

Understanding the society and people of North Korea based on North Korean defectors' testimonies

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UNDERSTANDING the society and people of North Korea North Korea is a nation difficult to understand. One cannot find in other nations such extreme idolization of national leaders, an unimaginable obsession with the nation's own communist ideology (which is called *Juche Sasang* in North Korea), the absence of any common people's uprising against the government, despite the extreme economic crisis and famine that have been continued for many years, and other such unique social phenomena.

Up until 65 years ago, the South and North Korean people were one people of one nation. However, after outside international forces divided South from North in 1945, no real human interactions have taken place between the two countries, which has made the societies and peoples of the North and South markedly different. Currently, the difference between the two peoples seems more solid than the truce line. Therefore, surmounting this difference between these two groups of people and developing their mutual understanding have great significance, not only for comprehending the phenomenon of Northern political defectors to the South, but also for the unification process and the post-unification era, that many hope will occur in the near future.

Meanwhile, the number of North Korean defectors entering South Korea is increasing continuously, and at the end of 2010, the number reached over 20,000. Most of these escaped from North Korea because of economic difficulties and food shortages. For the past 15 years, myself and my colleagues have studied, from economic, social, and cultural perspectives, these North Korean defectors' traumatic experiences in North Korea, the processes whereby they escaped to South Korea, and their adaptation problems in South Korean society (Jeon *et al*, 2005; Min *et al*, 2006; Jeon *et al*, 2008). From the perspective of cultural psychiatry, this research reveals the following characteristics regarding North Korean society and the psychology of the people living there.

1. *Societal dualism*: North Korea has a society in which, from the external perspective, communist and Confucian justifications and ideology control every aspect of life. At the same time, viewed

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from within, ordinary North Korean society shows selfishness and quick wits, which preserve individuals' lives.

2. *Social class*: In spite of political propaganda about breaking the social class system, North Korean society is characterized by a new social status system, which a person is born into. It dominates each person's entire life. This new social system is based on family background, specifically with regard to each family's past contributions to the communist revolution against Japanese colonial rule and to the Korean War.
3. *Violence*: Violent cruelty oppressing any attempt to challenge the national ruling system is an everyday occurrence. Furthermore, the educational system strongly justifies such violence.
4. *Nationalism*: Korea was a unique country in Asia, so close to Beijing yet maintaining itself as an independent state, with its own language, alphabet, and culture. These facts produced great national pride. Accordingly, North Koreans believe that nationalism equates to patriotism and justice. In the process of overcoming Japanese colonialism and the Korean War, the people built up a connection between such nationalistic patriotism and negative sentiments toward the United States.
5. *Idolization of the Leader*: In North Korea, forced loyalty to, and idolization of, the leader correlates with several factors. First, the communist party is the only political party in North Korea's one-man system. Second, North Korea's attempt to build national pride follows the logic of the "Chosen (North Korean) national superiority". That is, the Chosen people are superior, so, the leader of their nation is superior. Third, the leader is deified, to an extent, as not only representative and ruler of the people but also as symbol of the values, truth, goodness, and beauty the nation pursues. The leader idolization phenomenon in North Korea does not occur simply because of the North Korean people's low political and social consciousness.
6. *Psychological attitude toward South Korea*: North Koreans attitudes are that they are ideologically and morally superior to South Koreans. However, they also know they are economically inferior. They are taught to believe North Korea's economic inferiority results from its high military outlay and that this outlay is inevitable, due to the possibility that the world's biggest military power, the United States, may try to attack North Korea. They believe that, while they have impoverished themselves trying to maintain their national pride, South Korea abandoned such pride and accomplished its economic growth under American protection.
7. *Disappointment and frustration with the current situation*: North Koreans say the reason for their current, difficult economic situation is external, specifically, America's policy of isolating North Korea. However, the internal reason is the party cadres' ineptitude and corruption. Specifically, North Koreans feel frustrated that, despite the greatness of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jung Il, party cadres have failed to create a better nation and left many North Koreans poor, with some even starving to death. Moreover, they complain a lot about this situation. The North Korean people feel pressing frustration about having not yet established a truly ideal, communist society.

FINAL COMMENTS Usually, the phrase "unification on the Korean peninsula" means territorial unification, which includes political, economic, and military unification. However, if the unification is restricted to a mere territorial and institutional matter, it will be unstable, incomplete, and potentially followed by a re-division. True and complete unification needs to include sincere, careful, and sensitive understanding, acceptance, and mutual efforts among the South and North Korean peoples, including mutual cultural adjustments, signifying a "people's unification". With regard to the concept of unification, the Korean peninsula presently stands on an important cusp in time, passing from "territorial unification" to "people's unification".

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