of repression or the limitation of freedoms by specifically focusing on attitudes surrounding: government itself and the myths of its rulers, myths about the outside world, propaganda, freedom of speech and other basic freedoms, and reactions to state sanctioned punishments and violence.

3.1 The Government vs Actors of Repression

What is “government” to North Koreans? How do they perceive the political forces that control their behavior and determine the outcomes of everyday life? What beliefs determine their opinions and assessments of that government? A good starting point is focusing on the supreme leadership, Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il, seeing how almost every element of society somehow relates to the preservation of their image and legitimacy. Essentially, focusing on this aspect provides insight into what “government” means in the eyes of those who live under it, should those people ever decide to stand up against it.

Since the founding of North Korea by the Korean Workers Party (KWP) in the mid 20th century, the leaders of the nation have been elevated to the level of legendary idols. North Korea has one founding father: Kim Il Sung who remains North Korea’s eternal president. After his death, power was passed on to his son, the now ruling Kim Jong Il. Though religion

³¹ Anonymous defector 4 made an appointment to mention she had no idea what human rights were.

is illegal and often deliberately suppressed, North Korean society is in no short supply of religious beliefs. The machinations of propaganda devised by the government praising North Korea's leaders can often times look ridiculous³², but to consider that these things have been normalized in discourse for all its citizens since infancy, the belief in their godly status becomes all the more plausible, giving further credence to the common phrase "cult of personality." Their names for example must always be referred to in the honorific fashion, "dear leader(marshal) and dear general" (Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il respectively), which is one of the many societal traditions that seem to elevate their rulers to the level of deities.

It is safe to say that most all citizens of North Korea have all started from a similar background of ideological conditioning, all believing at one point in their lives that the rulers were noble super humans. The state centric education curriculum indoctrinates people from the youngest ages to praise Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il. Attesting to this fact, interviewees all explained their childhood education. When they weren't distracted from their regular school subjects from hunger or forced labor³³, they learned countless stories and narratives of the greatness of the Kim family. It's a common trend in North Korean education to neglect practical knowledge for political loyalty (Hassig and Oh 2009:154).

Based on Hassig and Oh's analysis of North Korean refugees they conclude that most believe Kim Il Sung was truly a heroic leader who brought them their autonomy and independence:

"Kim Il-Sung remains strong in the memory. Few North Koreans are aware of the universe of lies that makes up the Kim Il-sung cult, and most still believe he was a great man. All North Korean defectors have some opinion about Kim Il-sung, even those who are too young to have a clear memory of what their country was like during Kim. After they arrive in the South, most defectors still express a positive opinion of the senior Kim; to do otherwise would be to admit that they have been fooled their entire lives. Yet, comments about Kim are often defensive: "Kim Il-Sung is not a bad person"; "Not a bad human being" "Cant hate him" "everyone cried when he died" (184 :2010)

So, despite the evidence of changing ideological shifts, the decadence and infallibility of their founding leader seems intact. Godly praise however stops short of the Dear Leader's son. Defector testimonies mark a grand shift in political attitudes after the great famine in the mid 90's, in part because people were provided the unique chance to compare the success and failure

³² Gestures of worship that seem utterly laughable are not hard to find in North Korea. Glass casing around a park bench which Kim Il-Sung sat on or the belief that Kim Jong Il wrote over one thousand literary works in his life time (Hassig and Oh 2009:147).

³³ Interview with Gwon Eunbyul described her many classes in "revolutionary history". Authors Interview with Jang Oksung, shows that as a school teacher, her job became progressively harder when the heads of school implemented the labor system in which children had to work. This phenomenon was common through out many schools in North Korea, especially during harsh economic times (Lee 2009).

associated between the two Kim's³⁴. They likely conclude that the era of Kim Jong Il was a relative failure due to the prolonged economic collapse *immediately* after Kim Il Sung's death, not to mention the subsequent spread of foreign media to further contradict official government propaganda. In the end, despite growing evidence of discontent with the current regime, its founding history and origins have remained fond in people's memory.

Still, interviewees did not necessarily depict Kim Jong Il in a negative light when referring back to their formerly held beliefs. An interviewee states that upon first arriving in South Korea, he read an article highlighting the myths and lies behind Kim Jong Il and feeling genuine anger about its content³⁵. Another interviewee responded:

“In my view, people normally do not have questions about Kim Jong Il's actions because he was always deified and iconized as if he was a god. So people do not have any questions about that normally. Some people should have, but I didn't know anyone personally that did.”³⁶

So despite the times of hardship and contradiction, Kim Jong Il's image has maintained a certain amount of resilience. Another interviewee states:

“[on the topic of currency reform] And even though we are having a hard time, many still believe in General Kim Jong Il, and they think that in 2012 when Kim Il Sung's 100th anniversary comes, things will become a lot better.”³⁷

Believing in Kim Jong Il however does not suggest acts of government repression are by any means accepted or justified. There is a wide consensus that regular North Korean citizens harbor the utmost hatred for security agents or police (*anjeonwon*), who essentially act as arms of government control at the grass roots level³⁸. They are responsible for surveillance, and arrests for anti-regime offenses, but have also known to be very relentless and greedy. While society holds them up as model heroes to an extent, many refugees say that are often considered corrupt and cruel (Hassig and Oh 2009:186). I found this intriguing because I initially considered hatred for the police as a very salient source of disaffection for Kim Jong Il and his regime. The police, after all, are an arm of the government. But an interviewee perhaps sums up this paradox well describing his former beliefs about police corruption:

“Kim Jong Il doesn't know these things. If he knew of what was going on, maybe he would kill [the policemen]. Kim Jong Il is always good. Also he is starving like me and only drinks

³⁴ According to NKHR researcher Younghwan Lee.

³⁵ Authors Interview with Lee Sungjoo.

³⁶ Authors Interview with Oh Sehyek.

³⁷ Authors Interview with Gwon Eunbyul.

³⁸ District police (*anjeonbu*) can differ from other security bodies such as from the intelligence agency (*bowibu*), but in general “police” were spoken as one category during interviews, presumably including both agencies.

water. He works a lot to feed the poor people.”³⁹

Lastly, I have found that historical narratives, which infuse meaning and substance into political concepts such as freedom and independence, always appear to tie back to the leaders. The definition of “freedom” (*jayoo*) for example to most North Koreans does not mean individual liberties practiced in everyday life, but is instead more about independence from dominating foreign powers.⁴⁰ One interviewee described his own definition of freedom as he saw it in North Korea alluding to the history of guerrilla warfare waged by Kim Il Sung against the Japanese Empire’s during its occupation of Korea⁴¹. Accordingly, individual freedoms do not seem to exist in North Korean society as people were taught all their lives that freedom is something only enjoyed by a collective. Researcher Younghwan Lee states,

“The most common sentence or saying, is that ‘without the nation, we also can’t exist or survive anymore.’ So they put country first and individual last. Even when they leave they continue to have this concept. As a researcher, you can find it, feel it, and see it when you meet North Korean defectors even living in South Korea.”⁴²

In sum, narratives of Kim Jong Il and Kim Il Sung’s grandeur play a much larger role than just providing the public with mythical stories. We have seen that this state-centric discourse plays its part to convince people of the benign nature of government, despite times of plight, struggle, and doubt. It also carries the power to displace blame or accountability for acts of cruelty and repression. Moreover, these narratives are the only source of substance when defining civic or political concepts, such as ‘freedom.’ North Korean’s presumably do not know of their own rights, because they are unfamiliar with relevant examples in discourse to define them.

3.2 How the World Works According to North Koreans

North Koreans are falsely taught that the Korean War was started by a South Korean surprise attack on the North, and that a crushing retaliation allowed their troops to advance all

³⁹ Authors interview with Lee Sungjoo.

⁴⁰ Authors interview with NKHR Researcher Younghwan Lee.

⁴¹ Authors interview with Oh Sehyek

⁴² Authors interview with NKHR Researcher Younghwan Lee. In an NKHR survey “North Korean residents also revealed an inclination for socialist policies regarding issues such as the social welfare state and economic disparities in society. As much as 61 adults responded that the society should provide for basic necessities such as food, housing, education and healthcare. 56 adult respondents also stated that society should eradicate economic inequalities.(Hosaniak and Lee 2011:35)

the way down to Busan, Korea's southern-most city⁴³. Though most historians describe the war as a "stalemate", the North Korean history books declare the Korean War a victory, dubbing it as the "Father Land Liberation War" (*choguk haebang jeonjeng*) (Kim I.P. 2003:79). These are one of the many alternative interpretations of history that make up the North Korean world view. In general, the government's primary role is not 'governance' per se, but instead serves as what Hazel Smith calls a "permanent campaigning political movement" which properly conveys the regime's reliance on influencing public consciousness to sustain legitimacy (Smith 2005:168). In this way, many North Koreans had been convinced that the outside world is as abject as North Korea, not to mention plagued with existential threats to them and their socialist way of life. The United States, or "U.S. Imperialists" (*mijae*) in North Korean language, is especially vilified, serving as the depraved antagonist to North Korea in every historical narrative. An interviewee sums this up well:

"When I was living there, I was taught to believe that North Korea was the best at everything and that North Korea is "heaven" or "paradise" and South Korea was a cruel society, just like America. Most of the problems in society such as the suffering and bad economy was caused by America. They believe that America interfered with the economy between China and North Korea, so America was essentially standing in the way of economic development of North Korea."⁴⁴

As mentioned before, "brainwashing" improperly describes the current state of mass consciousness since many have shown to "read between the lines" and derive logical assumptions on their own (Hassig and Oh 2009, Haggard and Noland 2011). Myths and contradictions have been progressively clarified through increased exposure from market activity, migration and consumption of foreign media. But even defectors who had consumed such a great deal of foreign media will still never look at their social situation the way, for example, an educated western scholar would. Ironically, regular North Koreans have still remained relatively docile to government control who they now know not to trust anymore. This remains a key point of interest for this investigation. How is new alternative information processed? How strong are myths of the world? Which of them continue to persist and have an influence on the national psyche? More importantly: in what ways does this help preserve the dynamics of social control?

Generally, North Koreans have undergone what can be described as "psychological

⁴³ In an interview with Joanna Hosaniak, she recounts a story of a North Korean military official who questioned the fact that South Korea started the Korean War. This skepticism, she said, was only afforded by his knowledge of military strategy.

⁴⁴ Interview with Gwon Eunbyul. Similarly, defector Kim Kyeong Ok describes her experience teaching "Pyeongyang geocentric Theory" (NKHR Archives 2008). Andrei Lankov highlights some of the more gruesome stories of South Korea "where penniless students sell their blood to pay for textbooks and sadistic Yankees drive their tanks over Korean girls just for pleasure (2006).

inoculation” where consumption of foreign (factual) information is anticipated despite its illegality. Therefore one is conditioned not to accept it. This is often done by combining truth with fiction, for example saying that the westernized fashion of torn jeans is an proof of shoddy craftsmanship of a broken market system⁴⁵, or circulating pictures of slum neighborhoods of New York as general representations of American society (Hassig and Oh 2009:133,167). Another method involves infusing a sense of right and wrong, for example found in a Korean Worker’s Party lecture:

“Our enemies are using these specially made materials to beautify the world of imperialism and to spread their utterly rotten, bourgeois lifestyles. If we allow ourselves to be affected by these unusual materials, our revolutionary mind-set and class awareness will be paralyzed and our absolute idolizations for the Marshal [Kim Il-Sung] will disappear” (Members of the Workers’ Party lecture in Demick 2010:214)

The excerpt above describes in great detail a very natural scenario of one consuming new ideas, and is treated in a preemptive manner as a sinful temptation to be staved off if one is to live morally or ideally. An interviewee describes well how he himself guarded against outside information:

“Foreign media hasn’t necessarily changed things. For one person, it might take at least about 10 times to be exposed, or a couple months of exposure, because when they first encounter those types of information, first of all, they don’t want to believe it, they do not accept it. They say. ‘Oh this is propaganda, this is poison devised by the capitalists!’ But as they listen to it again and again, they understand that it could be possible. They think more consciously and they begin to think new ideas that they have never really thought of before”⁴⁶

Hassig and Oh’s analysis of with North Korean defectors supports this stating, “the North Korean people have developed a wide *latitude of rejection*⁴⁷ for foreign (especially American) communications... . . . A defector admits that he read an article [from Russia] about Kim Il-Sung starting the Korean War and said he would not believe it if it was not written by a Russian” (Hassig and Oh 2009:167) . This is an example of how guarding against alternative ideas and information is greatly effected by national myths, in this case, perception that the U.S. and capitalist forces are a negative influence on the world.

Unlearning these myths proves to be cumbersome even after defection. Interviewees more or less describe a period of intense reflection of reality once outside of North Korea.

⁴⁵ When I was taking a tour of the DMZ armistice line, tourists must adhere to a certain dress code since they claim the North Koreans will attempt to photograph poorly dressed tourists and use them as propaganda. Anonymous interviewee 1 talks of entering university in University in South Korea, mistakenly buying a sewing kit for a friend as a gift because he noticed her jeans were torn.

⁴⁶ Authors interview with Oh Seyhyek.

⁴⁷ The concept of latitude of rejection versus latitude of acceptance basically states that a persons inclination to accept new information is dependant upon how much that information deviates from currently held beliefs.

While their minds undergo a sense of ‘rebirth’, many old beliefs can still remain. An interviewee tells the story of a young defector who moved to America, and about how his old conceptions of history stuck with him even after living in the outside world:

“He put a message on *Facebook*: “The Japanese are being punished for what they’ve done 60 years ago.” He referred to the Japanese earthquake as a kind of justice. Maybe one year later after coming here [to South Korea], I would say that too.”⁴⁸

Of course, many misconceptions about the world become progressively dispelled. Among them, the myth that the outside world is very poor is expected to be heavily broken down due to massive consumption of high-quality foreign products and images of prosperity depicted in alternative media (Yoon 2007). But evidence presented here shows the various ways that myths continue to sustain themselves, while the process of unlearning propaganda and changing beliefs is arguably a very slow and cumbersome process. In general, all interviewees said that though having been exposed so many different ideas, the level of critical thinking that they have now never really came until they became educated in South Korea.

3.3 Propaganda and Basic Freedoms

Many North Koreans who defected had time to reflect on their upbringing and will often describe themselves as being “brainwashed”. But the realization of being indoctrinated is not something that has seemed to cause bitterness when these defectors look at their past. One finding that may account for this are their cultural attitudes toward the concept of ‘propaganda’, free thinking and expression, and other basic freedoms. ‘Propaganda’ in North Korean language (*seonjeon*) is a word frequently used to describe the way people’s minds are shaped by government forces⁴⁹. But contrary to what one might think, *seonjeon* is not described with negative connotations. Rather, it elevates the morality of state influence on peoples thinking. *Joseon joongang rodongdan seonjeon*, or “North Korean Socialist Workers Propaganda” department is a widely known segment of government known to have crucial roles, rather than a secret conspiratorial entity for social control. People are aware that indoctrination takes place, yet their attitudes have been groomed to view it with a level of acceptance and even praise⁵⁰,

⁴⁸ Authors interview with Oh Sehyek.

⁴⁹ Oh Sehyek describes the concept of propaganda well in my interview with him.

⁵⁰ In the PBS documentary *North Korea – Suspicious Minds* a tourist visiting Pyongyang disputed historical facts over the great famine with his tour guide or minder. The tour guide defended her own assumptions by describing the western interpretations as “propaganda”. Many defectors who learn English appropriate the word “propaganda” to describe foreign influence, but would not dare refer to it by its Korean form “*seonjeon*” within North Korea but it

perhaps reminiscent of celebrating book burning in Nazi Germany. Overall, while many defectors have had feelings of disappointment in society, they did not necessarily attribute it to their own lack of autonomy regarding expression of ideas and other seemingly basic freedoms.

An interviewee says simply “we were taught to be stupid”. Part of that meant accepting that free thinking was not held in high regard, nor was it a rudimentary right that people should possess. He recalls a propaganda billboard (or “banner” as he calls it) reading, “Thinking [or ideas] is the Enemy of Revolution!” (*sengag-eun hyukmyung-ui jeogida!*). He saw many of these banners as just everyday, normal, and at the time he said he remembers his own principles “agreed somewhat” with the banners message. He also recounts the material in his school textbooks, “I learned that Kim Jong Il, screens all the news contents. We learned that in middle school or high school. We saw some picture for example of Kim Jong Il at his desk, looking through a pile of news documents⁵¹.” Perhaps characteristic of its collective nature, North Korean culture to a large extent favors obedience over free agency, and attitudes toward freedom of speech exemplify that.

But censorship is not completely accepted or enforced seeing how foreign media consumption is on the rise in North Korea, especially in the form of DVD’s, which everybody knows is illegal, and for the most part, socially taboo (Yoon 2007, Lankov 2009). While one might interpret this as wide spread defiance, a more accurate interpretation would see this is merely as benign disobedience without the impetus for resistance against repression. “Silencing” voices of a population can be a frequent cause for upheaval in other societies, but North Koreans either do not value the right to voice their specific grievances, or they approach that right with utter bewilderment. An interviewee remembers hearing about human rights on a foreign radio broadcast, about how societies exists where people can say what they wanted and freely criticize their leaders: “It was like a fairy tale, a good story[laughs].”⁵² While North Koreans do complain of the restrictions that bear down on their lives, they do not frequently direct outrage towards the lack of freedom of speech. Attitudes toward repression in this case are perhaps expressed with frustration, but not with outright disgust⁵³. Not being able to say, write or publish whatever they want has become ingrained in their reality.

instead will refer to it as something negative like ‘ideological poisoning.’).

⁵¹ Authors interview Oh Sehhyek.

⁵² Authors interview with Lee Sungjoo,

⁵³ The lack of freedom of speech is treated as a secondary frustration. North Korean defector, Choi Young Hee, says to the BBC “If Kim Jong Il fed the people, even with corn bread, we would not complain. but he made us lose our homes, suffer, die. If his son now takes power I think it's dangerous, you wonder what will happen to North Korea. But inside my country I can't say a word”. A crucial distinction to make here is the difference between heartfelt expression of grievances and everyday grumbling. Aside from the dearth of certain rights, this type of grumbling applies to many other aspects of daily life. And while it acts as a sign of dissatisfaction with the government, it still differs from other more powerful sources of grievances which we will see in the following chapters.

Interviewees say that they and other North Koreans in general do not know about their own freedom, so they don't have any idea on how to fight for it in the first place. It is until they come to South Korea to actually experience it to fully appreciate it:

“I realize that there is freedom of speech, or freedom of travel or freedom to write what you want, but I didn't really know about these kinds of freedoms while in North Korea. It was until I came to South Korea, I realized there is “human rights”, and that is there are a lot of rights people can enjoy. So people in North Korea really just don't know their basic rights. They don't think of it, especially regarding the right to vote and the right to travel. It's very natural.”⁵⁴

As quoted above, the same level of cultural acceptance also applies to the restriction on democratic participation and free movement within North Korea. In terms of travel, only privileged members of society are able to obtain special permits and anyone who carries enough coin can bypass checkpoints through bribery⁵⁵. Merchants carrying foreign goods or people with connections to China (like brokers who carry out tasks for people outside of the country) make up a large segment of travelers. So constraints on traveling within the country are not a significant source of concern as many have undoubtedly found ways to cope with it. With regard to traveling outside of the country, restrictions have also shown not to be a source of grievance nor does it stop people from leaving. According to Myers, “defector” can be a misnomer seeing how half of all North Koreans voluntarily return (Myers 2010:18). The common theme still holds true however: while the rules that hamper the most basic freedoms are commonly broken, they are broken characteristically out of necessity or individual interests. Restrictions in daily life indeed frustrate many, but the attitude and approaches to these restrictions do not reflect indignation nor does it to create an impetus to defiantly oppose the establishment. As will be explained in depth later, personal freedoms have shown to be secondary to other priorities and values, such as food and other more basic means of subsistence.

3.4 Reactions to State Punishment and Violence

“[Violence] is also a form of symbolic action that conveys cultural meanings, most importantly ideas of legitimacy.”(Schroder and Schmidt 2001:8)

A key element of repression is violence and other harsh measures perpetrated by the state, and thus serves as a key research interest when gaining a better sense of common discontent.

⁵⁴ Authors Interview with Gwon Eunbyul.

⁵⁵ This is well documented through the testimony of defector Myeongsook Lee, witness to the many facets of marketization (NKHR Archives 2010a)

North Korea has been said to have resembled “Stalinism”, from its characteristically harsh punishments: ideological ‘re-education’, imprisonment in detention centers, and gulags where beatings, torture, and executions have evidently occurred⁵⁶. This is presumably a very effective, fear-instilling deterrent against disobedience, but I begged to ask: is there another dimension to it when looking at the attitudes toward it? How have North Koreans tolerated this system for so long? If someone is sent to prison, do people see it as wrong? If someone is publicly executed, are people disgusted and shocked by such barbarism? Again, while keeping in mind the recent shift to cynicism toward many government teachings, the attitudes toward the system of laws, contingencies, and justice compose a key ingredient to how people conceptualize their own situation in relation to their government. In this study, evidence shows that North Koreans for the most part do not always support acts of state violence, but on the other hand, succumb to the many forces that condone it.

One area is of course harsh incarceration and punishment through detention and labor camps otherwise known as *kwanliso* and *gyowhaso*. Most North Koreans are aware that labor camps exist, but are oblivious to the details of them.

“In terms of prison camps, detention camps, and torture, people may talk about it with the family, but it is rare for people to talk about it outside. Generally, they are not allowed to because when they get released they have to sign agreement papers never to talk about what they experience under the threat of punishment. People somehow get to know certain things, they know that society functions like that, but they have never heard of or seen certain information directly. Like somewhere in the back of their brains, they know that there are prison camps, and they have to be careful... ..So the lack of information is key here.”⁵⁷

In North Korea, much knowledge of punishment remains implicitly understood as it travels by word of mouth. Interviewees likewise heard about prison camps through this type of informal communication, including an interviewee who remembered the disappearance of a family friend rumored to have gone to political prison camp⁵⁸. It is also important to note here, that current events and general happenings that effect society most frequently travel by word of mouth according to interviewees; phenomena of state punishment serve as a good example of how this works.

According to defectors, the legal system in North Korea is not seen as an independent, impartial body from the government, nor is the law perceived to be enforced consistently (Lee, Gerber 2009:32). In addition, it is viewed simply as a branch of government that helps assert

⁵⁶ A substantial bulk of research favors gathering evidence of human rights abuse when utilizing defector testimony. Evidence of harsh treatment by the regime thus does not run in short supply. For full details, look at white papers by the Ministry of Unification KINU and the Korean Bar Association (2010, 2010).

⁵⁷ Authors Interview with Joanna Hosaniak, Lead researcher at NKHR, who has worked extensively with North Korean defectors on this subject, for example conducting research for NKHR reports on torture and the abuse of women. (Lee and Hosaniak 2011)

⁵⁸ Authors interview with Oh Sehyek.

control, while upholding Kim Jong Il and Kim Il Sung's primacy above any law. Crimes interpreted as threats against the regime itself carry the harshest punishments, and evidence points out that many people expect these prisoners to die, typically as a result of starvation while living in camps. (Kang, Lee, Choi, & Ahn, 1998 in Lee Gerber 2009:28).

So what then are people's attitudes toward the *victims* of this system of arbitrary enforcement? Researcher, Joanna Hosaniak continued:

“Many people especially those who have better status in NK, having nothing bad happening to them, they think that these people have actually done something wrong, and it was deserving of them to be in those places. Prison guards recite ideals taught in their education and they will actually believe them, ‘Those people are criminals, they were trying to kill Kim Jong Il!’.”⁵⁹

An interviewee confirms this notion given his take on society, “most people would think that it is right. We were taught for a long time that it is mostly right.”⁶⁰

This is further demonstrated by reactions toward public executions, a much more drastic display of state brutality against dissenters to the general public. During the UNHRC Universal Periodic Review held in 2009, a representative from North Korea unexpectedly acknowledged the practice of public executions in the face of the international community (KINU 2011:15). Although not as frequently occurring as in the past, the practice of it has been reportedly widespread (KINU 2011:15). Causes are typically due to anti-regime offenses or extreme infraction of socialist principles⁶¹. According to NKHR researcher Younghwan Lee, many defectors convey that these executions do not evoke outrage or disgust and can be considered legitimate and necessary:

“They take it for granted. They think its natural, and they think they deserve to be killed by the government. It is only when they leave the country, they start to realize how inhumane, and how ‘too-much’ it is to kill. Inside, they have no chance to experience any other civil society to realize what is wrong with it”⁶²

Furthermore, an interviewee claimed to have witnessed four separate public executions in the Chongjin region:

“I saw a public execution. I saw them being shot. I saw it four times. It was like a form of brainwashing. Everyone said, ‘If we do like this, you will be killed by the government. So I will not do like this, this is really bad.’ First time, it was really shocking. Second time: ‘Oh he deserved it!’... Well if someone is stealing is executed, [it wasn't right]. But it depends on

⁵⁹ *ibid.*

⁶⁰ He acknowledges from what he judges up to the time of his emigration from the country.

⁶¹ Authors Interview with Lee Sungjoo, who witnessed four public executions. Another cited offense was a person who killed a cow to eat while fending off starvation. Sungjoo partly interprets this as major offense since a cow can be analogous to a “worker”.

⁶² Authors interview with NKHR researcher Joanna Hosaniak. Ahn Myungchul, a famous defector who was a former prison guard recounts these sentiments well (NKHR Archives 1996b:24)

what they are stealing. If it is like iron from a government factory, it means, ‘Wow he is against North Korea!’”

The other side to consider is that defectors have said public execution was not only condemned in their minds, but it was a catalyst to start questioning the benign intentions of the regime⁶³. Nonetheless, most evidence points to the fact that harsh punishments, especially in the form of public executions are not always looked upon as repressive attempts to scare people into submission. People perhaps may question appropriateness of such severe measures, but the regime for the most part has reason to remain legitimate in the mind of many citizens.

I can only theorize exactly why people would continue to accept these restrictive norms, whether it is due to government propaganda, or perhaps their ability to cope and bypass these restrictions when needed. With violence for example, interviewees said that their attitudes toward violence and death had greatly changed since being in South Korea. One interviewee states regarding the Japanese earthquake in 2010, I learned in South Korea that when people are in trouble, you have to express sympathy to them and mourn the dead people no matter what country they are from.” Another interviewee contrasts reactions to public execution between North Koreans and South Koreans, “Other [North Korean] people who saw and it was like this [mild frown], but then I tell people in South Korea, and people are outraged. People don’t believe it. Many don’t, but they have to live in North Korea to truly understand that.”⁶⁴ Whether or not violence has become widely accepted by most North Koreans, evidence presented here nonetheless indicate that violent “repression” has in many ways become normalized and thus does not evoke a brand of outrage that necessitates action against the regime.

3.5 Summary

So harsh rhetoric criticizing the regime, for example the rogue vandalism of Kim Jong Il’s portrait and other sentiments of discontent that yearn for political freedoms, is an example of rare discourse that does not appear to be shared or even known to the everyday citizen. The speculated dissident movement responsible for the graffiti is also not something that is well known among scholars on North Korea, and is suspected to be the work of foreign journalists in

⁶³ Authors interview with anonymous defector 2 in Seoul, who witnessed public execution at the age of 19. In addition, anonymous defector named Mr. Park said it was a basis for his joining a dissident movement against the regime (Dispatch – Undercover in the Secret State 2008)

⁶⁴ Authors interview with Lee Sungjoo

China⁶⁵. Politically charged actions against the regime has perhaps become *commercialized* to the extent it falsely suggests a powerful underground social movement, but there exists very little information on it as of late. Interviewees, including the ones that most recently defected, testify to never seeing or hearing rumors of organized resistance movements⁶⁶.

In conclusion, these aforementioned forms of repression are for the most part tolerated and have arguably become a part of everyday reality. In essence, the state benefits from this discourse by allowing people to accept what ever is given to them. But not all things are passively accepted. While the repression of freedoms has not caused much of stir, discontent among North Koreans have shown to be fueled by other factors. As we see in the following section, it has much more to do with the cultural system of social hierarchy and its relation to economic well-being.

⁶⁵ NKHR researcher Younghwan Lee says he expects it to be the work of a Japanese Journalist, Ishmaru Jiro who trains North Korean defectors in China to collect secret footage of life in North Korea, including the workings of its so called underground movement, dubbed “the Freedom Youth League”. But very little information exists on this as of late, likely because they must work in secret (see Rimjingang: Asia Press.org 2011)

⁶⁶ Particularly, in an interview with Jang Oksung, she states that any movement would be hopeless because surveillance always seems to catch all suspicious behaviors. Younghwan Lee confirms this. In his experience with many defectors, he has never heard of underground movements.

IV. SOCIAL STRUCTURE AND THE RULES OF THE GAME

In North Korean society, *structure matters*. To get a good idea of the beliefs and values held by average North Koreans in everyday life, the system of social hierarchy must be put into focus. At first glance, contemporary North Korean society may seem relatively unstructured, having descended into a state of disobedience and corruption. Famine and extreme poverty had forced people to fend for themselves, often by desperate, illegal, and socially unacceptable means which have in many ways defied the set structure of society. But I argue here, that despite the shaken foundations of social structure due to the emergence of free market capitalism, evidence shows that people have in most ways adhered to the classic system of explicit and implicit social status determined by nobility of family background, education, occupational prestige, government party membership, region of residence, individual state records, and wealth among the most important factors.

The significance of the hierarchical structure is not only is a representation of people's values and beliefs, it also can carry the power to perpetually define those very values and beliefs. The North Korean societal structure is not simply a cultural phenomenon, it is a concept so significant that it determines how one will live for the rest of their life, defining interpersonal relations, life goals, and perhaps most significantly, one's own survival. As a result, it plays a substantial role in preserving and legitimizing harsh inequalities. In short, the structure is a fundamental component of the culture of non-resistance, in the end serving those who sit at the top.

This chapter provides a basic overview of the traditional structure, highlights the importance of discrimination within the structure, and identifies the role of money to ultimately illuminate how people favor satisfying basic needs over defiant action against the regime.

4.1 Hierarchy Social Background and "Origins"

Almost all relevant scholars have taken note that the hierarchical tradition of North Korean society has been initially founded on Confucian principles. In a nutshell, the Confucian hierarchy defines society through *familial* relations and structures, and hence is guided under a patriarchal figure while high social standing should always be respected by all subordinates. To parallel a small example, anyone who experiences South Korean culture can confirm the

strong sense of Confucian structures permeating everyday interactions. For instance, it is considered rude to address a person of higher standing (like an older person or an office supervisor) by their first name or to speak in a non-honorific form (*nopimmal*). Prominent scholar Bruce Cumings (along with many others), have noted that this strong cultural tradition has allowed North Korea to maintain its uniform structure and organization for so long (1995). Most importantly, it remains a key element of control and supervision, reminiscent of a blueprint of the *panopticon tower* where higher levels always supervise subordinate levels and so on.

Beyond Confucian philosophy, the intricate network of social hierarchy is largely influenced by beliefs surrounding one's officially determined status in society. Since the 1950's the Kim regime conducted political examinations to map out people's places within the system, using a criterion based more-or-less on a person's loyalty to the regime – though the regime will officially define “loyalty” as toward the socialist collective (Presentation by Oh 2003). These overlapping categories are based on concepts of “origin” (*songbun*) which is one's family background, and general history of loyalty to the state. (Lankov 2006:115). The most basic criterion for this can be broken down into three classes: the core class (*haeksim kyechung*), the wavering class (*tongyo kyechung*) and the hostile class (*joktae kyechung*) which South Korean authorities have said to make up 30%, 50% and 20% of the North Korean population respectively (KINU 2010:155, Hassig and Oh 2009:198). Those in the *core class* are people with good histories of loyalty to the state, carry prestigious positions, and enjoy a relatively high amount of privilege⁶⁷. Those in the *hostile class* for example can experience discrimination on the government level, for example having less rations distributed by the central government. One's status determines the quantity of rations and its nutritional quality (Lankov 2006:110). It also likely to come into review when one seeks placement for a job, housing or travel permit (Presentation by Oh 2003). The record is constantly updated and is likely to follow a person around for the rest of their lives, and even carry over to subsequent generations.

A very rudimentary concern regarding social background is the ability to find a job. A survey study of North Korean defectors in South Korea showed that above all else North Koreans value having a job and working (Hosaniak and Lee 2011). Jobs are not only a way to make money for subsistence, but they are also measure of social importance. An example of this can be well demonstrated by an interviewee whose main reason to defect was through her story of ‘falling from grace’, starting out as a daughter of a high military official.

⁶⁷ Many core class people are lauded for having military backgrounds, being descendents of guerilla fighters against Japan. Many of them live in the capital city Pyeongyang as well (Hassig and Oh 2009).

“My mother and my sister already left to South Korea and the government learned it. So as punishment they kicked me out of the military. So when I left, it was very hard for me to get a job. I didn’t have any special skills or abilities to do something, and thus suffered a lot of financial problems from that. I was 25 years old, which is a right age for marriage, but I felt hopeless because I couldn’t get a job, so I couldn’t do much else, and people were telling me to get married as a solution.”⁶⁸

Just as important is how this system plays out at the interpersonal level. These state concepts of social background shape subjective perceptions one’s social standing and likely dictates exactly how one person treats another person, perhaps even for the rest of their life. An interviewee mentions that he had little reservations in helping bully kids at school who had “bad backgrounds”, namely a child whose family member was punished for a state offense, saying “I seriously felt hatred toward them and other people with bad backgrounds”. Based on his experiences with defectors, Younghwan Lee adds:

“Officially North Korean kids should get a universal education provided by the government. But when we take a close look into the situation, for example inside classrooms, when we follow up on their daily life at home, or in class rooms, or even when they go on picnics together, they can see or feel various types of social discrimination according to for example, their parents, and their family background, and their parents positions in relation to the political power structure.”⁶⁹

In sum, social background has the power to both quickly excel or stymie ones own life progress in the end determining one’s education, job, government benefits, personal security and general survival. And being one of the most powerful determinants of life chances, the primary beneficiaries of this cultural system are those at the top.

4.2 Discontent from Social Discrimination

“We just do what we think is right, we just do what we are told”
- Anonymous North Korean (Lee, Gerber 2009:34).

The intricate system of disparate social backgrounds breeds one of the most important dimensions of discontent: *social discrimination*. This has been a frequently overlooked factor when understanding the needs of North Koreans. According to NKHR researcher Younghwan Lee, an all-too-common error occurs when researchers attribute dissatisfaction with North Korean society, in particular the willingness to defect, solely on economic factors⁷⁰. More

⁶⁸ Authors Interview with Gwon Eunbyul.

⁶⁹ Authors Interview with Younghwan Lee.

⁷⁰ NKHR researcher explains this thought as one the most common pitfalls for researchers studying North Korea since the question “why did you defect?” is one of the most common questions asked. For examples of authors who

careful interviewing and exploration often establishes that economic difficulties were just a byproduct among many other undesirable circumstances brought on by poor social standing and various forms of discrimination. In a study done with North Korean refugees, respondents prioritized a list of human rights and half of them placed “right not to be discriminated against” at number one which far eclipsed other human rights such as ‘freedom of expression’, ‘social welfare’, ‘security’, ‘physical integrity’, and ‘self determination.’ (Park H.S. et. al. 2005:12) In essence, the well demonstrated distaste for the negative consequences of social discrimination suggests its prevalence and elevates the role of structure in people’s values and concerns.

Most profound is the way this structure displaces blame of failures, injustices, or innate flaws in the system, away from authorities. People do not like having to live with a system of discrimination, yet instead of attributing blame to its intrinsic nature, people have shown to turn the blame on their innate origins. Interviewee Oh Sehyek effectively describes this idea: “Blame was always on individuals and never the officials.” He told a story of his inability to do designated manual labor due to a foot injury keeping him from reaching his worksite. He was punished and called in for “self criticism sessions”⁷¹ where he was required to affirm his own immoral lack of work ethic in front of an audience. He reflected on the experience afterward saying that while he was mad at his superiors for reporting him, he mainly cursed his own social background, in particular his family origins. “People hate discrimination and it happens all the time, but people don’t blame the system, they regret instead being born into a family.” Gwon Eunbyul found herself incredibly bitter about her discriminatory discharge from the military due to the actions of her family, but did not direct any animosity toward the government per se, “I felt betrayed by society. I was very disappointed because I couldn’t believe that I had to take so much responsibility for the actions of my sister and mother [who defected].”

Feelings that absolve ruling regime’s accountability for discrimination are common among many defectors. The phrases like *jayooronseurobta* meaning “natural” or *ochulsoo obta* or meaning “one has no choice to but accept these conditions” come up frequently to illustrate people’s beliefs of acceptance of unfavorable norms and the general status quo. NKHR researcher Younghwan Lee supports this notion in his experience with defectors, saying

assume this line of thought, B.R. Myers for example sees defectors as not people who no longer fit in to North Korean society, but instead are mainly “economic migrants” since so many return to North Korea(2010). Haggard, Noland, and Chang have noticed poor social standing of a survey of hundreds of refugees, but do not elevate its importance, suggesting that economic factors serve as the primary rationale for defection (2009).

⁷¹ Authors interview with Oh Sehyek. “Self criticism sessions” was and perhaps still remains common practice to affirm socialist ethics. The story of Mrs. Song from Demick’s book well demonstrates “Mrs. Song would usually say in all sincerity, that she feared she wasn’t working hard enough. Mrs. Song believed what she said. All those years of sleep deprivation, all those lectures and self criticism- the very same tools used in brainwashing or interrogations- had wiped out any possibility of resistance.(2009:46)

“They usually say that it’s the destiny of an individual and it is their duty or responsibility for any kind of crime or bad circumstance.” “Ordinary masses usually take bad conditions they face for granted as they simply regard it ‘an unavoidable destiny’ which is supposed to be passed onto their descendants”⁷²

Instead of people seeing more radical ways to defy authority structures, most are instead left to either accept their fate, or “play by the rules” to do what they can to move up the social ladder. In the end, the regime’s mechanisms for social control escape any culpability for society’s general dissatisfaction with the system. The regime was very successful in designing an all encompassing scheme powerful enough to force all members of society to participate, which in the end either justifies the inequalities in society, or protects against people from speaking out about those inequalities.

4.3 Simple Needs and Role of Money

“I never really thought about [Kim Jong Il and Kim Il Sung] much. Because the first thing I wanted was food. And then you can think about politics and other things. Many people are starving, their goal is food, so they don’t care about politics. That is why there is no revolution.” -Interviewee, Lee Sungjoo

Of course recent times have seen the traditional belief structure surrounding innate origins defied by money and free market capitalism. After all, the emergence of an independent economy has allowed the people to subsist without depending on government structures for well over 15 years. The concentration of money at the grass roots level thereby carries a lot of power and influence, which has “greased the wheels”⁷³ so-to-speak to help break down a rigid status quo. Despite a traditionally held cultural stigma on money, as socialist ideals malign its attractiveness, money has become a crucial aim among most North Koreans. Accordingly, looking into why they value money, the existence of simple needs becomes ever so apparent. Money allows one to feed oneself, protect oneself, and climb up the social ladder. One of the most famous North Korean defectors, Kang Chul Hwan, states, “Kim Jong Il’s basic policy is to make people focus on their everyday lives so that they become too busy to pay attention to other aspects of life.” (NKHR Archives 1996:19). To that effect, I argue that these simple needs reflect the absence of resistant behavior toward the regime. While money does create a very destabilizing effect, its usage tends to comply with the preexisting societal structures, or “rules of the game”, that have characteristically guarded society against radical

⁷² In an email with Younghwan Lee 22 June 2011.

⁷³ This term is used in (Haggard and Noland 2011).

change.

The sense of conviction against capitalism has been a strong ingredient of propaganda literature⁷⁴ yet the unparalleled utility of money cannot be contested any longer. An interviewee sums it up well,

“[North Koreans] really *really* love money, more than Kim Jong Il. Kim Jong Il is nothing. Money is here [*raises hand high*]. Kind of like capitalism Merchants pretend money is bad. When you talk to them in a private place, they will say money is good. Police say it too. Everyone has to pretend money is bad. [“Even in these sprawling markets?”] I don’t know. Everybody thinks money is bad in socialism but the reality is, everyone loves money. They need it. They can do everything with money. They can pay off the police. That’s why police aren’t really police. “Money talks” in North Korea a lot.”⁷⁵

In addition, interviewees and countless other refugee accounts typically cited money as reasons for defecting from North Korea⁷⁶. Once they get to China they work a lot less to earn much more. Although it was previously argued that distaste for discrimination was a pivotal factor for leaving, the immediate effects are presumably felt most through the lack of money.

Despite a sense of shame in loving money, it certainly gains leverage in most other aspects of daily life, including the elevation of social standing. High status and money can go hand-in-hand, especially in modern times where bribery and corruption are often used to achieve social ends. In many cases, money and position are combined to clear blemishes on one’s state records to ensure a good education, a job, or a decent place to live⁷⁷. Higher social standing also can mean less surveillance and more freedom to do certain things without fear of arrest or incarceration, along with better freedom to earn income from market activities. One interviewee talks about how this emerging class of rich women⁷⁸ have become very desirable prospects for marriage:

“In the past, a man wanted to marry a woman who comes from a good social background, but nowadays, a woman with a lot of money looks more favorable now and men are seeking out women who can economically secure them. In the past, teachers were good for wives because they were highly respected with good backgrounds, and because they played an important role in society. But today, women who can earn money are very favorable.”⁷⁹

⁷⁴ The account of one North Korean refugee, Mrs. Song, demonstrates this through her history as a genuinely loyal party member, so reluctant to participate in the free market to feed herself, that she eventually collapsed from hunger (Demick 2009:61). see also(Annex A3).

⁷⁵ Authors interview with Lee Sungjoo.

⁷⁶ Oh Sehyek in particular said money was an important factor. Anonymous defectors 2 and 4 interviewed also support this notion along with archived testimonies (NKHR Archives 2010b, 2010c)

⁷⁷ Based on authors interview with NKHR researcher Joanna Hosaniak.

⁷⁸ Men commonly have government positions where they are required to report to their post, while women who are frequently listed as homemakers in government records have the freedom use their spare time managing their business in the market(Hassig and Oh 2009:113).

⁷⁹ Authors interview with Jang Oksung. She was a teacher in North Korea.

Social status and money have essentially melded together. But this only represents a change in the *means*, while I argue that the *ends* steadfastly remain the same. When goals are geared toward securing good position in society for example, it suggests a perpetuation of the same values linked to the traditional social structure.

I discussed earlier how complex political freedoms were prioritized lower than simple economic freedoms. Interestingly, the government impingement on people's rights for basic economic subsistence has evidently been the largest cause for upheaval. An interviewee declares, "If there is a protest, it would of course be about food. The first priority will be sustaining their life with food. The second biggest complaint would be people complaining against the government."⁸⁰ In this manner, there have been many reports of unrest, especially in places of independent commerce where food is commonly bought and sold⁸¹ (Im 2011). Haggard and Noland cite proof of organized resistance, suggesting that the foundation of discontent have birthed protests and demonstrations in marketplaces (Bradley, Takayama 2009 in Haggard Noland 2010). But while these forms of "resistance" occurred, they may be falsely interpreted as people acting on discontent with the government. For example, these demonstrations fundamentally lack any articulation or meaningful purpose other than immediate frustration. Voicing grievances can look like government protest to an outside observer, but according to researchers' experience with North Koreans, it has nothing to do with the 'big-picture' struggle against authoritarian powers:

"Many news articles say that [protests] exist. They attempt to demonstrate resistance and discontent toward the government. I cannot be sure if it happens a lot. To me, the demonstrations are just expressing of their emotions. It is not organized, and it happens very quickly. It doesn't happen to any degree to threaten the government or to stand against the government. They simply express that they want food, that they want a freer market, or that they want the right to buy and sell goods; really, simple requests. The government can consider whether or not it's to a degree that threatens the system."⁸²

NKHR researcher Joanna Hosaniak seconds this notion:

"I think it is very natural what is happening in North Korea, because it has also happened in other communist countries. The economic deterioration has reached a certain point where people have started to complain. But these are utterances, like daily complaints when they are on the streets. They are cranky and that they do not like this and that..." "When authorities, police came and confiscated your [merchant] cart, and moved similar groups with carts, these people will be angry, and they will voice it out, and they can demonstrate. But they will do so just because, 'they took my cart!', not because 'they took my neighbors!'. It's not because they think the system is wrong, it is just, 'they took my cart, give it back!'"⁸³

⁸⁰ Authors interview with Gwon Eunbyul.

⁸¹ Daily NK Newspaper has had informants equipped with cell phones report numerous examples of unrest. Of course, whether or not these reports are accurate or exaggerated is certainly debatable.

⁸² Authors interview with NKHR researcher Younghwan Lee.

⁸³ Authors interview with NKHR researcher Joanna Hosaniak.

4.4. Summary

Overall, based on the aforementioned findings we see that from a cultural perspective, societal hierarchies underlie many avenues of human agency. The social structure has been frequently cited in other literature, but has not been honed in on as a factor defining people's beliefs within North Korea. The evidence here shows that it plays in very fundamental element to people's lives, and thus very noteworthy to any potential resistance movements. Focusing on the structural dimensions of North Korean society has revealed what peoples beliefs, values, and priorities are. Ones social position within this special structure can essentially 'make or brake' an individual in all aspects of his or her life (food, work, marriage, overcoming discrimination, personal safety), hence one seemingly has no choice but to continue to play by "the rules of the game" to secure their own wellbeing. The 'mad-dash for money' effectively summarizes the crucial differentiation between disobedience and defiance. Evidence shows that examples of discontent reflect simpler needs conducive to individual survival and success within the hierarchical structure. Notwithstanding unprecedented organized demonstrations, they are ultimately not intended to change society's rules, nor are they necessarily creating new structures of resistance against the government.

CONCLUSION

“North Koreans are conflicted but they do not dwell on it”-(Hassig and Oh 2009:171).

The overarching theme here is the uncanny persistence of seemingly extraordinary or abnormal circumstances. For instance, in his final report to the UNHRC, the UN Special Rapporteur, Vitit Muntarbhorn, made an “unmistakable discovery” after six years of service assessing the human rights situation in North Korea: the phenomenon of pervasive, state-sanctioned human rights abuse against its people has become a “permanent feature” of North Korean society (KINU 2010:16). While I can only speculate what he meant by “permanent”, he was likely surprised by the powerful legitimizing effect on authoritarian governance, or in this case, as argued, “a culture of non-resistance”.

My research puzzle necessitated a critical analysis of norms, values, and beliefs of everyday North Korean consciousness, and as a result, revealed the many potent cultural mechanisms that allow repression to become tolerated and eventually normalized. Despite highlighted suggestions of dissident political movements in the media, North Korean discourse does not reflect a natural yearning for certain socio-political needs such as personal freedoms, autonomy from government, or balanced democratic participation. The average citizen lacks familiarity with anything other than the state’s prescribed interpretations on how society should be, hence they lack a proper frame of reference to spot critical systemic flaws. We have also seen that the threat of state violence and harsh contingencies are something’s that have also been successfully adapted into society. Discourse, in effect, has shown to legitimize the hardened social order through the lack of fundamental worldly knowledge of economics, human rights, and political institutions.

The other mechanism of preservation is evidently North Korea’s cultural structure. Despite new economic empowerment at the grassroots level, there is still a profound robustness of the implied social hierarchy, which by design maintains the traditional order of society. The influence of structure becomes very apparent through the elevated importance of one’s innate social background, and people’s strong aversion to social discrimination. Related to the social structure is money, and its role in fulfilling simple needs. Propensity to openly defy authority seems strong when the government stands in the way of one’s means of basic subsistence, for example seizing money assets or limiting economic freedoms, but incidences of protest should not be mistaken for fervent anti-regime resistance movements since they appear to only reflect

immediate and simple frustrations.

At this point, I would like to make two points of clarification. Firstly, this analysis does not claim that cultural factors are the only blockade to social progress in North Korean society. Other instruments of fear, physical coercion, and political and economic control, are obviously very real determinants that stifle defiant action against the government. My argument is that these instruments simply do not suffice alone to explain the continued stability of an arguably shaken North Korea. Secondly, declaring the existence of “a culture of non-resistance” is in no way intended to undermine the growing evidence of progressive change, including changes to the *culture* itself⁸⁴. The highlighted evidence shows the many processes that can explain how the system sustained itself in the past, and merely foreshadows how it can sustain itself in the future. More specifically, I assume that the progression of North Korean society will result in changes to the aforementioned cultural phenomena that legitimizes repression: the state being the primary determinant of discourse and the people’s allegiance to the social structure. If these components are effectively broken down, then change should theoretically be possible and the beginnings of organized social movements should start to take shape. While I make no firm predictions nor set any time tables, it is nonetheless important to analyze how things change, by first understanding how and why things stay the same.

So what then is the *practical* future of these legitimizing cultural mechanisms? Given this presented analysis, we can see that a critical problem standing in the way of progress is the regimes uncanny capacity to escape accountability for the many unfavorable outcomes in North Korean society. We have seen processes of blame deflected from the government onto other less fortunate people, leaving in its wake a sense of hopelessness that the system can ever be fundamentally changed. But one final observation to note is how North Koreans’ situations become remarkably apparent when they are given a strong basis for relative comparison, namely from being educated in the realities of the outside world. In this very spirit, prominent scholar Andrei Lankov has theorized that an information campaign is probably one of the most practical and effective ways to bring about social change as it breaks down many misconceptions including “myths of prosperity” (2009). Furthermore, Haggard and Noland also conclude in their study of refugees that those with a higher education seem to be more aware of their situations in North Korea (2010). Essentially, education breeds skepticism. The efficacy of

⁸⁴ Evidence of change is nonetheless astounding. Interviews with North Korean refugees that have more recently defected have demonstrate a very dramatic difference in beliefs, lifestyles, and outlooks on the way society functions compared to those interviewees who left the country years earlier. Gwon Eunbyul who had left the country in 2010 (the prior year) could have been theoretically punished much harsher from having family defect. She adds, “Because in past, not many people complained a lot. People are complaining more and more, and so since too many people are breaking the law, they will not be sent to prison like they would in the past, or else the prisons would overflow.”

an information campaign is certainly a separate debate for another day, however, to tie back to the findings in this analysis, any plan of action that addresses the aforementioned components of culture could potentially yield strong effects. For instance, a campaign could instill a sense of value in human rights, help hold the regime more accountable for its actions through information, or be used as an educational tool to empower those at the bottom of the social structure; these potential possibilities could very well put principles into practice. But regardless of whether or not this could work, I acknowledge I am quite powerless with predictive matters given the mystifying nature of North Korean society, not to mention the slew of false prophets who similiary attempted to grasp it like I did. But in the end, my core assertion still remains: true progress is not likely to occur unless there is a fundamental break in the culture of non-resistance.

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ANNEX

A1. Interview Details

NORTH KOREAN DEFECTOR TESTIMONY FROM FORMAL, SEMI STRUCTURED INTERVIEWING								
Name (Alias)	Sex/ Age	Date of Interview	Year of Defection	Year of Entry into South Korea	Place of residence/Home town	Former Occupation in North Korea	Current occupation	Interview language
GWON Eunbyul	F/24	27 MAY 2011	2010	2010	Cheongjin, North Hamgyeong Province	Military service woman	Student	Korean with Interpreter
JANG Oksung	F/26	24 MAY 2011	2009	2010	South Hwangyeodo Province	Middle School teacher	Student	Korean with Interpreter
LEE Sungjoo	M/25	04 JUNE 2011	2004	2004	Cheongjin, North Hamgyeong Province	Dropped out student/live stock farmer	University Student	English
OH Sehhyek	M/33	13 MAY 2011	1999	2000	Western Haeju	Student/Laborer (was to enter the military)	Masters Student	English
ADDITIONAL DEFECTOR TESTIMONEY, INFORMAL INTERVIEWING, QUESTIONING								
Anonymous 1	M/?	15 MAY 2011	2002	2003	?	Government employee/late Camp Prisoner	?	Korean with Interpreter
Anonymous 2	M/25	24 FEB 2011	?	?	North Pyeong Ahn	Military Serviceman	Student	English
Anonymous 3	F/?	25 MAR 2011	?	?	?	Camp prisoner	?	Korean with Interpreter
Anonymous 4	M/?	02 JUNE 2011	?	?	?	Dropped out student/Orphan	?	Korean with Interpreter

INTERVIEWS WITH EXPERTS ON NORTH KOREA		
Name	Date of Interview	Title /Position
Joanna Hosaniak	23 MAY 2011	Head Researcher at Citizens Alliance for North Korean Human Rights
Younghwan Lee	05 APRIL 2011	(Former)Head Researcher at Citizens Alliance for North Korean Human Rights. Now: Presidential Council for Future and Vision Republic of Korea.

*All transcripts available

A2. Interview Question Framework

Protocol:

- Use Name or Pseudonym?
- Record interview, transcribe on the spot, or take notes? Assure that audio is only for me to listen to. If transcribed, will be done to not misquote subject.
- Introduce Self, position,
- Inform very briefly subject of interest without getting too much into details.

To Interpreter:

- Give brief overview of research topic and interests
- As to be polite and sensitive, especially in tone of language.
- Warn of linguistic difficulties and do not hesitate to ask for clarification

Basic Info:

- Name Date of Arrival to South Korea
- Home Town
- Former Occupation
- Hobbies
- Age

Questions:

(NOTE: Questions were NOT worded exactly as below. Questions below are simple guidelines to ease into certain subject areas in a more organic fashion. Extra care is put into using very *simple* language with a mindful eye on words that do not semantically translate well)

-Many say that North Koreans live dual lives/dual personalities. 1) loyal socialist 2) private life that where beliefs are different. Do you feel this way?

-Was there a moment (an incident, or piece of information, or experience) that had a very strong effect in changing your about your government (either your faith in the system, or faith in the leaders)?

-Bring up example of propaganda, counter propaganda. How do people know what is true and what is false?

-Did you ever hear stories of people working, organizing, making deliberate efforts to fight against the regime?

-Perhaps put most simply. Why don't North Koreans organize and rebel? (Avoid simple questions about "what is your opinion on the 'regime'")?

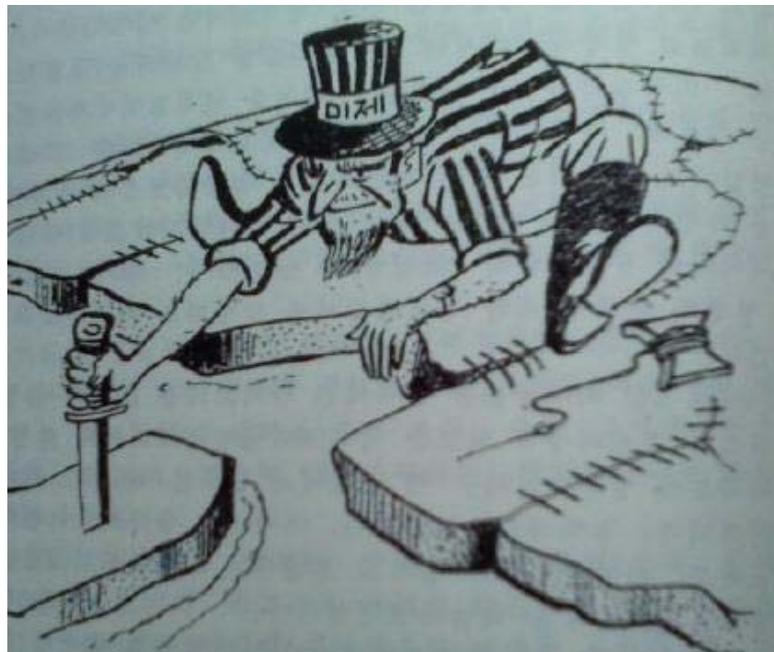
-When things go wrong (shortage of food, punishment by police) people tend to blame someone (other people, the government, institutions) who was typically blamed when...?

-How does one define atrocity? What are some examples of news, or phenomenon around your city that really took you aback (public executions, starvation, murder, theft, etc.)

-How do you make sense of society in terms of different groups? Are there different groups in society? For example in old Korean history there was *yangban* (gentry) and *sangmin* (commoners). Is there ever a sense of group togetherness against the government? How do social networks work? How do people make friends? What qualities do you and your friends have in common (jobs, social status etc)? How readily do people help each other?

-How do you define...? (freedom *jayoo* democracy *minju*, justice, propaganda equality, corruption, and other civil society, political concepts) Please give an example of this concept. How important are they to you? Did you ever feel angry about the absence of certain rights?

A3. Visual Aids, Images



An Uncle Sam looking figure stitches land to symbolize imperialism. His hat reads U.S.A. [Source: *The Evil of U.S. Imperialist Jackals*(1983)]



Bowing are different officials of state [Source: *The Evil of U.S. Imperialist Jackals*(1983)]



An American capitalist elite, eating from a bucket reading: “blood and sweat of immigrants” [Source: *The Evil of U.S. Imperialist Jackals*(1983)]



Westerners/Americans are always portrayed with hook noses [Source: *The Evil of U.S. Imperialist Jackals*(1983)]