



# The Emergence of a New Generation:

The Generational Experience and Characteristics of  
Young North Koreans

Cho, Jeong-ah  
Cho, Young-ju  
Cho, Eun-hee  
Choi, Eun-young  
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Study Series 14-03



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**Printed** May 2014

**Published** May 2014

**Published by** Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU)

**Publisher** President, Korea Institute for National Unification

**Editor** External Cooperation Team, Division of Planning and Coordination

**Registration number** No.2-2361 (April 23, 1997)

**Address** 123, 4.19ro (Suyudong), Gangbuk-gu, Seoul 142-728, Korea

**Telephone** (82-2) 901-2685

**Fax** (82-2) 901-2572

**Homepage** <http://www.kinu.or.kr>

**Design/Print** Hyundai Artcom (82-2) 2278-4482

**ISBN** 978-89-8479-762-8 93340

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All KINU publications are available for purchase at all major bookstores in Korea.  
Also available at the Government Printing Office Sales Center  
Store (82-2) 734-6818; Office (82-2) 394-0337

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# Introduction



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# 1. Introduction

Through the course of economic hardships and spontaneous marketization, the social consciousness and mindset of the North Korean people have changed. In turn, this has become a major factor to the cohesiveness and stability of the North Korean society. The economic crisis of the mid-1990s and the marketization which began around 2000 is a historical event and process which has most profoundly changed the North Koreans' lifestyles since the launch of the socialist regime. The set of values formed during childhood and life experiences imprinted in one's ego are characterized by irreversibility, making them difficult to alter after one matures into adulthood. In addition, the experience of historical change in adolescence, a determinative period in the formation of one's identity, values, and devotion to ideologies, has a major influence on the identity and value formation of youth.<sup>1)</sup> It can be surmised that compared to other generations, the generation born during or having spent their infancy during the period of economic crisis are more

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1) Gisela Trommsdorff, "Subjective experience of social change in individual development," J. Bynner and R. K. Silbereisen (eds), *Adversity and Challenge in Life in the New Germany and in England* (New York: ST. MARTIN'S Press, INC., 2000), pp. 91~92.

gravely influenced by social changes of economic crises and marketization. If specific life experiences arising from social change and the resulting characteristics surface as general social characteristics of a certain contemporary age group, it in turn acts as a major factor of social change. In particular, if the ‘new generation’ which forms the ruling base of the North Korean system under Kim Jong-un is qualitatively different from former generations, it will have great implications on the changes of the North Korean society as well as regime stability. Thus, this research aims to analyze common generational experiences held by North Korean youth who spent their infancy and childhood during times of economic crisis and marketization as a ‘generation’ in a specific social and historical process, and what common hallmarks they have formed as a result.

This research tentatively defines subjects of analysis as the age group in their mid-teens to late-twenties. According to Karl Mannheim,

Members of a generation are ‘similarly located’, first of all, in so far as they all are exposed to the same phase of the collective process. ... The fact that people are born at the same time, or that their youth, adulthood, and old age coincide, does not in itself involve similarity of location; what does create a similar location is that they are in a position to experience the same events and data, etc., and especially that these experiences impinge upon a similarly ‘stratified’ consciousness.<sup>2)</sup> ... Whereas mere common ‘location’

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2) Karl Mannheim *From Karl Mannheim* (New Brunswick, U.S.A Transaction, 1993), p. 372.

in a generation is of only potential significance, a generation as an actuality is constituted when similarly ‘located’ contemporaries participate in a common destiny and in the ideas and concepts which are in some way bound up with its unfolding.<sup>3)</sup> ... We shall therefore speak of a generation as an actuality only where a concrete bond is created between members of a generation by their being exposed to the social and intellectual symptoms of a process of dynamic de-stabilization.<sup>4)</sup>

Based on Mannheim’s theory of generation, this research focuses on the common experiences of young North Koreans. In identifying the characteristics of this generation, a key task is to understand how the age group called the ‘new generation’ experienced socio-economic changes that transformed the everyday lives of North Koreans and consequently, what common sentiments were formed. This research gives attention to the fact that early impressions and experiences of adolescence and childhood have determinative effects on the formation of an individual’s social consciousness. Experiences gained during one’s life are not simply accumulated in a chronological order. The importance of experiences gained during adolescence lies in the fact that the primary stratum of experiences in the childhood plays the role of a prism, giving specific meaning and character to all ensuing experiences.<sup>5)</sup>

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3) *Ibid.*, p. 381.

4) *Ibid.*, p. 378.

5) Jae-Heung Park, *The Problem of Generations in Korea* (Seoul: Nanam, 2005), p. 109.

With this in mind, chapter 2 of this paper summarizes the macro environment which affects the life experiences of adolescents as well as their subjective acceptance and interpretation of such experiences. First, the socio-demographic nature of the environment from the birth of this generation up to the present are analyzed. Important political and economic events after 1990 are summarized, and how North Korean adolescents accept and remember such events are observed. In addition, changes in the socio-cultural environment such as changes in lifestyle, family composition and formal education, as well as the effects of greater inflow of foreign culture and circulation of information are studied. By looking into what kind of political, economic, and social-cultural environment the new generation is located in, this paper seeks to offer a holistic view of the generation.

Chapter 3 takes a micro level approach to the new generation's worlds of experiences. The chapter aims to look into the generational experience of the age group after the mid-1990s, when fundamental mechanisms of personality formation such as national discourse, public education, and political organizations were halted, and market experience spread as the main means of survival. In observing such generational experience, it is crucial to understand bodily experience which directly influences the conscious world as well as linguistic experience which expresses the inner world. This means to be able to see how sufferings of poverty are imprinted in the body, and what language composes their inner world. Furthermore, it is necessary to

have an understanding of the subjects' experience of places and things, through which the members of the generation identify themselves and through which their identity is mediated to the world. This also means to be able to see how the subjects' experience of places and things influence their identity and cognition of the world, and to be able to identify the cultural strategies adopted in response to such understanding. Last, it is necessary to understand the subjects' culture of relationships which is formed through social relationships with others. These three categories start from the inner world of an individual and expand to observe how they come into connection with the world as well as their social relations with others. These categories are co-constructively combined with the new generation's experiences.

Based on life-history methodology, chapter 4 reconstructs the changing values, mentality, and identities of North Korean adolescents from the perspective of life-history experiences rather than based on its understanding as a single, short lived event. This is to observe how diverse generational experiences accumulate and mutually combine throughout an individual's life to form that individual as well as to study how it forms a generation as an aggregate. Furthermore, the chapter analyzes the emotional bottleneck, which unites North Korean adolescents as a generation based on life events and diverse life experiences observed in previous chapters, and examines the sprouts of the generation unit, which develop unique characteristics

due to their disparate ways of interpreting and accepting generational experiences. In chapter 5, the generational experiences and characteristics of North Korean adolescents identified through this research are presented along with the implications such characteristics offer in light of the future social changes due to occur in North Korea.

A quantitative analysis method is generally used for analyzing generation effects. However, it is impossible to apply such methodology to studies on North Korean adolescents and a problem lies in that it is difficult to distinguish age effects, cohort effects, and periodic effects. The topic of this research relates to the growth experience of North Korean adolescents, and the subjective beliefs, emotions, value systems, and ways of thinking formed as result of such growth experience. It also relates to what meaning North Korean youth give to their experiences and how they interpret it. Thus, this research adopts qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews and life-history methodology which are more appropriate in analyzing such topics. It also seeks to investigate the concrete experiences and complexities of social generation formation which cannot be addressed through models explaining the North Korean system, macro discourse, or positive statistics.

In-depth interviews were conducted on 40 North Korean refugees in their adolescence or adulthood, who mostly escaped from North Korea after 2010. The research focuses on the age group of mid-teens

to late-twenties which spent their infancy and childhood during the 'Arduous March.'<sup>6)</sup> This age group ranges from those born around the beginning of the Arduous March and spent their infancy during the economic crisis, starting elementary school when the markets were beginning to develop, to those who were born in the mid 1980s and experienced the Arduous March during their primary school years. Among the group, subjects of the interviews were mainly those in their late teens and early twenties. Those in their late twenties, thirties, and forties were also included for comparison. Due to the regional characteristics of the North Korean refugees, 60% of the interviewees were from Hamgyeongbuk-do. Elements such as gender or city/rural backgrounds that can influence experiences were evenly distributed.

Interviews were conducted over a two to three hour period and one or two additional interviews were held when necessary. Upon consent of the interviewee, the interview was recorded on tape and transcribed on paper. Based on such records, main contents were later categorized and coded by topic, and by comparative analysis of such coded contents, main topics related to the research were extracted, and such main topics and interpretation by topics were elaborated. When the life-history methodology was used, full

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6) In North Korea, the term 'Arduous March' first officially appeared in the common editorial of January 1996, and in October 2000, the 'Great victory of the Arduous March' was declared. In this paper, the term is used to refer to the period of economic crisis from the mid 1990s to late 1990s.

contents collected through interviews conducted in life-history statement methods were examined to select major cases, and cross comparative stances were deducted by topicalization of characteristics of the chosen cases, and the cases were reconstituted and interpreted. In addition to in-depth interviews of North Korean refugees, North Korea's official literature, material on the North Korean society's trends, and documents such as newspapers and broadcasts were used.







**2**

**The Environment of the New  
Generation**

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## 2. The Environment of the New Generation

The age group discussed in this research is those in their mid-teens to late twenties as of 2013. In terms of date of birth, they were born between the mid-1980s and mid- or late-1990s. According to the analysis of North Korea's census conducted in 1993 and 2008, mid and late teens constitute the population group which suffered most losses from the economic crisis. In addition to high mortality rates, this age group is likely to have suffered negative influences on physical development as a result of poor nutritional status. Furthermore, increases in the mortality rates of adult men, emigration of women of reproductive ages, and decreases in birth rates amidst the economic crisis have altered the population structure. Such alternation is likely to have led to changes in family composition due to escapees or to the complete dissolution of families which have had increasingly destabilizing effects on the adolescents' family environment. Single parent families and restructured families would have increased due to the death or defection of a parent, and ancillary effects such as economic difficulties or weakening of patriarchal rules within a family is likely to have influenced the life of

adolescents. The decline in birth rates leads to decreased number of siblings, acting as a factor in changing the relationships within a family and peer group. Generally, it can be said that the socio-demographic changes after the economic crisis has increased the instability of the adolescents' family environment.

As of present, it is estimated that the age group of this study, adolescents between their mid teens and late twenties, compose 1/4 of the total North Korean population. Ten years later in 2023, this age group will be in their mid twenties to late thirties, and the age group of those under 40 including this age group, will constitute over half of the total population. Thus, the characteristics which distinguish this generation from former generations, and the force of such characteristics working in a certain direction, will have a significant impact on the social changes in North Korea.

<Table 1> Size of the research subject group in population estimates of 2013 and 2023<sup>7)</sup>.

2013(Estimate)				2023(Estimate)			
Age	Male	Female	Total	Age	Male	Female	Total
Age 0~14	2,643,602	2,538,061	5,181,663	Age 0~14	4,382,354	4,212,206	8,594,560
Age 15~19	1,035,835	987,730	2,023,565	Age 15~19	1,018,259	972,453	1,990,712
Age 20~24	1,032,838	986,990	2,019,828	Age 20~24	1,011,035	968,507	1,979,542
Age 25~29 (people)	925,502	886,559	1,812,061	Age 25~29	902,960	867,254	1,770,214
Age 0~29 Total	5,637,777	5,399,340	11,037,117	Age 0~29 Total	7,314,608	7,020,420	14,335,028
Total Population	11,972,015	12,573,327	24,545,342	Total Population	12,582,393	13,126,418	25,708,811
Ratio to total population (%)	47.1	42.9	44.7	Ratio to total population (%)	58.1	53.5	55.8

7) Organized by author based on North Korean statistics, <http://kosis.kr/bukhan/>.

When examining major political and economic events after the 1990s and adolescents' memories of such events, those in their mid twenties or older were likely to remember them while those in their teens and early twenties had little memory of 'national events' aside from recent happenings such as the currency reform. This is partly because of their young age at the time of the economic crisis or the economic reform of the early 2000s. However, it also shows their lack of attention to political events except those which relate directly to their everyday lives, a common trait of the generation.

The socio-cultural environment which influences adolescents' generational experience include changes in means of survival, changes in family composition and school education, inflow of foreign culture and active circulation of information. The socioeconomic environment where an individual can no longer rely on state rationing and is responsible for his own survival through the economic activities of himself or of his parents, is a major difference which distinguishes the generation environment of this adolescent generation from the former generation. The former generation enjoyed benefits of the socialist welfare system such as state rationing, free education, and free healthcare whereas the younger generation has had no or only a limited experience of such system. Furthermore, they are in an environment where they cannot receive adequate education and care due to the dissolution of families and the poor state of formal education. The extreme shortage of food during

the economic crisis, death and illness of family members, and the participation of women in economic activities, has significantly decreased the stability of the family and increased the dissolution of families. Recently, the emigration of women from North Korea is also a major cause of family dissolution. This can act as a factor depriving adolescents who must be cared for in a stable family environment from such care and proper education. Formal public education was also extremely weakened. School facilities were severely damaged due to floods during the economic crisis, and as teachers left schools and students' attendance rate dropped, it became difficult to hold regular classes. In the 2000s, school facilities were recovered and teachers returned. However, economic circumstances and changes in the residents' perception of education have made it difficult to recover the rate of attendance in elementary and middle schools to the levels prior to the economic crisis.

Also, as the North Korean government is focusing its education budget on providing special education for the talented in the field of science and technology amidst a shortage in overall educational budget, support for regular schools has been greatly reduced. Textbooks, equipment, from stationary to desks, and school maintenance costs were supported by the state prior to the economic crisis, but now a significant portion is shouldered by parents. This change in public education has decreased the educational influence of the state on some adolescents.

Meanwhile, in the 2000s, due to the rapid growth of markets, foreign films and information of the outside world were introduced and distributed nationwide. Despite the tight control of the authorities, foreign popular culture, including that of South Korea, was spreading at an astronomical rate. This development exerts a greater influence on adolescents who are sensitive to new cultures. Its impact is immense in that it introduces North Korean adolescents to the outside world, along with new ways of thinking, culture, and information, which was impossible to acquire through formal education or official media.



**3**

**The Experiences of the New  
Generation**



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### 3. The Experiences of the New Generation

#### A. Bodily and Linguistic Experience

The following will examine the generational experience of North Korean adolescents with a focus on bodily and linguistic experiences. Unlike former generations, North Korea's new generation has experienced poverty and the stratification of wealth on a regular basis since birth, and poverty and stratification of wealth can be said to have had major impacts on forming the characteristics of the generation in forms of various bodily experiences. The new generation has direct and indirect experiences of physical pain, economic difficulty, and marketization in relation to the Arduous March. Such experiences relating to famine, disease, death, and the market influenced their emotions, behaviors and perceptions of the world.

Indeed, there are deviations relating to experiences and memories of physical pain according to at what age they experienced severe economic difficulties such as the Arduous March, Forced March, and currency reform. In terms of experience, it is difficult to simply codify

the generation's experiences as one of 'misery' or 'deaths' resulting from food shortage. Differences caused by economic circumstances of the family or region and the age one gains self-consciousness of bodily experiences are closely related to such deviations.

However, diversity and deviation of experience is what distinguishes this generation from former generations. The dynamics of experience itself forms a the bedrock of possibilities on which the generation can express themselves through various practices, and is found to lead adolescents to perceive the world in more realistic and sensible ways. Thus, rather than coding this generation as 'the generation of suffering,' it is important to identify this generation's characteristics from the perspective of their world of experiences. According to results of the study, it is possible to identify the following characteristics of bodily experience.

First is the experience of poverty and stratification of wealth. The new generation has experienced the divide between the rich and the poor in their everyday lives at school and among their peer group. In comparison to former generations, they have vivid experiences of wealth stratification. A strong correlation is established between school attendance rate and stratification of wealth. The majority of adolescents who were absent or excluded from school have continued to be excluded or ostracized from the society even after they enter adulthood.

Second is the bodily experience of rite of passage in becoming a

young adult. In North Korea, individuals in middle school go through a rite of passage in becoming a young adult through diverse physical activities. This national rite of passage is an important opportunity to establish one's self identity as an adult. However, participation in this rite of passage is often determined by economic abilities or status of one's parents. In certain ways, it has become a rite of passage for those who possess wealth and status. Utilizing such physical activities, the new generation re-appropriates this public rite of passage into an informal rite of passage for themselves to identify and define their peer relationships and identity.

Third is the identification of the new generation's body as a space for trend and countercultural resistance. The new generation has a great interest in enhancing one's appearance, such as undergoing plastic surgery on eyes and nose, tattoos and orthodontic treatment. Contact with the outside world has aroused interest in appearances. Also, due to the persistence of the economic recession, women's appearances have become somewhat of a resource for survival. Meanwhile, tending to one's appearance carries significance as an important means for peer relationships. This means that the 'body' is being rediscovered as a space to reaffirm one's self identity in North Korea.

Fourth is the identification of the new generation's body as a representation of class. The new generation detects other's class by appearance and clothing. Thus, it has become a norm to express

one's hierarchical and class position through the body or appearance, clothing, or things. Also, they have become sensitive to hierarchical and class symbols which are displayed through the body. Furthermore, they are more sensitive to the perception of a healthy body as a class symbol as well. The interest in appearance, perception of class location through the body, and its ostentation and consumption is noticeable in relation to ego formation.

Last is the body of the new generation as a symbol and representation. This is the desire to imitate and represent through their own bodies the bodies in the screen they encounter through dramas or movies in unofficial media. North Korea's new generation shows strong interest in imitating and representing diverse bodily images and actions. They have formed an approach of penetrating the overall style, going beyond the simple imitation of an object. The imitation of style is sometimes portrayed in imitating romantic ways of love. Also, they accept the entire South Korean lifestyle which is presented in the space of the drama as a single sensation.

The characteristic of the new generation is also observable through language. The gap between language used in everyday lives, documenting language used to document inner thoughts, and official language of the state is large, and furthermore, the generation is also deft in utilizing this duplicity. The gap between official state language and everyday language is especially perceptible in the language of the generation after the Arduous March. Thus, it is

possible to understand the characteristics of their conscious world by understanding the properties of their world of formal and private languages.

First, the Regular Evaluation Meetings most candidly shows the duplicity of the new generation's language life and a cross section of their language performance. The Regular Evaluation Meetings is an environment of language performance where one must censor his or her life based on the 'words' of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong-Il and formal principles. They may be referred to as a stage for a play, which is expressed through such formal and official language. To the new generation, Regular Evaluation Meetings are a time of being chastised for the demands made by schools or for absences due to economic difficulties, and a tedious time where one must replay formal 'words' which are out of touch with reality.

Second is the language of the new generation. Their private world has a different form and content of language from the standardized official language such as formal language, 'words' and Regular Evaluation Meetings. The new generation shares their language world through conversations on dramas, things, songs, and the outside world instead of concerns regarding the system or the future. Meanwhile, they also document their inner selves. The diary documents the language of a daily and self-confessing inner world which is unrelated to the formal language world.

## **B. Experience of Things and Place**

The new generation displays unique characteristics through experiences relating to various things and places in a social situation where the market is vitalized and the gap between classes continues to grow. First, they show a realistic perception of money and form an identity of religious materialism. Their parent's generation judge the new generation to be disingenuous, manipulative, calculative, and parsimonious. On the other hand, adolescents see a more positive aspect of their generation. Unlike their parent's generation, who only look to Kim Il Sung or Kim Jong-Il, they perceive themselves as an 'open' and 'awaken' generation with awareness of the capitalist system. Rather than living solely on principles, they are a 'smart' generation which thinks astutely and pragmatically. They can be seen as a 'market generation' in that they are familiar with consumption and relations of the market, and a 'currency generation' in that they perceive the importance of currency in itself.

Second, the new generation admires lucrative occupations with power. Rather than a specific occupation, they have a greater aspiration for status. They seek positions which are referred to as being on the managerial or executive level. Such occupations represent a person who has a great impact on the daily lives of people, a position which is useful for their day to day life in society, a position which can expect to receive certain benefits and conveniences, and a

position which can reign over ordinary residents. This generation's aspiration for status is also expressed through cynicism toward the hero figure suggested by the state. Serving in the military is also regarded as conscription, and is something they want to avoid. The cause of such cynicism and aversion can be found in distrust toward the state's coercion of adolescents, requiring unconditional sacrifice and exemplary behaviors.

Third, this generation has experienced class differences at school on a regular basis. They have spent their school years under the school's pressure to submit nontax payments. Such nontax payments are directly meshed with the school's hierarchic stratification and classification of wealth. In addition to nontax payments, the disharmony and frustration caused by such hierarchical divisions have influenced the generation's consciousness and behaviors in diverse forms.

Fourth, the clique culture of the generation is distinctive in that there is an identification and hierarchy of individuals depending on their economic abilities. Economic abilities of their families act as a clear dividing line of cliques among students. The operation of the hierarchy and students' relationship culture is more focused on economic ability than ever before.

Next, the characteristics formed by diverse experiences of things coming from the outside world are as follows. First, there is a need to focus on increased national discourse regarding the dangers of such

things and the contamination of adolescents. Through internal documents, it is easy to confirm the North Korean authorities' deep concerns regarding the inflow of capitalist culture through illegal recordings and CDs after the 1990s.

Second, it is important to give attention to how foreign things change the new generations' agency. Through CDs which carry dramas or foreign movies, adolescents experience the lifestyles of the outside world, talk about it, admire it, and imitate the lifestyle and language they see. They also develop aesthetic senses of 'sophistication', desires for materialistic abundance, and emotional sympathy.

Third is the confirmation of hierarchical and class identity and composition of the self through the possession and consumption of things. They construct the self by imitating and representing the plot, and the appearance and fashion of characters in unofficial media. The important point is that this imitation and representation is led by adolescents of a certain class who have the necessary economic wealth to possess or consume it, or are able to handle its associated political risks. To them, a trend is a continuation of imitation according to class position. Among the new generation, there exists a differentiation of hierarchy and class through one's cultural taste, imitation, and representation. Meanwhile, sharing information on new things or trends plays an important role in forming peer groups and maintaining friendships.

Fourth, the generation holds information and yearns for the



outside world through things. In addition to a desire to possess a certain object, things from the outside world incite imagination and a yearning for the outside world. The generation is different from former generations in that they form and share peer culture through various things, and imagines the outside world through them.

It is possible to identify various characteristics of the new generation from the perspective of their experiences regarding place. To experience a place means to imprint on their bodies the order/boundaries imposed by the rules of the place. The adolescent culture adapts or resists the traditional mechanism of imposing order/boundaries, and is also the process of transcending its order/boundaries.

First is the place-making identity of the new generation which appropriate anonymous non-place and resistance environment. After the 1990s, anonymous private environment has begun to increase. The experience of such ‘non-place’ is a characteristic of North Korea’s new generation. When outside of the formal boundaries of schools, they create and experience daily non-places. Rather than playing in public school yards or parks, they gather in secluded parts of the market, station plazas, vacant lot, under bridges, in the mountains or riverside, and those living near the border would cross the border for several days out of curiosity to see the outside world.

Second, the new generation is characterized by their mobility and creation of various social networks. The mobility of the new

generation in the city is formed in the circulation system of the market or commodities. Through these places, they experience various things and images, and share information on other worlds. The political power that mobility has is not laden in mobility itself but in various contacts that adolescents experience through mobility and the influence such contacts have on their identity. Meanwhile, the new generation also has individuals who have lost their environment, such as the *Kotjebi*.

Third, that they utilize reversely and overturn the regulations and demands imposed by the society or state through the environment is another characteristic of the new generation. The ‘rambling around’ and ‘aimless walks’ of the adolescents is another characteristic found in North Korea’s new generation. The reason this can be overturned is because the people who are required to perform a certain goal at a certain place as defined by the state make extinct and meaningless the goal-oriented behavioral regulations that a place or age group must have by aimless rambling. Through such aimless rambling, North Korea’s new generation can be seen as performing a seemingly powerless but most fundamental overturn. In terms of preference, they chose secluded places or mountainsides without surveillance as their favorite place, and places where security or surveillance organizations such as national security agencies or police stations are located were listed as their least favorite. The fact that their least preferred environment is security organizations shows that preference

of place is dependent on whether national aggression exists in that the environment in forms of surveillance, regulation, and punishment. It can be inferred that this generation has ordinarily experienced national aggression on a day to day basis.

Fourth is the cultural appropriation of the marketplace. This generation nurtures more visual and palate senses than former generations by their contacts with diverse things, food, and people through the market. Thus, market environment is a space of consumption, a space of communication, a space of sense, and a space of desire.

Fifth is the characteristic of discovering differences and desires by the city's stratification as result of marketization. Markets are divided, and such divisions show differences in the respective class's market usage and consumption level. In the city, class hierarchy is formed in areas according to residents or their status. It is such differences that the new generation perceives so sensitively. Also, the new generation has relatively greater mobility than former generations. They move across various areas of the city and also move from city to city and discover the 'differences' among such areas and cities.

Lastly, the new generation perceives regional inequalities between cities while admiring and dreaming of escaping to the outside world. They ordinarily encounter the gap between the rich and the poor and inequalities among regions in their everyday lives

and also directly and indirectly view and perceive them through mobility. Meanwhile, the ‘light’ of city streets is a new cultural experience to the new generation, and it expresses the unknown and developed civilization of their admired worlds. On the other hand, such desires are often manifested by crossing of borders.

### **C. Experience of Relationship and Intimacy**

In terms of their relationships and intimacy with others, this study has observed perceptions and experiences arising from relationship with one’s peers and family, as well as relationship with the state and the supreme leader. First, the identifiable characteristics of peer relationships which North Korean adolescents spend the most time in, are as following in terms of intimacy and subculture. First, intimacy is composed of homogeneity and similarity in peer relationships. Because adolescents spend most of their time at school, their lifestyles share many homogeneous aspects. Sharing of everyday life and secrets and collusion against organizational life such as Regular Evaluation Meetings are important factors that form intimacy in peer relationships. However, it appears that after the economic crisis, one’s economic status has become a criterion for group-formation. This is because due to economic problems, they have little time or economic allowance to spend with friends, and cannot form shared

experiences with friends because it is difficult for them to even attend school regularly. Meanwhile, another characteristic which is widespread among North Korean adolescents is the generalization of romantic relationships. Unlike former generations, recent North Korean adolescents have many experiences of relationships with the opposite gender, and more actively express their affection. Also, as romantic relationships become more commonplace and generalized, short and numerous experiences of relationships become a way of expressing superiority in peer relationships. Such interest in relationships with the opposite gender provides an opportunity to expand the understanding of the self through feelings such as romance and love.

North Korean adolescents' peer groups create their own culture in a limited environment and condition. The subculture they form can be observed in terms of play culture, clique culture, and possession of foreign culture. They often gather and spend time at a friend's house, loiter on streets, or look around markets. Also, they form a clique culture by creating cliques with friends and spending time together while establishing orders and rules amongst themselves. One observable characteristic in their cliques is a hierarchical culture in which they form hierarchy and ranks among themselves and perform specific roles according to their respective positions. In this process, North Korean adolescents construct the identity of the clique and the individual. It is to formalize the characteristics or qualities necessary

to join the clique, and the necessary competence necessary to maintain the clique. The most unique characteristic of this generation is their acceptance and imitation of foreign culture. Information regarding foreign culture, such as movies, dramas, or games, is shared and emulated in peer relationships. As foreign culture becomes the main interest and topic of conversation, they believe they are regarded as sophisticated by learning foreign culture relatively earlier ahead of others. This leads to active imitation of foreign cultures, and influences not only outer qualities but also the methods in which they maintain relationships. However, despite the fact that they become aware of a different world through foreign culture, the acceptance and propensity towards foreign culture does not lead to direct criticisms of the system. This is because the gap between their reality and the foreign world which is conveyed through culture is too large.

North Korean adolescents' relationship with family show different characteristics before and after the economic crisis of the 1990s. As the family, the primary affiliation group and a subject of intimacy, is dissolved due to the economic crisis, there have been changes in internal positions in the family and family relationships. Difficult domestic economic situations have pushed North Korean adolescents to engage in activities to support the family such as staying home to assist in farming, instead of going to school. Furthermore, adolescents without parents have to support the

livelihood of their brothers and sisters. This strengthened adolescents' responsibility for their families and expanded their roles as breadwinners. In addition, while bonds with relatives were strengthened, there was a tendency to expand the family scope by forming quasi-family relationships with unrelated people. Despite the adolescents' resentment toward their parents for such harsh domestic conditions, they were able to establish concrete plans and goals in their lives to work towards by actively working to support the family's finances and gaining more responsibility.

Lastly, adolescents' perception of the state and the supreme leader was surveyed to be multifaceted. Although economic difficulties and the inability of schools to operate properly weakened the struggle for revolution toward the state and the supreme leader, they still embraced a sense of loyalty towards the ruling ideology. Even though they appeared to be relatively indifferent to politics in comparison to other generations, they also showed changing perceptions of the state and supreme leader through foreign information.

North Korean adolescents' experiences of relationships are composed of different forms and contents from other generations. The subjects of intimacy have been expanded, and the ways of maintaining intimacy have changed, while the economic status has become a large factor influencing the creation and continuation of relationships. Depending on the subject, one's responsibility toward relationships have been strengthened in some cases, and weakened in

others. The ways of life that they show are not completely amenable to the system and they also challenge former orders by creating their own culture among peer groups. Also, in addition to economic difficulties, this generation perceive and experience the limits of future possibilities in early ages by directly experiencing social stratification according to economic status, to which they responded by concretizing and practicing future plans. Such experiences vary depending on location, age, and class. However, as generations change and time flows, such changes are expected to spread, and are expected to have greater influences on the North Korean society.







**4**

**Biographical Experiences and  
Characteristics of the Generation**

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## 4. Biographical Experiences and Characteristics of the Generation

Chapter 4 observes four biographical cases in order to understand the generational experience and characteristics of North Korean adolescents. Through analysis of the biographical cases and contemplation of the experiences introduced in the previous chapter, the paper identifies common experiences which unite the adolescents as one generation.

### A. Case Studies

#### 1) **Kim Jung Hoon: As I wish, as I want**

Kim Jung Hoon, who is a male student who just entered his twenties, began his life story by describing sufferings following his father's death and the experience of parting with his mother. Born in the urban region of Hamgyeongnam-do, Kim spent his youth without experiencing major economic difficulties as his father was a chief

engineer of a big ship. However, during his 3rd year of middle school, his father was “swept away in a political incident” and was taken to a political prison camp, with no knowledge of whether he is alive or dead. His mother chose to divorce his father, allowing the rest of the family to avoid being put in a political prison camp, but their house was confiscated and they were forcefully relocated to a rural area, where their suffering began.

The oral description of his adolescent life thereafter is full of suffering, terror, and loneliness. After moving to the rural area, his mother supported the livelihood of the family by selling products. When she went to sell products, she was away for one to two months. At most, he could only spend three months a year with his mother. When his mother was away for long periods, securities came and looked for his mother, and Kim was often beaten and detained. When his mother was away, Kim had to live on his own on the food that his mother left. Hunger and fear were the most difficult to endure. When he was scared of being alone, he would stay with neighbors. However, as his father was arrested as a political offender, he was always monitored, making it difficult for him to become close to his friends or neighbors.

The change in family circumstances also affected his school life and friendships. After his father was arrested as a political offender, even friends at school became cautious. Because he was ostracized at school, he had no interest in attending classes. Also, as his mother

was often busy and absent due to her work, no one was home to look after him and his untidy clothes and appearance bothered him. Two years after the arrest of his father, he quit middle school which he would “attend or miss as he pleased,” at grade 5, and went out to earn money with elder boys he became acquainted with. He would follow them around picking seafood and “earning his living.” However, rather than a genuine attempt to earn money, he “lived for enjoyment.” He was free and comfortable. The time he spent with peers and elder boys, smoking, drinking, playing, and talking about girls, remains his most joyful memory. He conversed with friends and elder boys after watching South Korean or foreign movies. He would often wish to live in a place “where there is no such thing as Regular Evaluation Meetings” and people live freely.

When he was sixteen, he moved to Hamgyeongbuk-do, where his aunt lived. At first, he and his mother stayed at his aunt’s house. When his father was present, he “could not even breathe properly” out of fear of his father. However, he soon developed a habit of doing whatever he wanted as his mother was absent during his adolescence, and this caused conflict between him and his mother. He also disliked the fact that he had to bear the inconvenience of living with his relatives.

Eventually after ten months since his arrival, he left his aunt’s house, and faced the turning point of his life. He became completely economically independent. Unlike the description of his previous

life, his story of this period shows efforts to develop his career and personal growth. The first couple of months he left home, he lived as a *Kotjebi*, sleeping in the waiting room at stations and stealing food from the market. However, with the help of his older cousin, he began to work as a porter, carrying and transporting the goods belonging to traders selling their products to China. Later, he learned to trade and entered the business, going to and coming from different cities. Earning a lot of money was the only thought Kim had after his father's arrest. He remembers that "his desire to earn money and live off his earnings consumed his day to day life." By earning money through trading, Kim was able to buy a small house. He sought his mother to bring her home and live together, but was unable to find her. Due to the instability that comes with his job, he tried to secure a job which gave rations, but it did not work out well. As he grew up, he realized the limits of living as the son of a political prisoner in North Korea. When he looked across the river to the Chinese territory, he thought, 'If I go live there, I would not even need to think about the things I am thinking here.' An elder boy suggested they go to China and in 2011, he crossed to China to earn money, eventually coming to Korea.

## **2) Han Areum: an enthusiast in a socialist household**

In the early 1990s, in a city located near Chinese borders, Han

Areum was born as the only child between her father who was a “completely loyal” laborer and her mother who was head of a neighborhood unit. After two years of suffering, her father passed away from an illness when she was in grade 5 of middle school. Her mother, who had a more resilient mindset, sold products at the market, which enabled her to support their lives without too much difficulty. She has no clear memories of those who died during the economic crisis. Instead, the public execution she witnessed at a young age, even before she went to school, left a grave impression on her.

The Han family was peaceful. Her father was a respected head of the household. When the family gained delicious goods, they would wait until he returned so he could have the first bite. Her mother always told her that she should study hard, enter university, and get a good job. Her family was politically exemplar, and when she brought home gifts on holidays such as Kim Il Sung’s birthday in April 15, she was taught by her parents to first give thanks in front of the picture of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong-Il. From elementary school to university, Han was always the class manager. In addition to getting good grades, she was an ‘enthusiast’ who participated assiduously in school events. She always played the role of a leader through her position as class manager. Her main troubles of middle school were about maintaining good grades, and she tried to excel so that her colleagues could “learn more from her.” She was proud of her work as class manager, and she enjoyed it. By participating industriously

and excelling in given tasks, she could feel that she was an important person. She internalized her school education more ardently than anyone else.

However, as with all adolescents, she also experienced peer culture. While taking part in the correctional squadron, which is attended by enthusiasts, or when attending to personal affairs, she would carefully avoid guards and wear straight pants or boot cut pants which were trendy but prohibited by the school. She also once wrote a repenting report after being caught listening to South Korean songs on an MP3 while hanging out with her friends. She also had a boyfriend during her sixth year of middle school.

Han, a typical model student, began to seriously worry about her career a year before graduating middle school. She thought of entering the party and becoming a party official, but because of her family's difficult economic circumstances following her father's death, she believed it was realistic to graduate university, secure a good job, get married and support her mother. Deciding one's career in North Korea meant "living in accordance with the trend of the times" rather than pursuing one's dream. In that sense, a medical career seemed to guarantee good payment as well as social recognition. Han entered the university of her choice and studied hard while continuing to assume the role of class manager. In order to lessen the economic pressure of her tuition, she went to earn money during school holidays.



Defection from North Korea was an unimaginable event considering her past life. The reason she chose to flee was because of a promise with her best friend. Han was born along the border area, adjacent to China with Tumen River in between. Many people crossed the river to earn money. Almost half of her friends had defected or had the experience of defecting from North Korea due to various reasons. In the summer of 2010, Han's best friend who was engaged in trading in China asked Han to come over for a month and help with business. She crossed the river in order to keep her promise with her friend. However, within a month, the conditions in China worsened and North Korean illegal immigrants were being arrested. Han was forced to hide in China as an illegal defector. After months, she was able to talk to her mother over the phone, and her mother expressed her concern that if Han returned, she would have to live under the stigma of a defector. After months of contemplation, Han decided to come to Korea.

### **3) Yoon Hae Il : following the fated course**

Yoon Hae Il, who was born in a military area near the border, defected from North Korea while a student at a prestigious university at the central university level. In describing his early life, he prescribed his identity as "someone who did nothing but study." Yoon gave a lengthy explanation on how studying came naturally by

following a “determined course” set by North Korea’s educational system. Another point he mentions regarding his studies is that since he started his education at elementary school, he has continuously received recognition through his studies. The self-portrait drawn through his early life stories is one of an elite adolescent who is well socialized into North Korea’s public education system, and acknowledged for his scholarly merits.

Yoon’s father worked as a factory laborer. He did not experience serious difficulties even during the Arduous March as extra benefits were provided at his father’s workplace. Yoon’s family was not of a favorable origin, but he built his future path by efforts directed toward his studies. Yoon’s memories of his school days are mainly related to studying. Yoon, who had outstanding grades since entering elementary school, attended school diligently without a single absence. He was selected to enter the province’s Middle School No. 1<sup>8)</sup>, where only the most gifted students are chosen to attend. After entering middle school, he enjoyed studying and “only studied without thinking about anything else.” That his name would be posted on the notice board as ranking 1st place, and the compliments he received from parents at parent meetings was stimulus for studying.

Although he enjoyed studying, he did not like the repeated political ideology education and organizational routines. At around

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8) Middle School No. 1 is a special educational institution which selects and educates the most outstanding students at the district, provincial, or national level.

grade 4 of middle school, he was the last to enter the Kim Il Sung Socialist Youth League, which is admitted in order of one's loyalty to political ideologies and grades. He believed that he attended school only to study, not for the organizational routines. A noticeable point in his oral statement is that in performing repetitive review meetings or mandatory mobilization which were integral routines of school life, he distinguished his deeds in terms of 'meaning' and 'practice.' Such activities were not meaningful to him, but he participated unconditionally as they were a kind of rite of passage which had to be performed 'for' him. Rather than a lofty goal to serve the Party or the Supreme Leader, he studied and lived with the thought that things are fine if "I can eat and live well," and evaluates himself as having a strong individualist egoism. Although the contents of the political ideology classes were mostly internalized, some were not. He was reluctant to study the subject on the Revolutionary History of Kim Il Sung, believing it would be of no use. However, while taking classes, he never doubted the authenticity of the educational contents. Through education on "man of steel who destroyed two imperialist powers in one generation," he felt the greatness of Kim Il Sung, and held a sense of reverence.

While attending elementary school, he accepted at face value the fact that South Korean citizens were starving in poverty. However, he realized it was "all a lie" while watching a South Korean movie. The South Korean movies and dramas he began to watch around

grade 2 of middle school were interesting. In North Korea, it is believed that “it is best to ignore and not even mention the word South Korea,” but as he grew up, his interest grew and he shared CDs among his friends and talked about movies.

In the process of entering university and during his university life, he realized various limits which he was oblivious to during his middle school years. In addition, there were many cases where he could not do what he desired. He had no choice in choosing his major and it was difficult to focus due to frequent mandatory mobilization. He came to realize that even after graduation, he could be allocated with a job and be working at a place he did not want to. In such circumstances where he could not get or do what he desired and where he was forced to do what he did not want, Yoon began to think about alternative possibilities of the “determined course.” News that his sister who defected two years ago had settled in Korea presented him a new life path in which he would be free to make his own decisions. Upon contemplation, Yoon defects to South Korea in 2011, just before his graduation.

#### **4) Cho Sung Hoon: been there, done that**

Cho Sung Hoon was born in a city in the border region in the mid 1990s, when the Arduous March just began. His most important life event as a late teenager was when his merchant father was arrested in

China. His life in North Korea is clearly divided in terms of time before and after his father's arrest. Before grade 1 of middle school, when his father was arrested, he "ate better and lived better" than others. As his father was always busy, Cho did not spend much time with him. However, his father was very strict with Cho's discipline. Cho respected and followed his father. After the arrest, his uncle raised Cho, but he could not fill his father's empty space. Throughout his adolescence, he was worried that he was fatherless and felt lonely without him.

After his father was arrested, he was deported from his home and had to live with his uncle's four family members at his grandmother's house. His father's absence was agonizing, but because his mother and uncle were merchants, he was not financially challenged. Cho summarizes his middle school years as a period of "playing, fighting, and dating girls." What filled his sense of loss and emptiness following the arrest and absence of his father and the frustrations of related events was playing and communicating with peers. Such activities included gang fights, dating girls, fleeing the control of schools and the state party. There were about seven or eight members who he called "friends." They always hung out together and when one was beaten by other boys, they would gang up and fight as a team. Cho spent his middle school years exercising and hanging out with friends in plazas and parks and at times gathering at a friend's house or a pub. With close friends, he talked about

girlfriends, shared information on sex, and also watched pornography together, which would result in severe punishment if caught. He even attended the boring and meaningless mandatory labor provisions because it was fun when he was with his friends. He received ideology education when caught in a gang fight or broke the law. However, he “would push it out of his mind” as they were only “banal words which I have been hearing since I was little.”

He did not give deep consideration to politics or the state leader. When he heard through documentary movies on TV that Kim Jong-Il slept only short periods and ate simple meals, he thought “would he really live like that when he is the leader of a country?” In contrast to the education he received at school, he began to harbor doubt after listening to the things his uncle and other acquaintances had said.

Cho was also interested in “dating.” If he was strong and well known, it was easier to date a pretty and well off girl. There was a “difference in the level” of girls one could date according to how good a fighter one was. If one had no girlfriend, he was regarded as being completely stupid. Once or twice a month, on holidays or friends’ birthdays, around twenty or thirty boys and girls would get together at a friend’s house and ate, played games or cards and also danced to South Korean music. There were many occasions where he would spend the entire night at such parties.

Due to the influence of people around him, Cho began to watch South Korean dramas and movies even before he entered elementary

school. He watched even more after his father was arrested. Because the images of Korea in dramas were too different from what he had learned at school, at first he thought “Is that real? Surely it is all made up. The damn Americans probably came in and made a movie like that.” However, after entering middle school he began to compare it with Chinese TV and what he heard from adults around him. Despite his confusion, he gradually realized “that was the truth.” On the other hand, he understood the position of the state in censoring North Korean media and accepted that the state would naturally ban movies from ‘enemy states,’ as capitalist ideologies could be a bad influence to the society.

Eventually, South Korean movies provided a critical incident for Cho’s defection. His friend was caught after Cho lent him a USB with a South Korean movie in it, and Cho was punished and “almost beaten to death.” He ran away because he did not want to receive a warning and stand on the criticism stage, where he would be publically shamed. Because his mother had defected and settled in Korea a year ago, he had always thought “I would eventually go one day.”

## **B. The Characteristics of Generational Experience and the Division of the Generation**

The generational experiences of the new generation observed

above can be summarized as follows. First, destitution, relative poverty, death, suffering of loss and the resulting instability of existence; second, the decline of absolute, patriarchic authority of the family and the state, and the resulting dissolution and formality of regulations; third, the appearance of a new regulating power such as peer relationships, foreign culture, and money which has replaced previous regulations of the state and patriarchy.

Above all, the most fundamental life experience that forms the emotional foundation of North Korean adolescents is destitution, relative poverty, death, suffering of loss and the resulting instability of existence. The experience of suffering is important in the life experience of adolescents not simply because of the fact that they experience materialistic destitution, instability, and loneliness, but because such suffering is related to the dissolution of regulations due to the decline in absolute, patriarchic authority of the state and the family, which creates meaningful differences between them and former generations in terms of the levels of social consciousness and performance. The rules of the family and norms or beliefs systems that the state has internalized in the present generation, which have been regarded as absolute, are no longer accepted in the same way as the former generation. Rather, it is a widely observable phenomenon among the new generation to escape from it and perform it only ostentatiously, or appropriate it in according to their own ways. Another important life experience which binds North Korean



adolescents into a single generation is the weakening of the state and family regulations due to the insolvency of the public education system and the dissolution of the family, as well as the fact that the power of peer relationships, foreign culture, and money became a new force greatly influencing the generation. The force which forms and regulates the social consciousness and attitudes of adolescents is not only derived from the official discourse of the state or text books, but also from their relationships and real world that these adolescents come into contact with on a everyday basis. The conflict of the two sources of regulations leads to adolescents to create various coping strategies.

However, such experience factors are not perceived and experienced in the same way or do not exert equal degrees of influence on all North Korean adolescents. Three kinds of sprouts of the generation unit can be identified among North Korean adolescents. The first group consists of adolescents who make early labor and career decisions during their childhood amidst materialistic destitution or family dissolution. The case of Kim Jung Hoon is a paragon of such case. Adolescents who belong to this group show characteristics of defying state authority and are prone to escaping or maladapting to the control of organizational rules.

The second group consists of adolescents who accept the authority of the state and family while internalizing the dominating ideologies of the North Korean society. Among the above

interviewees, Han Areum belongs to this group. In their lives, the regulation mechanisms of the family and the school operate normally. As a result, they are well assimilated to the formal orders of the society through which they seek individual self-achievement.

The third group does not deviate from the ruling orders of the school or society nor show active resistance. However, their participation is merely one of formality and they tend to focus on other activities through which they derive genuine meaning. The cases of Yoon Hae Il and Cho Sung Hoon belong to this category. In between active internalization of official regulations and escape from such regulation mechanisms, in one way, they become main agents in performing the national discourse, while in other ways. They are active in creative deviation by altering and possessing such official regulations. The adolescents in this group can be regarded as being in the same category as Alexei Yurchak's category of 'normal people,'<sup>9)</sup> or "svoi (us)" who were the focus of Yurchak's study on the last generation of the Soviet Union. Though it may be difficult to argue that they form the majority of North Korea's new generation, they are at least within the category of 'normality' in the new generation.

Here, one must note that an individual is not continuously fixed to one generational unit throughout his or her growth. In particular, important life experiences obtained during one's adolescence, a

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9) Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), pp.108~109.

period in which one goes through physical and mental maturity, gains independence from family, and forms values and identity, it is possible to change one's directivity and move to a different generational unit. In addition, the fact that peer culture or the influence of socio-cultural changes that bring about alterations in social consciousness is already in the lives of adolescents proves that the gap between the sprouts of each generational unit is not so deep.



# 5

## Conclusion

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## 5. Conclusion

The generational experience and characteristics of North Korean adolescents observed in the previous chapters can be summarized into three points. First, the new generation holds desires for material goods, wealth, and power, and expresses this through various ways. The desire for material goods comes from the simultaneous experiences of absolute and relative poverty that they have basically underwent since their youth. It also comes from self-awareness of the power of wealth that they ordinarily come across in school, peer groups, and the society. The society that this generation lives in is no longer an equal one where everyone lives under similar conditions, but one where the possession of material wealth is prehensile at a glance, and one which is grouped and hierarchically organized according to such possession of wealth. In their everyday lives, they regularly experience hierarchical differences according to the degree of wealth or power possession, and have deeply embodied such understanding in their minds and bodies. The awareness of the power of wealth evolves into a desire of wealth. They continuously consume material goods and reproduce symbols of wealth in their bodies,

words, and acts, and express themselves through such behavior. The reproduction of desires is aided through visual media which has come from the outside world, and the market, which is an environment fueling their leisure and dates, their joy, and a part of their lives. The way this generation achieves self-actualization is to acquire wealth as well as the power to support wealth. Such characteristic is expressed through a tendency towards pragmatism.

Second, the new generation is a non-political generation. They perform political formalities imposed by schools and the society, but appropriate them as their own. Major events of the state, political events and the ideological slogan of the party are no longer of their interest. North Korea stipulates adolescents as ‘the generation belonging to the building of a strong and prosperous nation’ and insists them to assume the revolutionary spirits of the former generation, but to them, the revolutionary spirit is a dead word only relevant in textbooks. They voluntarily perform the tasks and formalities required by the state, but this does not express their internalization or consent to the contents of the task. They give various meanings to the endlessly repeated political discourse and format which is recreated and shared as their own, and reinterpret it, reversing its original political meaning. This is due to the lack of an authoritative government or head of family which guarantees their livelihood. The gaps of the dismantled regulations of the state and family are filled with the culture and order of their peers, and the power of wealth.

Third, the new generation is one open to the outside world. Until recently, passages through which one could come into contact with the outer world were strictly limited in North Korea. However, after the 2000s, the influx of foreign culture became active through the Chinese border, and as markets were domestically vitalized, a nationwide distribution network of commodities and cultural media were created. The new generation is one that has enjoyed such cultural change, and although limited, has developed an awareness of the outside world through cultural mediums such as South Korean and foreign visual media. Through visual media such as movies or dramas, they came into contact with a world in which people live differently in different environments, and share experiences of such contacts among their peers. Curiosity about the new world and new life is at times converted into admiration and fantasies, which is sometimes expressed in their lives through direct imitation and reproduction. In addition to visual media, those who come and go through the border areas also influence the new generation so that they can hear about the outside world and develop an admiration for it. Despite regional differences, in the case of the border area, it is common for family members or close relatives come and go to China due to trade business and in the process, convey news of the outside world. It is also common for them to give news of South Korea after defecting from North Korea and settling in the South Korean society. The outside world in visual media is difficult to access in their real

world, but is not impossible to reach. In comparison to the former generation, the new generation has ample experiences of domestic regional mobility, and has a wider radius of activity. In particular, it is common for adolescents in bordering regions to loiter near the border, or boundaries of the outside world, and sometimes cross the border to directly go and see the outside world. The materialistic abundance of the outside world is at times a powerful catalyst to put thoughts of living in a new world into action. To some adolescents, defection from North Korea is an act that makes self-realization possible, and also an act which makes possible the realization of desires for material goods and power.

Such characteristics of the new generation do not bring immediate and perceptible changes in the North Korean society, but will act as a social pressure in determining the direction of policy decisions of the Kim Jong-un regime, and will become a source of power to incite mid and long term changes in the North Korean society. First, in the short term, the North Korean regime will strengthen ideological education to warn North Korean residents about the ‘ideological and cultural invasion of imperialism,’ and in order to block the influx of capitalist culture and foreign information, North Korea will implement a strong policy against the distribution and consumption of foreign cultural media. In particular, if exchanges with the international community are activated in response to the change in foreign relations, the state will put an all-out effort into



ideological education, including the refinement the tradition of revolution as well as system surveillance in order to shut off the influence of such exchange on adolescents who are sensitive to new culture and information.

However, the generational experience of North Korean adolescents observed through this study show that the regime's social control policies are not very effective. The characteristic of the new generation which is pragmatic, non-political, and open, will inevitably act as a prominent force for reform and opening in the long term. In particular, to North Korean adolescents, reform and opening is a possibility to realize their desire for wealth while maintaining the current system of North Korea and avoiding extreme methods such as defection. In the mid and long term, partial reform and opening is inevitable to garner support of the younger generation in a situation where the credibility of state discourse is declining and information about the outside world is overflowing.

Partial reform and opening, controlled by the North Korean authorities, has dual aspects. Partial reform and opening based on the support of the new generation can act as a general stabilizing force for the system. This increases support for the regime and can also direct the attention of the new generation, which is non-political and pragmatic, toward the pursuit of economic interest and realization of desire for material goods instead of criticism against the system. Reform and opening and the expansion of market relations can move

the younger generation toward a private environment centered on consumption, and by leading them to become politically insensitive, can act in the direction of strengthening the basis of a passive support for the regime.

On the other hand, reform and opening and the resulting expansion of market relations and increase in inflow of foreign culture can increase the instability of the system. In particular, if reform and opening proceeds and exchanges with the outside world are carried out, social reforms and democratic measures such as the provision of legal protection for open political action or the downsizing of non-democratic repression institutions can have great explosive powers in the new generation who appropriate and neutralize national discourse in their own ways. Thus, going beyond the admiration for and imitation of the Korean or Western democratic societies' material aspects and cultural styles, the form in which the new generation comes into contact with the essence of democracy, will determine whether they will remain complacent within the system or escape from it.

This study is a kind of 'ecological' report of North Korean adolescents who were born around the period of the economic crisis and have spent their childhood during the process of marketization. As it is the first attempt to connect to the experiential world of North Korean adolescents through experiences etched in their memories and show which have been accumulated and undergone during their

growth, there are more questions than answers that are left for follow-up research.

In this research, the generational experiences and characteristics of the new generation were analyzed in comparison with former generations. However, it has been unable to identify how former generations experience and accept the same political-economic and socio-cultural changes and events, and how the same event, accumulated in different sedimentary layers of the experience stratification, bring about different characteristics among generations. Thus, through follow-up research, it is necessary to identify the relationship with other generations and define the characteristics of the new generation with a focus on their differences and continuities.

Moreover, as partially observable in the interviews of the adolescents, there are significant differences in experiences and thoughts even among those between their mid-teens and late twenties which this study has defined as the ‘new generation.’ In particular, significant differences have been identified in the response to specific experiences and events between the group born in the 1990s who have experienced the Arduous March during their childhood, and those in their mid or late twenties which is the age group born in the mid or late 1980s who have experienced the Arduous March during their school years and have reached early adulthood in the 2000s. The similarities and differences of generational experience of these two age groups can be compared with that of former

generations who are over thirty or a younger age group. Within the age group of those in their late teens and early twenties who relatively share more similarities, factors such as class, area of residence, and family organization influence the division into certain generation units. Through additional research, how such social and personal factors influence the interpretation and acceptance of similar experiences, and attribution to a certain generation unit, must be clarified.

Based on the difference in absorbing generational experience within the North Korea's new generation, this study has classified into three categories defining them as the offshoots of generation units. In order to define the three groups as clearly dividable generation units, it is necessary to assess whether the division and characteristics of each unit is maintained and advanced over a certain period of time. In addition, it is crucial to observe and analyze which generational unit will develop into the leading generational unit in order to predict changes in the North Korean society.

In order to carry out such follow-up research, field study on the North Korean region is essential. However, it is impossible to contact adolescents who live in North Korea at present. Thus, as done in this study, it is inevitable that access to North Korean adolescents' experiences is obtained through adolescents who have defected and settled in different societies such as South Korea. Adolescents who have defected have left North Korea for various reasons, and

experiences of their life in regions they have lived in or settled in after defection are accumulated to their life experience in North Korea. However, properties of such experiences cannot be individually separated through analysis tools like chemical samples in a lab. Rather, it is necessary to study how the various layers of experiences interact in different socio-cultural contexts and are expressed holistically in their current lives. Analysis on how the generational characteristics of North Korean adolescents observed through this study operate and how they are altered or maintained will show in which direction the characteristics of the new generation will flow according to future changes in the North Korean society, how it will re-influence the North Korean society, and furthermore, how it will operate in relation to social integration in the process of Korean unification.

## The Emergence of a New Generation: The Generational Experience and Characteristics of Young North Koreans

Through the course of economic hardships and spontaneous marketization, the social consciousness and mindset of the North Korean people have changed. The set of values formed during childhood and life experiences imprinted in one's ego are characterized by irreversibility, making them difficult to alter after one matures into adulthood. This research aims to analyze common generational experiences held by North Korean youth who spent their infancy and childhood during times of economic crisis and marketization as a "generation" in a specific social and historical process, and what common hallmarks they have formed as a result.