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# Regime Survival, Societal Resilience and Change in North Korea

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Barbara Demick, 2010. *Nothing to Envy. Ordinary Lives in North Korea*. New York: Spiegel and Grau.

Ralph Hassig and Kongdan Oh, 2009. *The Hidden People of North Korea. Everyday Life in the Hermit Kingdom*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

Heonik Kwon and Byung-Ho Chung, 2012. *North Korea. Beyond Charismatic Politics*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

Andrei Lankov, 2013. *The Real North Korea: Life and Politics in the Failed Stalinist Utopia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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## 1. Introduction

The rapid ascent to power of Kim Jong-un, accelerated by Kim Jong-il's death in December 2011, confirmed hereditary succession as the modal form of political succession in North Korea. 'Do not hope for any change in us,'<sup>1</sup> is a statement oftentimes coming out of Pyongyang, warning outsiders that no reform of any sort should be expected. And yet, although the country's moribund economy avoided both East-Central European and Chinese style reforms to stay afloat, trade across the Chinese-North Korean border is bringing social and economic changes into the lives of ordinary North Koreans. This grassroots-level dynamic is transforming the country in subtle but profound ways.

While a great deal of attention has been devoted to North Korea from the perspective of East Asian security studies, so far surprisingly little attention has been devoted to what goes on inside the country, including the issues of the hereditary succession era as well as the political economy of transition. Rather, the time is now ripe for a shift in emphasis towards a study of what *actually* goes on inside the country, and increasingly across its no longer sealed boundaries. North Korea is gradually but steadily becoming a '*normal country*', meaning that its citizens are no longer as cut off from access to information and outside reality as in the past. It should be studied as such, and to that end greater borrowing from the analytical tools of comparative social science, as is done in some of the texts reviewed here, is to be welcomed.

This is of course not to deny the value of the scholarly work done on strategic issues, the threat to global security posed by nuclear proliferation, and especially North Korea's pursuit of nuclear status.<sup>2</sup> At the same time a focus on hard security tends to overshadow the micro- and meso-level changes that are taking place inside

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<sup>1</sup> 'Urineun sungrihand'a', *Rodong Sinmun*, 3 June 1996, cited in Kwon and Chung (2012, p. 12).

<sup>2</sup> Bennett and Lind (2011), Bryman and Lind (2010), Fitzpatrick (2013), and Gompert (2013).

the country and across its borders. The books reviewed in this paper thus represent a valuable addition to the literature, contributing to our understanding of a reclusive regime and a society that is hard-to-access – let alone understand –.

## **2. North Korea from afar**

As Kwon and Chung note in their introduction, there is ‘no mystery about North Korea’s political system’ (2012, p. 1). Little remains unknown about the brutality of the regime domestically and its international posture. At the same time, the challenges of accessing data (when they even exist), entering the country and possibly even doing fieldwork remain daunting, thus limiting the kind of research that is possible when it comes to the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) and the validity of the data. A long immersion in the country is just not possible (Kwon and Chung, 2012, p. 10). Some of the work on the country remains based on ‘hearsay’, limiting our understanding of this secretive state and its reclusive elite, and also hindering a proper policy towards it.

Accounts from defectors, refugees and members of the international community working for a limited period of time in the North have traditionally been the main source of information about ‘all things North Korean’. This body of literature includes the work of Abt (2014) and Everard (2012), as well as the whole ‘defectors’ literature’ (Harden, 2013; Kang, 2001; Kim, 2010; Kim, 2009). Alongside this type of publication, North Korean scholarship has relied on input on perspectives from history and international relations. Seminal works by historians Bruce Cumings (2004) and Charles K. Armstrong (2013), among others, have shaped the way we look at and understand North Korea.

On the whole scholars in political science and international relations have otherwise tended to be more focused on more strategic/security issues and typically more policy-oriented (Cha, 2013; Cha and Kang, 2003). Empirically grounded and methodologically solid work based on field research inside the country includes Hazel Smith’s account (2005) of how the famine struck and was ‘dealt with’ in the 1990s. Smith’s book constitutes a rare ethnographic study of the North Korean economy, insightful and methodologically innovative. The famine also constitutes the focus of Haggard and Noland’s study (2007) of market, aid and reform in the country.

This article surveys four examples of recent work on North Korea. The volumes reviewed in this essay partly complement some of the accounts based on interviews with defectors and refugees while adding new material and perspectives. Demick’s and Hassig and Oh’s books shed light on the lives of ordinary people, but have also less to add to theoretical discussions. Lankov’s monograph draws on the author’s decades-long familiarity with and travels to the DPRK, but similarly avoids an engagement with theoretical debates. Kwon and Chung’s work is the exception here, with a truly unusual and novel contribution to understanding North Korean politics.

## **3. A country in transition**

From a variety of perspectives the books address a similar set of themes: how do

ordinary people live in North Korea, and how has their life changed during the Arduous March (the famine in the 1990s) and as a result of the proliferation of informal markets and the intensification of cross-border trade with China? How have trade flows impacted on value systems? Since Pyongyang has deliberately avoided the Chinese path of reform, let alone a Central-Eastern European way of political opening, what does the political economy of change look like in the northern part of the Korean peninsula? How best should we understand what is happening inside a country where socialism has long given way to a radical form of hereditary politics which mixes a combination of Confucian beliefs, nationalism, and loyalty to the Kim family, all 'shot through' with a good dose of postcolonial undertones?

Demick's book is the least academic of the four, as it draws from the author's seven-year stint in Korea as the Los Angeles Times Seoul correspondent during the 2000s. In *Nothing to Envy* (2010) the author explores the question of 'what it is like to live in one of the most repressive regimes' (p. 8). Demick's informants are refugees from a single city, Chongjin, which at 500,000 inhabitants is North Korea's third-largest city. Chongjin is a distinctive setting where two different segments of North Korean society live side by side: on the one hand there are the indigenous residents, the legacy of imperial Japan's effort to make inroads into Manchuria via Chongjin's port and the infrastructure they built in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (alongside other various factories, whose building Pyongyang never credited to Tokyo); on the other there are local elements of the core classes, relocated to the periphery, closer to Vladivostok than to the North Korean capital (p. 31, 37-38). Despite being a journalistic account, Demick's work is a thoughtful and insightful contribution to understanding the country 'from below'. North Korea, she notes, is 'not an underdeveloped country. It is a country that has fallen out of the developed world' (p. 4). In the 1960s it was home to a 'viable, if Spartan economy' (p. 79), bearing more resemblance to Yugoslavia than to Angola around that time. By the early 1990s, however, the economy was on a 'slow-death path', stagnating at first and then plunging into a nose-dive. The backdrop to Demick's work is the great famine of the 1990s (especially 1996-1998) which followed the collapse of the Public Distribution Service, the state-managed system of food provision and social control (Haggard and Noland, 2007, p. 9). Demick's main source of information are North Korean refugees in the South who have left life in the North in various waves in the aftermath of the great famine that killed up between 600,000 and one million people, about 3-5% of the country's population, according to the bleakest data. The disintegration of the Soviet Union, and the withdrawal of aid from Moscow's, complemented with the implosion of North Korea's own economic system, left the country as a virtual black spot on the map. Economic collapse meant electricity blackouts, among other things. During the day this meant that factories could no longer work (yet workers were still expected to show up so that surveillance and indoctrination could continue). At night, Demick notes, 'darkness ensured unprecedented levels of privacy' (pp. 4-5), almost freedom, to ordinary North Koreans. In her book Demick follows the lives of a number of North Korean refugees, beginning the story from the pre-famine period. Through the account of the lives of doctors, teachers, neighborhood watchdogs (*inminban*), young couples



seeking to develop and maintain relationships, street children (*kochebi*, or wandering swallows) and smugglers of goods from China, we learn the variety of survival mechanisms adopted by North Korea's citizens to cope with hardship and brutality, and to carve out some islands of separateness, even in extremely harsh conditions. As domestic surveillance, organizational life, mobility restrictions gradually break down (or are no longer enforced), what emerges is a changing North Korean society, able to turn disaster turned into opportunity. In the later part of her book (chapters 16-20) Demick explores the new feelings of alienation, uprootedness and daily struggle that accompany North Koreans living in the South. Although not fully developed, the point made here is that after several decades of separation, North and South Koreans have grown more and more apart from each other. Are Koreans no longer *hanminjok* (one people)?

A new North Korea is also visibly taking shape in Hassig and Oh's book (2009), which like Demick's, draws on years of conversations with dozens refugees and seeks to shed light on the lives of ordinary North Koreans. The structure of the book is quite intriguing, as each chapter outlining officialdom is mirrored by one presenting a focus on everyday life and a changing reality on the ground. While chapter 3 revisits the pillars of the North Korean type of socialist command economy, its collapse (resulting from 'the absence of trade with advanced economies, failure to receive continuing support from fellow socialist economies, natural disasters, and a degradation of the economic infrastructure', p. 67), and half-hearted attempts to introduce Chinese-style reforms in 2001 (the 'July 1 Economic Management Improvement Measures', p. 71), chapter 4 moves the focus from 'working for the state' to 'working for oneself' or 'working abroad', that is on individual survival mechanisms beyond passivity. Chapter 5 introduces the system of surveillance and presents the contours of the official information system, while chapter 6 shifts the attention to the hidden thoughts and double-thinking of the population. Though intriguing and potentially revealing, this chapter is also problematic in that the paucity of data suggest it may be premature to state that '[t]he transition from socialism to capitalism seems to have gone too far to stop' (p. 132); however, the emergence of markets, legal and illegal, has indeed created a 'new economic class of people with hard currency' (p. 130). Hardship fostered an entrepreneurial spirit, a newly discovered mobility facilitated access to goods across the border, which in turn brought not only material resources, but also access to new, unrestricted, information. This prospect of pressure and change from below, rather than the fear of any elite infighting,<sup>3</sup> bodes ill for the long-term viability of the North Korean ruling class. Hassig and Oh explore a similar drama of 'change and conservatism' as they (re-)personalize North Korea's citizens. That said, the very plausible claims advanced in the book could have been backed up by stronger evidence, so that the hidden thoughts of the North Koreans often referred to (p. 244) could appear not just plausible but confirmed and in principle verifiable. Double-thinkers the North Koreans might well be, and indeed the information control system is slowly breaking down, but adding more data and evidence to minimize

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<sup>3</sup> This is unlikely at present given the still obvious costs of defection now, and fear about future retribution.

exposure to criticism would have strengthened the book. Moreover, the last few pages on the policy implications (pp. 250-253) add little to what has been already been said in greater detail by others scholars pondering how to deal with the North, including Cha (2013), Cha and Kang (2003), and Lankov in his *'The Real North Korea'* (2013).

'How do they do it?' (surviving, that is) is the question Lankov addresses in his sober, occasionally bleak, but perceptive text. *The Real North Korea* discusses extensively the themes of the political economy of change and of a gradual mutation in the information environment. Despite strenuous attempts by the North Korean elites to withstand pressure to 'open up' and at least introduce Chinese-style reforms, Pyongyang has stubbornly rejected such calls, putting politics (through the *Songun* policy, or 'military-first') above economics, as Kwon and Chung also note (2013, p. 11, 19). And yet the withdrawal of aid which accompanied the Soviet collapse, the collapse of the Public Distribution Service in the 1990s, the famine, and a number of catastrophic economic policy choices have also thrust change upon the North as well, following the law of unintended consequences. Socio-economic hardship (or the 'Arduous March', as per official parlance) saw honest but unimaginative citizens die of hunger, while others, more resourceful, discovered in themselves an entrepreneurial spirit that many outsiders thought dead and buried by decades of totalitarian propaganda. Despite all odds, faced with starvation, North Koreans engaged in trade activities, inside the country and across the border. First barter then later hard currency kept the North Koreans afloat and alive. Goods started to flow from China and indirectly from South Korea as well. With goods started to flow ideas and eventually new ideas, just as the North Korean leadership feared. While it is difficult to gauge, as Hassig and Oh claim (2009, p. 244), that young North Koreans boast fashions and haircuts that mimic those of actors in South Korean dramas, it is nevertheless fair to acknowledge that, as Lankov convincingly shows, that a value system change might be occurring as a result of the relaxation of the information environment. This relaxation is not enabled from above, but has simply forced itself on the country via illegal means. Be this as it may, Lankov argues, it is precisely access to information, inside the country or preferably outside (via exchange programs)<sup>4</sup> that will ultimately bring about change in the North (p. 216). A large portion of the book is dedicated to the survival of the regime and ultimately the state (chapters 3-6). If survival is the main goal of the North Korean elites then their behavior, combining rejection of any form of political or economic reform and an attempt to keep the population as insulated from the rest of the world as possible is the only course of action available, whatever the social, political, and economic costs for that population.

Lankov's book is a solid, provocative piece of work, but strives to speak to one audience too many, remaining suspended between academic scholarship, policy-oriented readers, and a broader audience. Despite the number of analytical tools that the literature on authoritarianism offers for the understanding of this type of regime (of which Kwon and Chung make rather extensive and productive use), Lankov shies away from a theoretically informed discussion of the sources of North Korean

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<sup>4</sup> This theme is also explored in Spezza's contribution to this special issue.

stability and change. Although occasionally a comparative glance or a theoretical reference is offered, no systematic framework other than explaining the logic of survival (and thus indirectly the durability of an otherwise anachronistic regime) is put forward. This is regrettable as the author would surely have something meaningful and empirically-informed to contribute to broader academic debates. That said, what Lankov's study lacks in theoretical cohesiveness, it fully makes up for with its thorough if occasionally bleak analysis of a changing country. The first half of the book (chapters 1-2) essentially lays the ground for the second. Chapters 3-6 and the conclusion are dedicated to questions of the present and future: how best to deal with the country, scenarios, implications for the US and South Korea, and an outline of a confederal option for the Korean peninsula. North Korea, Lankov contends, might be around for quite some time and, he adds perhaps more controversially, this might not necessarily be a bad thing (chapter 5). The Somalia scenario (i.e. regime collapse followed by a descent into civil war) is reasonably discarded (p. 188), whereas he indicates a period of violent transition as far more likely (pp. 187, 195-197). This is consistent with the literature on authoritarianism and authoritarian collapse (Brooker, 2009; Brownless, 2007) which show that personalist sub-types of authoritarianism are unlikely to morph smoothly into viable states, let alone democratic ones. After showing how 'the sticks are not big enough' and that the 'carrots are not sweet enough' either (chapter 5), in chapter 9 Lankov outlines the contours of a confederal option, which would keep North Korea formally in place, tied to and yet not merged with the South for a period of about ten to fifteen years. This, he suggests might well be the least bad option, as the time-frame would both allow the North to catch up without hemorrhaging its population (mobility would be restricted to some extent, possibly thanks to a visa regime, and purchase of land and housing in the North would also be subject to regulation), while at the same time giving North (and South) Koreans a realistic timeline for unification (pp. 243-45).

#### **4. The future of revolutionary politics: From charismatic politics to hereditary succession**

By far the most theoretically sophisticated of the texts reviewed here is Kwon and Chung's *North Korea: Beyond Charismatic Politics* (2013). This book is a remarkable and novel exploration of the relationship between revolutionary art and politics. 'Power as display' becomes central to explaining how the DPRK, a modern theater state,<sup>5</sup> moves from revolutionary charisma to post-charismatic politics (legacy or succession politics), allowing Pyongyang to manage not one but two rounds of hereditary succession.

In their volume, Kwon and Chung set out to understand the 'evolution of North Korea's postcolonial political system' through the lenses of modern revolutionary politics (p. 1). To this end they borrow tools from both sociological (Weber) and anthropological (Geertz) traditions, and add insights and concepts of their own. What emerges is a complex and novel picture of just 'another country'

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<sup>5</sup> The idea was originally developed by Wada Haruki (cited in Kwon and Chung, 2012, p. 4), drawing on Clifford Geertz's study of ritual politics and symbolic power in Indonesia (1980).

(p. 2), along the same lines of what Bruce Cumings had argued in a prior study of North Korea (2004). North Korea is ‘just as modern and as much a production of interaction with global modernity as any other political system in the world’ (p.2). While not unique in its authoritarian durability, the regime has shown a ‘remarkable resilience’ (p. 3). Key to understanding the stability of the first few decades was the notion of charismatic authority, most notably the revolutionary charisma of the country’s founding father, Kim Il Sung. Focusing on ‘politics as display,’ the relationship between art and politics is examined in depth through a careful study of North Korean filmography, the *Arirang* mass spectacles, its ideology (especially the ‘barrel of a gun’ philosophy and the military-first – *Songun* and *Chongdae* theory, examined in chapter 3), and the emphasis on both the family state and the partisan state (chapters 2 to 4). What is striking, according to Kwon and Chung, is how the fundamentally ‘impermanent nature of charismatic authority’ was transcended through a Weberian ‘routinization of revolutionary charisma (p. 3). Starting already from the early 1970s (formative in this regard), and accelerating during the Great National Bereavement in 1994 following the death of Kim Il Sung, North Korea under Kim Jong Il made legacy politics a central dimension of the country’s political and social system.

As Kwon and Chung embark on a sophisticated attempt to account for ‘stability against all odds’, they depart from the standard understanding of ‘North Korean ideology’ as a combination of the more extreme and less humane aspects of Confucianism<sup>6</sup> with a Stalinist variant of socialism. The authors do not deny that these elements are, or in fact have been guiding elements of North Korea’s ideology in the past. At the same time, they contend that what is crucial to understanding the survival and durability of the regime and its decision to place ‘politics above economics,’ is the routinization of charismatic politics. Kwon and Chung draw extensively on Max Weber’s work on the different types of authority and especially the charismatic sub-type.

The book advances two noteworthy arguments, both of which are of great relevance in understanding North Korea’s regime and its longevity, but also in placing this peculiar country in a broader comparative framework. The first is the routinization of revolutionary charisma which led to the establishment of hereditary rule. Central to the mission, they convincingly show, was the pursuit of ‘the realization of a historically transcendent charisma in the form of actualizing a hereditary succession of power’ (p. 188). This was done at great costs at all levels, for the population, but also for the nature of the regime itself. A seemingly successful state-building phase in the 1950s and 1960s where a Spartan though viable economy was built, subsequently turned into a ‘story of tragic failure’ (p. 189). All, the population and the economy, had to be ‘sublimated’ to politics, leading to an ‘extreme centralization of political and executive power’, destroying - among other things - ‘the democratic principle of the socialist revolution’ (p. 189).

Kwon and Chung advance another claim that makes North Korea less distinctive and more ‘normal’. Accommodating – and eventually moving beyond – Marxism-Leninism, emphasizing the least humane aspects of Confucianism, the

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<sup>6</sup> Confucianism has been an oft-use prism to look at political behavior in Korea, north and south (Bell and Hahm, 2003); Kim, 2011 and 2012).

country's leadership attempted to present itself as a profoundly post-colonial country (pp. 14-15, 80-82), establishing and strengthening ties with revolutionary countries in the Global South, such as Algeria, Angola, Congo, Laos, Yemen, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, p. 140). This argument is extremely important in two respects. The first is the grounding of the North Korean experience in the framework of post-colonial politics and identity, where the nationalist component of the identity of the North Korean polity is as important, if not more so (over time) than the socialist one. This is not unlike the case of other socialist states in East Asia, like Vietnam and China. Secondly, and following from the previous point, this new understanding of North Korea calls – by extension – for a 'pluralistic understanding of the global system', especially as far as global transitions from socialism are concerned (p. 13).

Although not all chapters are equally convincing (chapter 6 on the moral economy appears disconnected from the rest of the text), this is a truly sophisticated analysis of North Korean ideology and politics. Like the other books reviewed here, and despite a different temporal focus, even Kwon and Chung's North Korea is undergoing transition. However, unlike the other transition kickstarted by the Soviet collapse and the end of the PDS, North Korea's transition here started in the early 1970s. Where does this leave the country now? 'The military-first era North Korea is a proud partisan state, but a failed family state', Kwon and Chung acknowledge in the concluding pages of their concise and yet extremely rich book (p. 177). This failure is 'both moral and structural', leaving the DPRK without a viable society and thus without a viable state (p. 189). This, no less, is the fundamental challenge the new leadership must confront if it wants to preserve itself.

## **5. A country in transition**

The books reviewed here are different from each other, with two more academic (Lankov, and Kwon and Chung) and the other two (Demick, and Hassig and Oh) for a broader lay audience. They adopt different lenses and approaches, and focus on different aspects of North Korean politics and society. Taken together, however, they complement each other well and provide the reader with both a full picture of the domestic and international logic of survival of the regime, and of the way in which North Korean society and economy are changing, despite all appearances. The texts underscore both the exceptionality of North Korea (whose regime has last exceptionally long, has replaced socialism with hereditary politics, has been exceptionally repressive, and has built an extreme cult of personality) and at the same time its *normality*. This of course does not mean that North Korea is like any other country, but rather than in order to understand the 'Hermit Kingdom' more theoretically informed work is needed. In their different ways, the four books all call for bringing the analysis of North Korea's regime and society into the mainstream of academic research. Long treated as a relic of a bygone era, an aberrance of the current international system or a mysterious object (or subject) of global politics, North Korea, or better our understanding of it, has long 'suffered' from the country being treated as a unique case, something with few or no equals. The books reviewed here are not comparative (very few comparative studies of the

DPRK exist anyway), but none the less all suggest – most notably Kwon and Chung’s monograph – that our understanding of what goes on in the country would greatly benefit from adopting conceptual tools used for making sense of other states and non-democratic regimes.

An absurd anomaly which defied all trends and expectations North Korea may be, but saying so does not take us very far in understanding continuity and change in the country, either at elite or mass level. The four books take this awkward but stubborn resilience as a departure point for their analysis, but then move on, more productively, to analyze changes at political, economic and social level. Three start their analysis against a similar backdrop, namely the collapse of the Public Distribution Service (the rationing system) and the first hereditary succession. The fourth (Kwon and Chung) shifts the focus to an earlier era, the 1970-1972 period (when the first succession phase actually was in preparation) and the ‘Great National Bereavement of 1994’, when that succession finally materialized. The arguments put forward largely speak to each other, with points touched on in one text being fully developed in others. For example, the emergence of a moral economy during and in the aftermath of the Great Famine, only hinted at in Kwon and Chung’s book, receives extensive attention in Demick, Hassig and Oh, and Lankov’s monographs, which show in greater detail the unexpected marketization of North Korean society. The changes discussed in the four texts: hereditary succession, the emergence of an informal economy, and an evolving access to information which is informing the worldview and values of ordinary North Koreans, tell readers a story of a system that is far from static or ossified. The regime might have shown remarkably longevity, but society has evidenced resilience as well, and adaptability too.

## **6. Conclusion**

In sum, the message conveyed by the texts reviewed in this essay is two-fold. First, contrary the commonly held belief that erratic behavior and irrationality drive North Korean politics, a rational logic of survival has guided Pyongyang’s policies, at home and abroad, no matter how radical and brutal this might have been, and whatever the costs. The second is an attempt to articulate the agency of the typically de-personalized North Koreans. Rather than passive automatons at the mercy of a brutal regime, they come across as agents, resilient, adaptable and entrepreneurial. This in fact bodes well for the hopefully not too remote future of a post-Kim North Korea.

Based on the insights of these volumes, three possible paths for future research suggest themselves. As North Korea – in its own peculiar way – has embarked on socio-political change, it is imperative to locate it on a comparative map, without denying its own distinctive traits. In this respect the country is thus ‘normal’, at least in the sense of being able to be treated as an instance in a broader universe of cases where the traditional tools of the social sciences can be meaningfully adopted. For instance scholars could fruitfully locate transition Pyongyang-style in a broader study of authoritarian survival and change, so as to understand the domestic sources of regime (in)stability.

Secondly, the North Korean case – when taken together with developments in

China and Vietnam, suggest that a comparative study of socialism and post-socialism would benefit from a comparison of European and Asian cases, with social justice as a more central feature in the former cases, while Asian socialism had a more distinctively post-colonial and national dimension.

Last, but not least, the difficulty North Korean refugees experience in adjusting to life in the South, and the extreme form of nationalism they have been exposed to in the North (as explored by Myers, 2011) raises the question of whether Koreans in the North and South still constitute one nation (*hanminjok*), or whether over the decades, and despite the rhetoric that all Koreans are one, we now are confronted, in fact, with two increasingly distinct Korean nations.

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