

The Transformation of Class Structure and Class Conflict in North Korea

Jae-Jean Suh

Abstract

This study examines how North Korea's class structure transformations influenced the social transformations, and seeks to understand the structural characteristics of North Korea by examining in detail the existing shape of each social class. This study found that North Korea's socialist transformation was the process of dismantling every social class, such as the landowners, farmers, commerce and industry, and intelligentsia classes, etc. The 1946 land reform dismantled the landowner class, the 1958 agricultural collectivization dismantled the farmers class, and the 1958 nationalization of commerce and industry did the same to the petty bourgeoisie. The only class remaining in North Korea is the managers of the governing class. There was no class differentiation, only dismantlement. Thus, with social classes dissolved, the governing class remains as the monolithic class monopolizing social, economic, and political power in North Korea, with no other social power to act as a balancer. This type of class structure may constitute the social conditions of political dictatorship in North Korea.

Key Words: North Korea, class structure, social class, democracy, dictatorship

Introduction

The unification of two countries does not simply involve the uniting of two political and economic systems, but ultimately requires social integration. For the two Koreas, North and South, which hope to one day reunify, this fact is particularly salient. For while each has aligned itself on opposite sides of the Cold War divide for over half a century, making the difference in their political and economic systems rather obvious, the most important difference that deserves our attention is that between the North's and South's social systems. In fact, analyzing the heterogeneity of these two countries' societies is one of the most important tasks for social scientists today.

Class structure is a pivotal point in which social system should be analyzed. Class structure implies the structure in which the economic and political gain of each individual is distributed in the process of economic production. In that regard, each social class is an interest group with an independent economic base. As Barrington Moore points out, social classes represent social forces with political influence. In modern times, a decisive precondition for modern democracy has been the emergence of a rough balance between the state and the society.¹

Since North Korea (the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, DPRK) is characterized as a society under dictatorial rule, its class structure should be paid due attention because authoritarianism is not just a political aspect of a society, but an aspect of class structure as well. Consequently, analyzing the transformation of North Korea's class structure – an area of study that has received little attention in the literature on the country – is a highly useful approach when

¹Barrington Moore, Jr., *Social Origins' of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), p. 417.

analyzing the social structure of the DPRK.

In North Korea, via the so-called socialization of the means of production, all social classes were dismantled and a new ruling class was installed as the sole power in society. If we consider that the foundation of society in North Korea was developed as a monopolistic system, then we might be able to see how the country's class structure and class characteristics are determined politically rather than socially. While individual class position is determined by the ownership of the means of production, a society's class structure is determined by the mode of production. The mode of production is reorganized as a result of industrialization, but through political decisions it can be artificially reorganized. In the case of North Korea, political power has reorganized the means of production in the process of socialist transformation, and hence, completely reorganized the mode of production and class structure in the country.

This study examines how North Korea's class structure transformations influenced the social transformations, and seeks to understand the structural characteristics of the DPRK, such as by examining in detail the existing shape of each of the social classes. By way of conclusion, the study draws a brief comparison between North and South Korea in terms of class structure.

Dismantling of the Social Classes

In North Korea, the fundamental ownership relations of the traditional class structure were dismantled in the name of socialist construction. The victims of this construction were the traditional classes of landowner, petty bourgeoisie, farmer, and intellectual, which we shall begin to examine.

Dismantlement of the Landowner Class

Within North Korea, the large class of landowners was brought to ruin when the Land Reform of 1946 came into effect. At that time, the North Korean Provisional People's Committee announced the Land Reform Law and in only a month completed the land reform. The principle and method of the reform appeared in the officially announced March 5, 1946 'North Korean Land Reform Act' and March 7 'Rules Concerning the Implementation of the Land Reform Act.' The basic principle of the reform was voluntary forfeiture (a euphemism for confiscation) and free distribution. The reform essentially provided for the confiscation by the government of any land over 5 *chongbo* (1 *chongbo* equaling approximately 2.45 acres). Only those who cultivated land were deemed worthy of having it.²

When completed, about 1,000,325 *chongbo* of the 1,982,431 *chongbo* under cultivation in North Korea at the time was confiscated. Among this land, the amount owned by the Japanese state, Japanese people, and religious organizations was barely 4 percent. The remaining 96 percent was that of Korean landowners and land tenants. This reached a total of 405,603 inhabitants, about 40 percent of the total number of 1,121,295 farming households registered in North Korea at this time. No fewer than four among every ten farmhouses are known to have had their land confiscated in whole or in part.³

In North Korea, land reform was the most important policy in the construction of the Kim Il Sung regime. In the beginning, the landowner made up only 4 percent of the agricultural households, while the people made up 58.2 percent of total cultivated land tenants against close to a total population of 80 percent. As a result of the agrarian land reform North Korean society's class structure was

²For a detailed analysis on land reform in North Korea, see Park Myung Rim, *Outbreak and Origins of Korean War: Origins and Cause*, Vol. 2 (Seoul: Nanam, 1996), chapter 4.

³*Ibid.*, p. 196.

greatly reorganized. The landlord (i.e., landowner) class, a traditional ruling class, was completely dissolved. The poor and other farmers positively supported the political power agency of the land reform as it gave them their own fields to cultivate. The agricultural class, which represented 74.1 percent of the entire population at the end of 1949, was working in absolute support of establishing the political power of the Kim Il Sung regime.

Dismantlement of the Petty Bourgeoisie

In addition to the land reform, nationalization of key industries had reorganized class structure toward urban regions in a revolutionary way. The North Korean Provisional People's Committee on August 10, 1946 promulgated the rules regarding the nationalization of industry, traffic, transportation, communications, and bank finances. It follows hereupon that at this time, across the country, over 90 percent of industry's 1,034 important factories and businesses were nationalized.⁴

In 1947, from the total amount of industrial production, 80.2 percent was held by the state management industry, while capitalistic commerce and industry made up only about 19.8 percent. After the Korean War, private enterprise production in the North as a whole consisted mainly of small-scale rice mills, metal-works shops, rubber factories, and other small-scale establishments. By 1957, on average, each existing private employer employed about 1.4 people. Private enterprises that employed more than 5 laborers amounted to a mere 14 percent. By May 1957, the total number of existing private industrial enterprises was 633.

After the Korean War, the capitalist economic structure and small-goods economic structure of commerce still remained, but it

⁴ *Kuloja*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (1963), p. 87.

began to transform toward socialist relations of production, a transformation that completed itself by August 1958. Prior to the war in 1947, within the commerce and trade sector, the share of private enterprises selling retail goods was 43.5 percent. However, just after the war in 1953, this number fell to 32.5 percent. By the end of 1956, it was just 12.7 percent. By August 1958, this type of activity was completely eliminated.⁵

Dismantlement of the Farming Class

Through the land reform, all farmers received land. This pleased them until they had to return it to the state in 1958. Though the right to private land ownership depended on and was accomplished via the land reform of 1946, through Kim Il Sung's instructions of March 11, 1954, and the Party's Central Committee's conference of November 1954, the agriculture collectivization movement was actively pursued until August 1958 and successfully carried out. All farmers and farmland of North Korea were included in the collectivization.

South Korean social scientists mainly tend to cite economics as being the main reason why Kim chose a socialistic collectivization path for agriculture, as Kim himself argued the destruction of farming villages during the Korean War made it difficult for individual farmers to manage farming by themselves. However, this argument is controversial because the reason behind it lies somewhere else. Ten years after the land reform, some farmers were beginning to prosper greatly, and their emerging political power and independence were becoming evident. It seems apparent that after the land reform in rural communities, Kim Il Sung strived to develop his own agriculture as a means to control all farmers.

⁵Kim Young Hee, *Socialization Experience of Private Commercial and Industrial Sector* (Pyongyang: Social Science Publisher, 1987), pp. 14-15, 46-47.

We also cannot close our eyes to the fact that rich farmers are constantly emerging in the countryside. Of course, we successfully carried out the agrarian reform. Since then there has been no serious trouble, but it is a fact that rich farmers are gradually appearing in the countryside. Though they benefited from the agrarian reform, those who are growing into rich farmers are liable to be influenced by south Korean reactionary circles as their farming gradually takes a capitalist character. An analysis of those who collaborated with the reactionaries during our temporary retreat shows that some had benefited by the agrarian reform and some had even worked as farm hands for the landlords. The reason is that as they were becoming rich farmers after the agrarian reform in our countryside, they were all influenced by south Korean reactionary circles and by the US imperialist. Inasmuch as rich farmers are emerging in the countryside and they are affected by reactionary influences, the class struggle is continuing in the rural areas anyway, even though it has not yet come out into the open, and it may gradually grow sharper.⁶

Even though the reason why Kim Il Sung carried out agriculture collectivization is related to the economic problems of North Korea at the time, one can also see that the political problem loomed larger, and that the nationalization of land in the North was carried out so that the state could control at will the farmers' production arrangements.

If we were to follow the line of Milovan Djilas,⁷ with the exception of North Korea's managerial class itself, no ownership class with stabilized power was to be allowed to remain in the North. Typically, in times of serious political instability or turmoil, farmers hold the possibility of becoming dangerous, politically, to the established authority. Understanding this, Kim Il Sung executed the agriculture collectivization to force the farmers to obey his authority. There was

⁶Kim Il Sung, "On Our Party's Policy for the Future Development of Agriculture: On the Economic Structure in the Northern Half of the Republic and the Socialist Transformation of the Countryside" (Concluding Speech at a Plenary Meeting of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea, November 3, 1954), *Kim Il Sung Works*, Vol. 9 (English ed.) (Pyongyang: Foreign Language Publishing House, 1982), p. 108.

⁷Milovan Djilas, *The New Class: An Analysis of the Communist System* (New York: Prager Publisher, 1957), p. 56.

no need to risk the possible sabotage of the food supply by the farmers. This meant that the nationalization of the land was necessary. This is the direct reason why the attack was conducted against the farmer in North Korea, a process similar to the agriculture collectivization done earlier by the Soviet Union.⁸ Through the agricultural collectivization that was performed in the North, the farmers' class was dismantled. Farmers and peasants alike were degraded, becoming much like the serfs of the middle ages.

After 1958, in terms of mode of production, North Korea was thoroughly transformed into a socialist society. Those from the upper industrial sector that grew into wealthy merchants were also castigated. People in the North who raised themselves defiantly against this process were purged.

Dismantlement of the Intellectual Class

At the beginning of the regime, because of the shortage of manpower, North Korea pursued a policy which attempted to utilize intellectuals who had studied under the pre-liberation system. However, the regime purged many intellectuals while ousting dissidents in the process of the nationalization. Kim Il Sung proposed the issue of reforming and purging of intellectuals for the first time when he talked with local officials on August 9, 1958: "We have to speed up the construction of Socialism, and for that purpose, we have to fight against the conservatism of intellectuals."⁹ A passage from the *Rodong Sinmun* (a mouthpiece of the Party) shows the perception of North Korea's leadership:

⁸ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Stalin's Peasants: Resistance & Survival in the Russian Village after Collectivization* (Oxford University Press, 1994).

⁹ Kim Il Sung, "On City, County People's Committee's Current Tasks," *Kim Il Sung Works*, Vol. 6 (Pyongyang: Chosun Workers Party Press, 1960), p. 2.

There are people who still work lazily while other people cast out old things, and people who still stick to the old paradigm while innovation is taking place.¹⁰

North Korea issued a “Letter of the Central Committee of North Korean Worker’s Party” (or the *Red Letter*) to appeal to all party members as a policy of overcoming passiveness and speeding up the construction of socialism. The letter said, “let’s break conservatism and passiveness, and go forward with Cheollima!” This, however, was mere lip-service to constructing socialism and in reality was an effort to purge dissidents. The *Chosun Jun Sa (Whole History of Korea)* hints at this: “There was an ideology fight to get rid of old ideas that harm the revolution, such as passiveness, conservatism, mysticism. In this process dissidents were harshly criticized.”¹¹ Key targets of the purge were the intellectuals, who had received their education during the period of Japanese occupation of the Korean Peninsula. Kim Il Sung’s remarks in a campaign of national innovative producers further suggest this:

Conservatives still have the remnants of Japanese imperial ideas. Those people try to see our reality with the old paradigm while saying, “I went to a Japanese University and studied in the past, but what about you?”¹²

The movement of overcoming conservatism and passiveness started from technicians and managers in the economic field, but it

¹⁰“Again Against Conservatism and Passiveness,” *Rodong Sinmun*, Editorial, September 16, 1958.

¹¹Social Science Academy History Institute, *Chosun Whole History*, Vol. 29 (Pyongyang: Science Encyclopedia, 1981), p. 103.

¹²Kim Il Sung, “Opposing the Passiveness and Conservatism in Socialist Building” (A Speech in a National Production Reformist Conference, September 16, 1958), *Kim Il Sung Works*, Vol. 12 (Pyongyang: Chosun Workers Party Press, 1981), p. 523.

gradually extended to all intellectuals. With the *Red Letter* and orders from the Party Central Committee, the purge against conservatives (i.e., intellectuals, technicians, etc.) extended to all fields of general affairs, administration, education, arts, and culture.¹³ According to North Korean defector Jeong Gab Ryeol, all competent intellectuals were ousted in order to set up the dictatorship.¹⁴

Writers and artists were purged in October 1958 right after the nationalization of all industries was complete:

Some writers and artists don't follow the Party's lead and criticism, and they just act recklessly. There are no rules or regulations.... The reason why writers and artists still have remnants of the Capitalist idea is that they don't make efforts to get rid of their old paradigm. In the past, writers and artists didn't examine their own idea and they didn't fight well to get rid of the old paradigm.... Writers and artists should join the fight to get rid of the remnants of Capitalism. All writers and artists need to examine and criticize their work and life with the Party's guideline, as if they were looking at their face through a mirror.¹⁵

The following also suggests that dissident writers were purged under the pretext of their being bourgeois revisionists obeying larger global powers:

'Culture-line' ideologues who talked about characters of no-class in literature, old rubbish who pointed arts-best ideology with dissident poem *Eung Hyang*, corrupted anti-revolutionists who cooperated with American imperialists with bourgeois ideas, and all dissidents and old things including anti-party families who transplanted ideas of obeying big countries and revisionism with international opportunists. All of them have been dismantled by the marching of our literature with the

¹³Institute for North Korea Studies, "Class Policy in North Korea," Yang Homin (ed.), *North Korean Society Reconsidered* (Seoul: Hanwool, 1987), p. 310.

¹⁴Jung Gap Yul (musical instrument researcher; age 46; defected on May 31, 1996) testimony.

¹⁵Lim Il Sung, "Fighting against Old Thoughts Residue among Writers and Artists" (A Speech to Writers and Artists, October 14, 1958), *Kim Il Sung Works*, Vol. 12 (Pyongyang: Chosun Workers Party Press, 1981), pp. 553, 557.

literature policy of the Party.¹⁶

According to Shibada Minoru, many cultural intellectuals were purged under the pretext of their being ‘dissident bourgeoisie,’ ‘liberalists,’ and ‘revisionists.’¹⁷ One North Korean defector even testified to this by publishing a book about oppression and the purging of writers and artists at that time.¹⁸

Essentially, all social powers were ousted. All landowner, farmer, businessmen, and intellectual classes were dismantled. All classes that possessed means of production were eradicated. All means of production were socialized and nationalized, so all individuals became employees of the state, and the state became the sole employer in North Korea. For North Korean people, there is no property which they can control. Everything is under the bureaucratic control of the state. Individuals are only objects of the state’s mobilization.

Therefore, in North Korea, class structure consists of the rulers – a class of cadres as the political power group – and the ruled – that is, everyone else. The ruled have no social power; only cadres do. The ruled are merely objects to be governed. The process of dismantling of social classes was a process of dismantling and purging the privileged. In this process, many people were punished for being hostile or a social “cancer.” All social classes were dismantled and the new ruling class grabbed hegemonic power in the name of proletariat dictatorship.

¹⁶Rim Soo Rim, “Our Juche Literature Marching Strongly Sustaining the Great Sun,” *Chosun Literature* (May 1982), p. 65.

¹⁷Sibada Minoru, Yi Wonbok, trans., *Kim Il Sung’s Ambition: History of Purge* (Seoul: Gyungji Sa, 1989), p. 147.

¹⁸Yi Chul Ju, *North’s Artists* (Seoul: Gemong Sa, 1965).

Class Policy of North Korea after Class Dismantlement

During the regime's beginning, if the initial class policy was to get rid of the physical base of the dissident class through collectivization in farming and nationalization of industries, then the policy that followed was to prevent remnants of the past from being revived. This was done by clearing the ideological base of the past class structure. For that, North Korea classified each individual according to their family background at birth, and pursued a policy of discrimination based on class. This discrimination policy has been actively pursued since 1957.

It is widely known that Kim Il Sung consolidated his power by purging his political opponents, such as those belonging to the Yunan and Soviet factions when the August Faction Incident occurred in 1956. In 1957, when Kim Il Sung established his dictatorship, it was also deemed necessary to classify people into "trustful" people and "distrustful" people. It was based on the demand for power that remaining dissidents be ousted, as well as those complaining of the radical socialist reform, such as the agricultural collectivization and abolishment of individual industries, that had been undertaken.

At the international level, a type of anti-socialist backlash was spreading within the Eastern socialist world in 1956 (e.g., the Hungarian Revolt in Hungary, the October Confrontation in Poland), with a stream of revisionism started in the USSR by Nikita Khrushchev after Stalin died. Kim Il Sung needed a policy that would block these winds now blowing from the USSR and the Eastern bloc and threatening his regime.

Facing crisis both internally and externally, Kim's regime began identifying who was an enemy and friend by classifying all people as either supporter or dissident based on their family background at birth and ideological orientation. This kind of policy toward people was pursued in the name of class struggle and a fight against anti-

revolutionists.¹⁹

On May 30, 1957, after a meeting of the Standing Committee of the Korean Workers' Party Central Committee, North Korea issued a statement about transforming the anti-revolutionists fight into a movement of the whole party and all people. At first, North Korea launched a local movement, but it pursued a Party's Central Intensive Guidance for effective administration of the Standing Committee's 'May 30 Decision.' Intensive Guidance started its organizing plan in December 1958. It organized 7,000 agents including Kim Young Ju as a top leader and an organization director of the party who was a younger brother of Kim Il Sung.

Intensive Guidance began in Pyongyang and was extended nationwide by the end of 1960. In the Intensive Guidance, North Korea classified its people into those that could be trusted and those that could not, based on one's family background at birth. And from this classification, it again classified them into the core, wavering (potential dissidents), and hostile (dissidents) classes. Through this operation, North Korea ousted groups that resisted Kim Il Sung's leadership and opponents of the agricultural collectivization policy, as well as those who were dissidents during the period of the Korean War. By doing so North Korea identified enemy and friend and ousted dissidents in the name of Cabinet Decision 149. According to the decision, those ousted were to be put into an area 20km away from the seacoast and demarcation line, 50km away from Pyongyang and Gaesung, 20km away from cities, and into limited residential areas. From this calculation, those limited residential areas meant Jagangdo, Yangangdo, and Hamgyeongbukdo. People of Decision 149 received a special stamp on their ID card and were registered on the social security agency list for close monitoring. Many were relocated step by

¹⁹Institute for North Korea Studies (ed.), *North Korea Chongram* (Seoul: Institute for North Korea Studies, 1984), pp. 301-302.

step within a year: 5,000 residents in Pyongyang, 600 in Kaesong, and 1,500 in Gangwondo; the total reached 8,000. Others received worse punishment: 5,500 people were put in labor camps, 1,500 were confined, and 1,000 sentenced to death.²⁰

North Korea classified its people, and those classifications determine one's destiny. The core class, the privileged, includes workers, farmhands, participants in the Korean War, honorable veterans, general residents, intellectuals educated after Korea's liberation from Japan, enthusiastic members who had helped in the establishment of the North Korean regime, etc. Those not a part of this core fall into one of the other two classes, the wavering and hostile, and are systematically discriminated against. The wavering class possesses a politically complicated problem, as those in this category are subjects for revolutionalization and re-education because they are believed to be vacillating: They may embrace the socialist ideals of North Korea, or possibly the so-called fantasy of South Korea and/or capitalism. As for the hostile class, it includes those who collaborated with the Japanese during the colonial rule of Korea, landowners, rich farmers, capitalists, those who collaborated with the United States or South Korea during the Korean War, families of defectors, persons ousted from power, anti-revolutionists and their families, religious people, political dissidents and their families, and so on. They are classified further as subjects to be re-educated, isolated, or eradicated.²¹

The Condition of Each Social Class

The Ruling Class: An Exclusive Group

Though North Korea claims that all exploiting classes in the

²⁰ For a detailed analysis on Central Intensive Guidance, see *op. cit.*, pp. 302-308.

²¹ Kang Ilsung, *North Korea's Personnel System* (mimeo, 1997), pp. 3-4.

country have undergone socialist reform, the reality is that a new ruling exploiting class was created. They are the managers of the state practicing state capitalism, managing the now nationalized means of production. They function as a managerial class, and Lenin's vanguard party theory is used to justify their rule. It states that the party's vanguard role is necessary to give class identity to its workers, who lacked a class identity. According to Lenin, it was the party's vanguard role that made workers realize their class identity, rather than social or economic conditions.²² Thus, this class is a managerial class in both theory and practice, a privileged class that monopolizes everything economic, political, and social, has no dissidents, and tends to be an exclusive group that shuts out people from the other classes.

Like this, the North Korean managerial class is an exclusive group which has institutionalized a system so that it may keep its privileges. Only the sons and daughters of the core class can become promoted within the managerial class. Those of the wavering and hostile classes are discriminated against and cannot enter the core.²³

This North Korean status system is one based on parentage or background, not on personal effort or ability. This is the key of North Korean class policy, as it regards the label one is given at birth as the most important thing in the system. Although North Korea claims that ideology is the standard by which a person can become a party member or go to college, it is one's network and lineage that affords one real power in this society.²⁴ Hence, family line is the most important apparatus for reproducing the managerial class.

For example, one's father's background is very important if one wants to go to college. Sons of cadres are almost guaranteed success.

²²Ralf Miliband, *Class Power and State Power* (New York: Verso, 1983), pp. 161-162; Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism, 2-The Golden Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 386, 396.

²³Cho Byung Im (mine worker defected on May 8, 1996) testimony.

²⁴Ha Gun Sung (diplomat defected on January 16, 1996) testimony.

One's personal network, such as knowing the sons of other cadres, is a much bigger factor that influences whether one may enter college or get a promotion. Thus family background is used as a standard of legitimacy and discrimination.

There is a thick wall that separates the classes in North Korean society. Children of cadres only marry children of cadres. Cadres are connected together and they construct a closed system. Through this system, cadres make their children cadres. Therefore, North Korean people think that cadres come only from the families of cadres. Thus there is a big difference between the rulers and the ruled both in their standard of living and way of thinking. They are, in fact, different people. While in the past it was good to be a worker, or a child of a worker, now it is good to be a child of a cadre. If one's father is a cadre, the child too can become a cadre; if a worker, then he or she will ultimately become a worker.²⁵ Often North Korean people criticize their reality and class order by saying, "we should have a good foundation, we should have Mt. Baekdu's power, and we should have good lineage" to be successful.

Cadres are party members in North Korea, and party members monopolize all the rare resources of wealth, power, and social prestige. Non-party members are prohibited from obtaining such resources, exist merely as people who cannot become cadres, and essentially live in exile. Since those who are not selected to become party members are generally regarded as having a problem with their family history, it is obvious that the relationship between the party and non-party members is not established based on equality, but on one's being "legitimate" or "illegitimate." Discrimination of non-party members by party members leaning on their party affiliation often leads to conflict, and the non-party members are disadvantageously

²⁵Nam Jun Yi (material purchaser defected on July 22, 1996) testimony.

judged regardless of the causes of a dispute.

It is frequently said that non-party members are treated unfairly. For instance, they must bow their heads toward party members. Party members are also clearly distinguished from the non-party members even in their everyday life. In the workplace, every individual is obliged to engage in one of three organizations: The party, the Youth League (the former *Sarochong*), or the Workers Union (*jikmaeng*). Everyone joins the Youth League by age 31. While those who joined the party are admitted into the party organization, the others who could not are assigned to the work union organization. In the work union organization, only the chief is a party member.²⁶

In North Korean society, it is said that the party members are so authoritative that when they become a chief they do not regard the people as human beings. In other words, they rule the non-party members by virtue of their party membership. Party members hold much authority, with no other social power to keep them in check. Since preferential treatment of party members is institutionalized, non-party members are consequently regarded with contempt.²⁷

Privileges also exist for the managing staffs in the distribution system. Supplies are divided into special numbers, i.e., No. 4, No. 3, No. 2, and No. 1. Those people who are in higher positions are afforded a higher rank distribution, i.e., a wider variety of products. There are supply stations (shops) for staff in the regions ranked higher than *gun* and *do* that provide tobacco products, confectionery, meat, oil, etc. On such inequality of the distribution, people make cynical remarks, saying things like “how could the lowest party secretaries that don’t do anything be allowed to obtain objects of a No. 4 (*tukho*) classification?” There is much criticism of this reality in which the lowest cadres get one and a half times the salary as the

²⁶ See Cho Byung Im testimony.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

underprivileged. And at the same time, it is also heard that the workers complain about the staff, saying, because of their better backgrounds, these staff could enter universities, become cadres, and live idly.²⁸

The ruling elite is the privileged class reigning over the ruled. Overall, they enjoy relatively far more special benefits than the other classes, have a very high affinity for the system because their special benefits are transferable, and prefer that the existing system continues.

The Working Class: An Atomized Class

In North Korean society, the inequality has already been structuralized as much as the working classes are regarded as the lower classes treated with contempt, even though the DPRK advocates a society of proletarian dictatorship. According to such a social structure, the value consciousness of the people has also changed. Even though the North Korean regime has promoted social reconstruction in many ways (such as through the humanity-reform project, the thought-education and training project, and others), the internal value system of the people has changed to run opposite the party line. This is because the value system of the people is affected by how social power and resources are distributed. The occupational prestige has formed a dual structure in North Korean society with regard to the difference between the officially claimed socialist value system and the actual one that influences North Koreans' everyday lives. The actual value system of the people is far from the original direction of socialist ideology (in which the working class leads, pursuing equality in a society without classes).

One other important feature of the North Korean working class's existing form is that it is thoroughly atomized. The North Korean

²⁸ Im Chul Myung (steel worker defected on November 18, 1995) testimony.

leadership believed that the atomization of the individual would make state control of the people much easier. In fact, a socialist regime normally adopts policies intended to maintain its power by preventing the masses from being loyal to anything other than the regime. Peer groups were recognized as interfering with the absolute control of the state. Moreover, these groups are usually understood as the basis for the formation of underground organizations and anti-government actions.²⁹ In Soviet society, the company groups were important private organs that resisted the state. While the Soviet encouraged comradeship, it prohibited friendship. There was a good reason for the Soviet regime to view close relationships between people with suspicion. One of the causes of alienation, anomie, and solitude in socialist societies originates from this characteristic.³⁰

In North Korean society, human relationships are also atomized. This means that the ones who do not correspond to the goal of the party are suppressed. The regime considers that trust toward anything other than the party may foster potential reactionary elements against the party's goal. In other words, private relationships are possible only through the party. Individuals cannot foster relationships independently.³¹

One of the institutions which promote the atomization of human relationships is the mutual indictment system. Under this system, if someone does not implicate someone else for a fault committed, he himself will similarly be punished. Because of this policy, people cannot talk freely without inhibition. They say that they do not open their hearts to others since they cannot make certain who is an informant of the security agency and who is not. There are a number

²⁹ Shlapentokh, "Public and Private Life of the Soviet People," p. 172.

³⁰ Andrew Walder, *Communist Neo-Traditionalism* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986), p. 3.

³¹ Suh Chul Young (rail road station officer defected on August 14, 1999) testimony.

of cases in which informants have made false statements against innocent people just to place those people in a position of greater hardship. North Koreans, therefore, take care of what they say, and do not trust or discredit each other.

The self-criticism sessions carried out weekly also promote the atomization of human relationships. Since these have become routine, people know each other and act accordingly (unless someone gravely irritates them). And because everyone has to criticize one another in these sessions, they tend to do so in a modest way.³² Regardless of how things play out, the fact remains that this system itself institutionally atomizes human relationships.

North Korean defectors often say that no one has a true friend in North Korean society, because there were many cases in which open-minded words caused calamities. They say that they were always ready to inform against their comrades no matter how close the relationship looked on the surface – in one case, after a divorce, a spouse prosecuted the ex-spouse for speaking out against the politics of the system.³³

Agrarian Class Reduced to Serfdom

It would be helpful to look into the notion of the European serf in the medieval feudal ages as a historical phenomenon to understand the class realities of the peasants in the DPRK.

The origin of the serf began near the time when the Roman Empire was ending. The forerunners of medieval serfs were the colon, or people who placed themselves under the protection of the Roman potentates and were given land to farm and paid a yearly amount to do

³²Sung Whan Young (military medical doctor defected in September 1999) testimony.

³³Kim Chul Dae (researcher of Waterpower Engineering Institute defected in 1999) testimony.

so. Except for their specific duties to their lords, they could possess their own properties, and manage their own businesses independently.

However, the serfs under the jurisdiction of the feudal lords in the middle ages could never leave the territories of the lords, and, in most cases, they died there without any chance (or liberty) to move. Moreover, they could not marry free persons (and their marriages with one another were not regarded as full marriages) but only those who their lord selected. The serfs were solemnly the properties of their lords, even if they could enjoy a certain liberty of individual life within the territory. These people were tied to the land and could be sold together with their lot. They were not slaves, but they were not free either.

While the modern free peasants only had to pay ground rent and were free people equal to the landowners in social position, the serfs were, at first, prohibited from moving about freely since they were tied to the lands, and, secondly, they were responsible for shouldering various kinds of burdens (poll taxes, death taxes, marriage taxes, etc.) besides ground rents. Thirdly, they were under the control of their lords.

For the serfs, even though there were land-leases for maintenance so that independent agricultural management was permitted, they were required to pay taxes, which included labor and money, to their lords, since the subordinate relationship was a price they had to pay for permission to work the land. In particular, they were so tightly subordinated to their lords that they had to work to manage their lords' lands as well. Even though the serfs were more independent and enjoyed freer existences than the slaves, they were still lower in status than the independent peasants who were emancipated from the whole restriction.

The serfdom in which means of production combine with producers forms a type of supremacy through personal non-economic coercion. In this sense, serf means the same as feudal peasant. The

ancient slaves were mere possessions of their owners, and essentially different from the modern wage earners since the latter sell their labor without means of production. But the serfs in the feudal society possessed means of production, such as land, farming tools, draft animals, and so forth.

The Chinese peasants before Deng Xiaoping were also called serfs.³⁴ According to Zhou, the Chinese peasants were not free to move and choose their own jobs. They were tied to farms by the census institution and food card system, and more severely restrained from moving than the European serfs of the middle ages. For example, a married woman could not visit her parents' home, and peasants were prohibited from going to agrarian markets.

North Korean peasants share similar aspects to the medieval serfs. In a sense, the former are more subordinate in social status. While serfs could possess their own property and manage it independently, North Korean peasants cannot.

As financial difficulties deepen and the food situations worsen, peasants usually become the main subject of exploitation since there is actually nothing to exploit in the other industrial sectors. While formerly the products were distributed with peasants of the collective farm, namely the producer as the central figure, now such distribution is centered on military supplies. Moreover, because of the food shortage, when there is any food support, distribution of the food is not according to ordinary rules, but according to orders from higher authorities. And since shares for peasants were reduced, the peasants are no longer enthusiastic about production and expectations of distribution have vanished.³⁵

³⁴Kate Xiao Zhou, *How Farmers Changed China* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996).

³⁵Kim Guk Chul (manager of Meal Management Corporation defected in November 2000) testimony.

In North Korea, the newly added type of exploitation of peasants comes in the form of peasants having to supply pork to the North Korean People's Army. It is an institution that requires every farmhouse to supply one pig of 100kg every year. Reportedly, this has been in operation since the late 1980s. If anyone does not accomplish this task, then an equal proportion of his share of distributed food is withheld. The price of one pig is approximately 10,000 won, which matches about 500kg of food, and is more than the yearly amount of food for one person (340kg). This places a lot of stress on peasants, and is one of the biggest fetters on peasants today.

The closing account of distribution of the collective farm consists of national duty procurement rice, military provisions, food for peasants, 1:1 feed (feed for one pig), and seed. Among them, the provisions are first subtracted, and the rest are given to the peasants. If anyone fails to supply pork, 1:1 feed is subtracted.

In many cases, peasants could not even taste (unglutinous) rice. While they sometimes borrow corn and repay with unglutinous rice in recent years, they have begun repaying with fowl, goat, rabbit, and so on instead of pig. However, they cannot skip the payment due to the criticism they would receive at self-criticism sessions, which operate at the level of administrative units and the party.

As exploitation against peasants grows, so does their anger. They say that the life of a peasant is harder than a laborer or office worker. While laborers can at least do business, peasants do not have time to do so. In addition, while laborers do not have to show up at work since the factories are closed, peasants have to work since the lands are still cultivatable. Although some enlightened peasants live a better life by bringing some fields under cultivation, most people are dependent on the state and live a tough life.³⁶

³⁶ Testimony from one of the defectors cited above.

It is said that there are many among the peasants who criticize Kim Jong Il for his bad policies. Typically, after one of Kim Jong Il's field (i.e., on-the-spot) guidance trips, people would see him on TV repeatedly for several days. Their reaction, however, was very negative. They usually said, "when will he show up? It would be better to give us rice." They often say that it was good while Kim Il Sung ruled, but it has been bad since Kim Jong Il officially took power. For them, the reality has worsened: Families have split up, and more and more houses are becoming empty. Now people complain openly. It is said that even cadres and military officers speak like this.³⁷

The Hostile Class: Leading the Change in Values

The class-discrimination policy has operated since 1957, producing a mass of dissatisfied, disenfranchised people excluded from the regime, and they are leading a systemic change. They are working as seeds of change conceived inside the system. As a result of the Party's central intensive guidance and the resident registration project of 1971, North Korean society has been divided into 3 classes and 51 sub-classes: The core class of 3,915,000 people in 870,000 households; the wavering class of 3,150,000 people in 700,000 households; and the hostile class of 7,930,000 people in 173,000 households.³⁸ Combined, the number of people who make up the wavering and hostile classes accounts for well over half the population in North Korea, with the hostile class alone accounting for one-third of the entire population.

We have already said that in North Korean society, if someone is branded as wavering or hostile, it is hard for them to become a party member, which is basically equal to citizenship. Such a person also

³⁷Yi Sook Mi (female farmer defected in 2000) testimony.

³⁸*Naewae Tongsin*, No. 22, 1977.

has limited opportunities to improve his condition as far as career is concerned: For example, such a person is denied entrance into university and cannot be appointed to the position of cadre. Moreover, such restrictions are not placed simply on that individual alone, but extend to his family and descendants. Thus, once one is branded as “wavering” or “hostile,” regardless of political propensity, the individual quickly loses hope to achieve great success in life in the North Korean social system. In addition, once one is officially labeled by the authorities, he is essentially labeled in society, since he would subsequently be despised by his neighbors and colleagues. In this society, the policy that classifies people into core, wavering, and hostile classes actually functions as a social discrimination policy.

Once branded as a reactionary element, these people become marginalized and end up harboring hostile feelings against authority. Therefore those labeled are driven into a situation in which they cannot help but be hostile toward the system, as remodeling their thought so that they could once again seek approval within the system is deemed impossible. Those politically identified as hostile do in the true sense of the word become antagonistic toward the system. The DPRK’s classification policy has done this, and as a result has mass produced an underlying hostile power. In fact, most of the North Korean defectors that have come to the South were of the wavering and hostile classes.

With an extremely limited chance of rising in stature in the North Korean system, once the official section encountered crisis and left little benefit for anyone else, those of the wavering and hostile classes had an immediate change of attitude toward the unofficial section of the economy. These people were the first to enter into the black market, which had become the subject of the authorities’ control, and pursued new material values. In a way this resembles what took place in China, where because of the discrimination policy between urban

and rural residents, rural community peasants started to find ways to make money, all in search of a reformative breakthrough.

So while the core class concentrated on inner-systemic solidarity when faced with such a systemic crisis, the other classes immediately began searching for other opportunities. They found these opportunities in the market, which was officially prohibited for it was deemed anti-socialist, and began to flock there to do business. After businesses expanded countrywide like a prairie fire, the authorities ended up bringing the business into the open in July 2002 with the announcement of the economic reform measures.

Hence the seed of change grew from within the system itself. The marginalized of society essentially led the change of values. Among this group, most were from the general masses and those classified as wavering. Rather than attempt to seek approval in a system that had rejected them, they decided to achieve success by conducting business and making money. For them, a change in values toward emphasizing economic prosperity via business was an easy change to embrace.

Reportedly, they collude with the regulation authorities, such as the regional safety personnel and national security guards, creating a symbiotic relationship between the wavering class and members of the regulation authority. The former habitually bribe the latter, borrow or rent their motorcycles for business, and give them gifts. When a new regulation squad like the anti-socialist group monitors appears, those conducting business shy away from the group members at first because they are unfamiliar with the characteristics of the organization. However, once they begin to understand the group's inner workings and characteristics of its members, they bribe them as well and continue to conduct black market operations.

Class Conflict of North Korean Society

In the North Korean system, the ruling class is the group that monopolizes power, wealth, and prestige. Because the degree of monopoly is extreme, it is expected that other groups be suppressed. Controlling the suppression of and protection against the non-ruling classes is most important.³⁹ In order to suppress the non-ruling classes, North Korea uses a policy of distinction based on one's heredity and discriminates against certain members of certain classes. Hereditary distinction of the individual shoulders the responsibility of this discrimination. This acknowledges the structural discord of class and contrasts it with the case of capitalism, which pursues class compromise.

Ultimately, North Korea's decades of class discrimination policy has brought about untold suffering and pain for the North Korean people, which has given rise to feelings of antagonism against the system. Only those sub-classified as part of the *Mangyoungdae* line (i.e., of Kim Il Sung's lineage), *Baekdosan* line (i.e., Kim Jong Il's lineage), *Ryongnamsan* line (i.e., fellows who chummed with Kim Jong Il and graduated together with him from Kim Il Sung University), and specific others can receive official government posting. One's family background determines one's fortune or misfortune, and this has become the social reality in North Korea.⁴⁰

When preparing for the 1970s succession planning, Kim Il Sung said, "our world is a world of workers," and when that was said the North Korean citizens consented to these words. But when the 1980s followed, it is said that the people stated, "our world is a world of cadres."⁴¹

³⁹ Michael Voslenski, *La Nomenklatura*, Hong Sunho, trans. (Seoul: Pyungmin Sa, 1982), pp. 75-76.

⁴⁰ Kang Ilsung testimony.

⁴¹ Yi Chul Sng (researcher of waterpower station defected on October 9, 2003) testimony.

From the situation of the recent economic difficulties bounds a rare opportunity to witness the struggle for survival intensify between the cadres and citizens, and it is possible that we will see this conflict between the two intensify even further. The ruling class set the economy on a path toward recession, and as the economic situation worsened, they began to monopolize the things of scarcity through legitimate and illegitimate ways, leaving those people without power relatively deprived. Of the population, only about 10 percent makes up the power-holding ruling class, another 40 percent a class of a lower social rung doing business and smuggling here and there to make ends meet, while the remaining number comprises the those that live a life of great hardship.

Until the early 1980s, it has been thought that cadres and non-cadres have lived together, but it is believed that due to the economic difficulties, the discontentment of the people toward the cadres has become serious. Recently, many people have said that “the last three years have been harder to live than before liberation, which hardens the heart.” The discontentment bred from absolute poverty is culminating. Though it depends on one’s social class and it is different for each individual, the antagonism North Korean citizens feel and their subconscious resentment toward the cadres are growing. In particular, the disaffection is generally aimed at the lower-level cadres.

Of course, people are not permitted to say abusive things against the cadres. However, when like-minded people come together they usually seriously express their dissatisfaction. In most cases, the cadres are considered to be nothing more than thieves who are able to stay in their positions because people have no choice but to flatter them.

The common folk have said the cadres must die. They recognize that if they themselves do a little unauthorized business on the side, it

will be kept under observation and control; but if the cadres undertake business, even on a larger scale, they suffer no consequences. Cadres, of course, do business by taking advantage of the official system and the existing organization. For example, they may call the section chief of a warehouse and ask for rice to be loaded into a car, where subordinates are then charged to do the work according to the order. These cadres are taking advantage of the official system, but secretly and mildly. This is the parasitic system of the country and it is a method which robs the individual of his profit.

North Korean citizens refer to the cadres as landowner-like rogues, *seorim* (of which are the villainous characters of North Korea's Robin Hood-like legend, *Im Kuk Jung*) and other names. There is a lot of criticism that cadres are the ones responsible for the country's fall into hardship. The complaint is that to obtain personal promotions, things that have not gone well have been falsely reported by the cadres as having been done well. Because of this, it is said that the country has failed to and cannot develop. However, it is said that the people cannot oppose the cadres on the surface, for if people fight with party workers, they are criticized for damaging the authority of the party.⁴²

The cadres can sense the people's animosity, and in the local areas security bars on windows and locks have been installed as way for the cadres to deal with any rising antagonism or threat to themselves. Whether or not the cadres believe that some of the ordinary people want them dead, what is certain is that a number of cadres do fear the common people. Thus, in the event of a major catastrophe in North Korea, the families of the party cadres and security authorities, as well as the elite of the core class, would likely be the first to flee the country.

⁴²Kim Jung Hoon (head of corporation committee defected in 2003) testimony.

While organized resistance is almost unheard of in North Korea, stories of people seeking revenge are not uncommon.⁴³ Security workers are frequently terrorized. In Hamgyung Province, it is said that sabotage has also taken place. Acts of hostility by the residents against the cadres do occur. Foreign affairs bureaucrats have said that, because of the disaffection of the people, cadres have been known to go to work dressed as common folk, and only change into their “Red Guard” uniforms once they have reached the office. In another case, it is said that when cadres of the Party Central Committee came out to directly impart ideological education to coal miners, the miners responded by saying, “bring rice and then wash the coal dust from off our necks!” Likewise, cadres going into local regions for the purpose of imparting party propaganda have been met by a serious level of antipathy among farmers, much like it was back in the period of Japanese colonial rule of Korea. Therefore, cadres have transformed their means of imparting propaganda education, going into each department (for example, of a factory) separately to do the propaganda work, instead of gathering all the people together. It is said that now only core party members are gathered for a lecture.⁴⁴ In addition, in agricultural regions, agricultural committee regional chairmen are said to be scared to go out to the local districts because of the antipathy of farmers. This indicates that the farmers’ antagonism toward the cadres has already risen significantly.

Because North Koreans who travel around the districts tend to conduct a lot of business, railway security officials have begun to enforce travel restrictions. Hence these days the average person tends to hate the railway security officials and (local) market inspection officials the most. Soldiers, too, are avoided by the people. It is said that there is no place where the military does not pass by and steal

⁴³ Yi kwan Moon (mine worker defected in 1998) testimony.

⁴⁴ Yi Su Dong (diplomat defected in 1998) testimony.

everything. Soldiers like this are despised and considered to be nothing but local bandits.⁴⁵

What descends from the upper level authorities is not well executed by the lower level cadres. Those that take the responsibility must see some kind of added benefit (i.e., chance for networking, side business, gifts, etc.) in implementing the tasks or taking on the responsibility, otherwise they would not want to be in the position of cadre. And because of the hostile feelings toward the cadres by the people, it is very difficult for the cadres to conduct themselves. It is a well-known fact that lower rank cadres do not want to widely abide by Kim Jong Il's own policy, and thus they are frequently purged. Ultimately, being suppressed from the top and resisted from the bottom, cadres have a hard time succeeding, being positioned between a rock and a hard place.⁴⁶

The North Korean power elite recognizes the dissatisfaction among the people and its latent explosive characteristic. The reason behind the North Korean leaders' maintenance of a closed-door policy is obvious here. We recognize the fact that if North Korea were to wage war, the barrels of North Korean guns might just as likely turn around, that is, the people might very well take aim at the cadres themselves. It is expressed that this possibility is only limited to a certain part of the population, but in fact it may apply to many more people. Regardless of the possibility, North Korea is constantly on guard against the resistance of the masses.

However, there is a recognition that things have been done wrong and change is being considered. The shock of the 1990s has continued, and the heated criticism from the middle level management is ascending to the upper level departments. North Korean people

⁴⁵Kim Nan Ae (office worker of Quality Control Institute defected in 1997) testimony.

⁴⁶Kang Kuk In (material purchaser defected in 2003) testimony.

would like to speak ill of Kim Jong Il, but speaking ill of Kim would be a problem, especially for the middle class. Expressing doubts about Kim even once puts a person in great danger, therefore one cannot speak ill of him. Nevertheless, in the border regions of the country, they do curse Kim Jong Il.⁴⁷

Conclusion

North Korea's socialist transformation was the process of dismantling every social class that existed back in 1945. The 1946 land reform dismantled the landowner class, the 1958 agricultural collectivization dismantled the farmers class, and the 1958 nationalization of commerce and industry did the same to the petty bourgeoisie. There was no class differentiation, only dismantlement. Thus, with social classes dissolved, the governing class remains as the monolithic class monopolizing social, economic, and political power in North Korea, with no other power group to act as a balancer. And it is this type of class structure that may constitute the social conditions of political dictatorship in North Korea.

In contrast, South Korea's process of capitalistic industrialization led to the differentiation of classes, promoting the wealthy capitalist class, the well organized working class, the diversely oriented middle class, and intellectual groups. In South Korea, there exists a democratic society with checks and balances, forming a balance of power between the classes and between the society and the state, a form that favors the conditions for democracy. If the condition for democracy is "balance of power," as Barrington Moore claims,⁴⁸ South Korea has formed one between classes and political rights and between the classes

⁴⁷ Kim Nan Ae testimony.

⁴⁸ Barrington Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966).

themselves. Moreover, the condition of class structure has been maturing to allow for the establishment of democracy.

This is ultimately far from the reality in North Korea. The gap in class structures might be the determining cause of democracy in the South and dictatorship in the North. Every society and nation tends to abuse and monopolize power. As Thomas Hobbes pointed out, the state is “Leviathan”: Whether or not there are checks and balances of the social power against the Leviathan will determine if the state becomes a democracy or dictatorship. Barrington Moore asserted that absent the presence of a bourgeois revolution, democracy will not emerge: “No bourgeois, no democracy.”⁴⁹ Through until the end of the 1980s in South Korean society, the capitalist class’ political operation did not function well in spite of the high degree of economic growth. But we can see that a bourgeois democracy in Korea involves the role of the middle class, which has a high degree of differentiation as a result of the industrialization, and this class does function properly as a powerful force in society. What will emerge in North Korea in the future is hard to say, but at this point, considering the class structure, democracy lies far in the distance.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 418.