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FASHION AND CONSUMER CULTURE OF NORTH KOREAN WOMEN AND THE 'CULTURAL TURN' TOWARD HARMONY

Jein Do and Mincheol Park♦

Abstract: This paper seeks to set a new direction for a 'Cultural Turn' toward harmony in re-examining the Korean Cold War to promote a sustainable inter-Korean scholarly dialogue and enhance mutual understanding. Based on the 'Cultural Turn' in Cold War studies, the concept of 'commonality' in 'Humanities for Unification' (*t'ongil inmunhak*), parallels drawn with the decline of socialist fashion in Eastern Europe, and discussions on the achievement of UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) such as Gender Equality and Women Empowerment (SDG 5) in the unique context of North Korea where 'gender equality' and '*namjonnyŏbi* (superior men, inferior women)' coexist, the present analysis looks

♦**Jein Do** (first author) is Assistant Professor, Institute of Humanities for Unification, Konkuk University. Her research on North Korean cultural and diplomatic history has been published in *Korea Journal*, *Asian Perspective,* and *Seoul Journal of Korean Studies*. Email: jeando1966@gmail.com.

Mincheol Park (corresponding author) is Assistant Professor, Institute of Humanities for Unification, Konkuk University. His research focuses on the philosophical thought of South and North Korea as well as inter-Korean relations based on the humanities. Email: guy082@naver.com.

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Note on Romanization: Although the McCune-Reischauer Romanization system was used in principle, exceptions were made for names such as Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong Il, Pyongyang, Chongjin, and organizations such as *Chongryon*.

into the clothing and consumer culture of women in the 1980s to explore the nuances and complexities specific to the materiality of *chuch'e* (self-reliance) socialism and gauge the feasibility of SDG 5 in the North Korean context by focusing on the agency of women in their own self-empowerment rather than the patriarchal socialist state or institutions. The interviews with North Korean defectors demonstrate the evolving state-society negotiations concerning standard and new styles, domestic and transnational means of consumption, and regulation and deregulation for the revitalization of socialism. By exposing the normalizing qualities of *chuch'e* socialism and the active role of women in their formation, the 'Cultural Turn' explores North Korea's distinct experience of modernity to pave the way for viable inter-Korean academic exchange between the worlds of *han'gukhak* and *chosŏnhak.*

Keywords: *Chosŏnhak*, *Chuch'e* Socialism, Clothing, Commonality, Consumption, *Han'gukhak*, Humanities for Unification.

1. Introduction

This paper seeks to set a new direction for a 'Cultural Turn' toward harmony in re-examining the Korean Cold War to promote a sustainable inter-Korean scholarly dialogue and enhance mutual understanding. Previously, North Korea's experience of socialist modernity has been viewed as simply lagging behind that of capitalist South Korea; Pyongyang's singular ideology of *chuch'e* (self-reliance) has reinforced the Cold War biases about its cultural impermeability and the omnipotence of the monolithic party-state apparatus. Shifting the focus to the people's sociocultural expressions from the military or political tensions, however, can illuminate the nuances, complexities, and ambivalence in the everyday materiality of *chuch'e* socialism. As an illustration, the present analysis unmasks the clothing and consumer culture of women during the 1980s based on interviews with defectors.[1]

[1]The socialist regime's political success or failure depended in large part on its ability to supply its citizens with consumer goods that satisfied not only 'basic needs' but also a variety of ever-increasing desires. Clothing played a key role in this political project, for it satisfied one of

The most visible yardstick of socialism's material promises and an indispensable tool for the cultivation of socialist taste, clothing is the most basic consumer item with which to assess the people's sentiments and political attitudes in socialist regimes. Unlike housing or food, however, clothing was a basic consumer item for which the North Korean people were both unable and unwilling to rely on the state even before the economic crisis of the mid-1990s. The recollections of the interviewees showed that the people, especially women, mobilized wide ranging means, which included unplanned, autonomous, and transnational practices, to cope with the lack of abundance and allure in their clothing culture. This makes clothing an object of peculiar relevance for the cultural investigation of the nuances, complexities, and ambivalence involved in the formation of *chuch'e* materiality in the pre-crisis period of the Kim Jong Il era.

Both as a matter of socialist morality and an aspect of practical necessity, the issue of clothing and consumption generated complex multiple realities for women who looked to fulfil both basic and higher needs. The 'Cultural Turn' exposes the normalizing qualities of North Korea's unique *chuch'e* socialism—which officially replaced Marxism-Leninism at the Sixth Congress of the Korean Workers' Party in 1980 where Kim Jong Il was officially sanctioned as the second generation successor—and in turn offers a detached view of its distinct experience of modernity to pave the way for a more viable inter-Korean academic exchange between the worlds of *han'gukhak* and *chosŏnhak*.[2]

2. Analytic and Conceptual Framework

Situated at the interface of culture, society, national identity, and gender in the study of North Korea, the present analysis adopts the

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the three 'basic needs' along with food and shelter and functioned as one of the most significant and visible yardsticks of socialism's material successes and political legitimacy (Stitziel 52).

[2] *Han'gukhak* refers to Korean studies in the general sense of the term commonly used in South Korea and other parts of the world. *Chosŏnhak* refers to Korean studies grounded in North Korea and backed by its supporting elements among diaspora overseas.

following analytic and conceptual frameworks. First, the paper draws attention to the aspects of North Korean daily life that are similar to those of other societies and the North Korean people's participation in global trends. This analytic focus on shared experiences in lived culture across the East and West is inspired by ① the 'Cultural Turn' in Cold War studies (Johnston 209–307; Reid 211–252; Sabina 509–539), ② the approach based on 'Humanities for Unification' (*t'ongilinmunhak*) (Kim and Pak 143–172). The re-evaluation of the Cold War along its cultural dimensions rather than political, economic, and military confrontation has shown that the "commonalities and shared experiences of the Cold War were as important as their better publicized differences and zones of antagonism" (Johnston 292). This became clearer as historians looked into the question of how ordinary people thought during the Cold War, which involved a truly diverse range of sentiments, emotions, and values within and across ideologies**.**

Taking the 'Cultural Turn' in the study of Korean problem is fruitful for establishing parallels on which a basis for mutual understanding can be built. Previous studies have magnified the divisive political, economic, and military dimensions of the Korean conflict. Instead, the 'Cultural Turn' facilitates the search for 'commonality' used in the approach based on 'Humanities for Unification'. 'Commonality' in this conception should not be associated with a return to the pre-division cultural *homogeneity* of the *past*, which is not only unrealistic but also problematic because it denies the obvious differences between the two Koreas (Kim and Pak 152). Instead, 'commonality' will be the *future consequence* of the two divided Korean people's *mutual recognition* of each other's *differences* in addition to the similarities; 'commonality' will result from the interaction among complex and distinctive identities in geographically disparate Korean communities (Kim and Pak 152). This view supports the exploration of North Korea as a centre of its own distinct modern environment. This new mode of mutual understanding based on the recognition of 'commonality' can have a harmonizing impact on inter-Korean academic communication.

Second, the study seeks to set a new direction for adopting the framework of multiple modernities in the study of socialism

(Fidelis 533–544) and separate North Korean studies from Cold War polemics and projections about regime collapse. The objective, then, is to identify the conditions of regime maintenance and survival (which is what actually happened) rather than assuming North Korean regime collapse to be preordained given the experience of the Soviet empire. In the more recent scholarship, historians have been reconsidering modernity "not as something that spread like a virus from West to East, but rather a global phenomenon created by the participation of people far and wide" (Fidelis 534); in this connection, "socialist societies should not be read as lagging behind the West, but rather as centers of a distinct kind of modern environment" (Fidelis 534). By challenging the biases about the cultural impermeability of *chuch'e* and the omnipotence of the monolithic party-state apparatus, the research illuminates the normalizing qualities of *chuch'e* socialism, which remain less well understood than its destabilizing consequences. By challenging Cold War binaries, the research confirms Heonik Kwon's analysis of the Cold War "as a globally staged but *locally diverse* regime of ideas and practices" (32, emphasis added).

Third, to conduct a contextualized and nuanced analysis of North Korea as a distinct kind of modern environment, the paper focuses on a specific type of consumer item, namely clothing. To that effect, the authors drew from the fascinating previous scholarship on the rise and decline of socialist fashion in the Soviet empire (Bartlett 13–62; Gronow et al. 11–37; Medvedev 250–272; Stitziel 1–76) as a reference point of comparison with North Korean women's clothing and consumer culture. As will be elaborated in the following sections, the way in which North Korean women dealt with the paucity of abundance and allure in their clothing partly resembled the informal networks, sewing, and shopping that took place in other socialist countries. However, what set the North Korean case apart was the set of historical, political, and cultural circumstances which together made its socialism inseparable from Korean national essence (Suzy Kim 14–70). In Eastern Europe, "socialist and capitalist fashion shared the fundamentals of a symbolic language that the West undeniably controlled" (Stitziel 68). In comparison, *chuch'e* coloured the notion

of modernity, system of aesthetics, and a symbolic language of affluence in North Korea.

Fourth, the present study situates the examination of North Korean women and their agency within the emerging discussions on the achievement of UN Sustainable Development Goals (SGDs) in general and specifically Gender Equality and Women Empowerment (SDG 5) (Chang Un-ha 153–178; Choi Gyubin 93–119; Chun Won-jae et al. 253–293; Hwang Su-yon 8–11; O Son-Hwa, 12–15; Park Ji-youn et al. 123–147) in the unique context of North Korea where 'gender equality' and '*namjonnyŏbi* (superior men, inferior women)' coexist.[3] This points to the need for scholars to develop a contextualized understanding of what it actually means for North Korean women to be empowered in a situation

[3] This unusual coexistence of gender equality and *namjonnyŏbi* is attributed to the Koreanization of revolutionary history associated with the consolidation of Kim Il Sung's one-man rule. The division of the Korean peninsula in 1945 produced two rivaling regimes bent on disproving each other's claim to independence and nationwide representation. Starting in 1946, the North Korean regime implemented a set of drastic 'anti-imperialist, anti-feudal, democratic' reforms which were designed to validate Pyongyang's self-proclaimed lead in achieving superior independence and modernity. In this transformation, the 1946 Law of Equal Rights for Men and Women is presented in official history as the one of the three most illustrious accomplishments of Kim Il Sung's post-colonial reforms along with the land reform and the nationalization of major industries. Since then, gender equality has historically been defined as a political right enabled by Kim Il Sung's nationalism. The North Korean regime has persistently claimed that gender equality has been achieved decisively by the Kim Il Sung's initiative. In this context, the eradication of gender stereotypes or women's subservient positions to men are not considered relevant to gender equality. From the authors' encounters with people from North Korea and those who have resettled in South Korea, it was noteworthy that 'patriarchy' as a social phenomenon was either denied by them or thought to be incomprehensible. North Korean male and female defectors instead referred to *namjonnyŏbi* much more frequently. This was widely observed in the defectors' recollections of married life back in North Korea (Park Min-cheol at el. 39–76).

where they are considered both 'equal' yet 'inferior' to men and the regime perceives gender equality to have already been achieved.[4] In other words, gender equality is placed on the back burner, not necessarily because it is unimportant but because women already enjoy it (Hwang Su Yon 8–11; O Son-Hwa 12–15). Consequently, gender equality, unlike other SDGs (e.g., poverty reduction, education, clean energy, health, climate change, etc) for which the regime has shown more practical commitment, is not regarded as a top policy (Choi Gyubin, 109; Park Ji-youn et al., 129).

To probe the meaning of gender equality and gauge the feasibility of SDG 5 without reducing North Korean women to victimhood rooted in state patriarchy or socialist material scarcity, the present research examines the fashion and consumer culture of North Korea in the 1980s to reveal the crucial role of women's creativeness, ingenuity, and perseverance in making up for the material scarcity of *chuch'e* socialism. Contrary to the standard depiction of North Korean women as mere subjects of state control and regulation, the study shows that they played key roles in shaping *chuch'e* materiality by mobilizing a diverse range of independent, unplanned, and transnational means to cope with the lack of allure and abundance in their clothing culture. The cases and stories in these pages show that even though gender equality as a component of SDGs may not be readily incorporated at the level of North Korean state ideology, women have nonetheless empowered themselves to sustain *chuch'e* socialism. In North Korea, the lack of government action on gender equality in the general sense of the term (such as SDG 5) and the dysfunctionality of the male-dominated socialist planned economy of shortage prompted women, such as those noted in the present analysis, to build their own capacities for supporting their livelihood. The interview results show how women chartered this course by adopting standard and new styles, domestic and transnational

[4]This is a point that is often overlooked in existing studies of North Korea's implementation of SDGs. In particular, SDG 5 raises complex questions due to the formation of a highly indigenized concept of gender equality parallel to the Koreanization of revolutionary history which supported Kim Il Sung's power consolidation.

means of consumption, and regulation and deregulation for the revitalization of socialism. This view fosters a more nuanced understanding of the complexities, dualities, and ambivalence involved in the formation of North Korean popular attitudes, living standards, and material culture in the era of Kim Jong Il's emergent leadership facing interlocking internal and external challenges throughout the 1980s.

3. Methodology

To capture how North Korean women met their basic and higher clothing needs, the authors have conducted in-depth interviews with sixteen North Korean defectors now residing in Seoul. The periodic focus on the pre-crisis phase of the 1980s, along with the thematic focus centred on clothing makes the present study a new complement to the existing scholarship on North Korean socialism which has paid only scant attention to the relationship between clothing and politics. Despite the growing scholarly interest in North Korean daily life, studies on housing, clothing, or food consumption rely on basic quantitative survey results, without specific details or contextualized analysis (Jeong Eun-mee 142–173, Kim Byung-Yeon 361–385; Park Sun Song 9–57).

To get a rare first-hand account of clothing and consumer culture in the 1980s, the authors interviewed sixteen defectors throughout the year 2020. Their age ranged from the 40s to the 80s. Geographically, most of them were women who had resided at the Sino-North Korean borderland. This reflects the overrepresentation of this particular demographic among North Korean settlers in South Korea. To address the regional and gender imbalance, the authors also consulted men who formerly held jobs in the public sector in Pyongyang and its vicinity. They commented on policy details that were unknown to the ordinary North Korean citizen at the time and markedly contrasted with the lifestyles at the Sino-North Korean border.

The interviewees were selected based on their career, family, or educational relevance to one of the four following criteria: (1) work experience in the clothing production sector or the home-based workshops (*kanaejagŏppan*); (2) availability of family ties in China

engaged in the emergent small-bag trade (*pottarijangsa*) from 1983 (Hyun-Ok Park 106); (3) availability of family ties in Japan or connected to returnees from the Japan affiliated with the pro-North Korean General Association of Korean Residents in Japan (*Chongryon*); and (4) worked in a position of party/government authority and able to speak on policy matters. Some information about their background is summarized in the following Table.

	Age	**Gender**	**Residence**	**Education**	**Job**	**Entry SK**
1	50s	F	North Hamgyŏng	High School	Garment Factory	2008
2	50s	F	North Hamgyŏng	High School	Garment Factory	2014
3	50s	F	Yanggangdo	High School	Garment Factory	2019
4	60s	F	North Hamgyŏng	High School	Garment Factory	2009
5	60s	M	Pyongyang	University	Government official	2015
6	40s	F	North Hamgyŏng	High School	Garment Factory	2015
7	60s	F	South Hamgyŏng	University	Factory Worker	2004
8	50s	F	North Hamgyŏng	University	Teacher	2015
9	70s	M	Chagang	University	County-level official	2001
10	70s	M	North Hamgyŏng	High School	County-level official	2007
11	50s	M	Pyongyang	University	Teacher	2008
12	50s	M	Pyŏngsŏng	University	Provincial Official	2011
13	60s	F	Pyongyang	High School	Garment Factory	2015

14	80s	F	North Hamgyŏng	High School	Garment Factory	2004
15	50s	M	Pyongyang	University	Government official	2011
16	40s	F	North Hamgyŏng	High School	Farming	2009

The interview lasted for two hours and was recorded with a video camera. All interviewees were informed of the research objectives and asked to sign a letter of consent required by the Board of Ethics at the authors' employer institution. The interviewees were asked questions regarding the dress culture, production of clothing, multiple realities of clothing consumption, and political loyalty. To protect the identities of the defectors, we refer to them by code-number.

4. Clothing and Consumption in *Chuch'e* Socialism

4.1. Standard and New Styles

As the wave of reform swept across the socialist world in the 1980s, North Korea's emerging leader Kim Jong Il at first appeared to embrace some changes. As one informant remembered, there was some mode of cultural relaxation following the 6th KWP Congress: "At one point people in Pyongyang were allowed to smoke imported cigarettes, own cars, invite relatives from abroad, and even make international calls from home. These changes at first raised the people's expectations about a new atmosphere" [Interviewee 11]. This recollection is well aligned with Kim Jong Il's initial emphasis on the need to revolutionize women's dress styles (Cho Kyu-hwa 158–175). This led to the decline of the traditional Korean dress as daily wear as well as the Japanese colonial-style pants known as *momppae*. Against this backdrop, there was a noticeable increase in the launch of garment and clothing factories from the 1970s onward [Interviewee14].

According to the interviewees, people were able to dress according to their needs and tastes as long as they did not violate the socialist/Korean lifestyle [Figure 3]. Asked to define the meaning of dressing in the socialist style, the interviewees in general made common references to Korean tradition, modesty

(*yamjŏnhage*), decency (*tanjŏnghage*), and frugality (*kŏmsohage*). The emphasis was on preserving the lifestyles of 'our *minjok* (nation),' rejecting *sadaejuŭi* (flunkeyism), *pokkojuŭi* (reactionism), *kyojojuŭi* (dogmatism) and following *chuch'e* [Interviewee 13]. 'Yellow-wind' (*hwangsaekparam*) styles such as bell-bottoms, mini-skirts, shorts, and jeans were absolutely prohibited [Interviewee 3].[5]

The standard socialist Korean style was accepted but not necessarily admired. The aspiration for refinement, coupled with the state's promotion of sartorial diversity, gave rise to some new styles in the 1980s. Examples include 'one-piece' (*tallinot*) or 'two-piece' (dress and matching jacket), the Kim Jong Il jacket (*chamba*), sweat suits (*tanbok*), bell-bottoms (nap'albaji), and scarves known as 'cicada wings' (*maeminalgae*)or 'dragon fly wings' (*chamjarinalgae*).[6]

Figure 1. Women's Dress Styles in the 1980s[7]

Figure 2. Women's Dress Styles in the 1980s[8]

[5]Yellow-wind was used to refer to the wind of capitalism.

[6]This appellation comes from the transparent quality of dragon fly or cicada wings [Interviewee 12].

[7]Scenes captured from the film, "The Young Man I Fancy" (*Maŭme tŭnŭn ch'ŏngnyŏn*), released in 1989. The female protagonist works at a tailor shop.

Figure 3. The Cultivation of Socialist Taste[9]

① The dress, referred to as *tallinot* in North Korea, was the most popular of all the novel aspects of clothing culture in the 1980s [Figure 1, 2; Interviewee 7, 12, 15]. Dresses made in Japan were popular in Pyongyang but were not readily available elsewhere in the country. Dresses produced in Pyongyang were usually imitations of Japanese styles [Interviewee 15]. Dresses began to appear in foreign currency stores in the mid-1980s [Interviewee 12].

② At one time during the mid-1980s, the popularity of the Kim Jong Il jacket reached what was described by one interviewee as a "jacket fever (*chambayŏlp'ung*)" among rural and urban women [Figure 1, 2; Interviewee 12, 15]. One interviewee remembered how the Kim Jong Il jackets came to be circulated across the entire city of Pyongyang in 1984, as a gift from Kim Jong Il to celebrate North Korea's inaugural launch of a short-range ballistic missile (SRBM) known as *Hwasong*-5 (North Korea's variant of the Scud-B missile) in April [Interviewee 15].

③ All those interviewed remembered the massive popularity of sweat suits (*tanbok*) among men and women. Returnees from Japan brought *Adidas* sweat suits (usually abbreviated as just '*ada*') [Interviewee 12]. Women loved them because they could wear sweat suits as substitutes for the *momppae* at home instead of wearing skirts [Interviewee 12]. Sweat suits would be distributed

[8] Scenes captured from the film, "Dreamy Maiden" (*Kkummanŭn ch'ŏnyŏ*), released in 1984. This film depicts the contradictions and tensions built into the socialist consumer and clothing culture.

[9] Pages captured from "The Encyclopedia of Socialist Lifestyle and Culture" (*Sahoejuŭi saenghwalmunhwabaekkwa*), published by the Clothing Research Center under the Committee on Light Industries in 1988.

as gifts on special occasions such as Kim Il Sung's birthday [Interviewee 7]. According to Interviewee 16, "People who had relatives in China or lived in Pyongyang wore brand new sweat suits. In the countryside, sweat suits were worn out and had stitches all over the place." These were the most popular items from China [Interviewee 16].

④ While the official policy was to ban the donning of pants, many interviewees remembered their compelling practical necessity, particularly in rural areas [Figure 1; Interviewee 1, 4]. Since pants were prohibited and therefore not sold in the state-run stores, women relied on their own resources such as sewing at home or going to the tailor shop. Despite the ban on pants, North Korean women found 'bell-bottoms' particularly fashionable [Interviewee 1, 4]. Women used to compete over wearing the widest bell bottoms, which would be extended as wide as 26cm by tailoring at home [Interviewee 2]. Women would insist on wearing these bell bottoms even at the risk of a confrontation with state regulators [Interviewee 2, 4].

⑤ It was common practice for women to wear scarves known as 'cicada wings' (*maeminalgae*) or 'dragon fly wings' (*chamjarinalgae*) from China and Japan [Interviewee 4, 8, 11, 12, 15, 16]. Rural women generally wore white scarves on their heads [Figure 1], and urban women wore vivid colours and flower prints [Figure 2; Interviewee 12, 15].

4.2. Domestic and Transnational Means

As described above, the diversification of women's clothing culture in the 1980s corresponded to both state policy and popular aspirations. Nothing about the education of socialist Korean taste or the egalitarian principle of socialism obstructed dress diversity *per se*. However, the ideal of a varied dress culture was countered by the rigidity and material scarcity of state planning. Moreover, the most problematic aspect of consumption in socialism was that either needs or wishes could be planned well in advance. Thus, even before the complete breakdown of the Public Distribution System following the famine of the mid-1990s, the North Korean

people were both unable and unwilling to rely on the state for their sartorial needs.

There are several reasons for this. Some interviewees cited the urgency of meeting production requirement for exports [Interviewee 15] or the priority of producing items needed for the distribution of state gifts (e.g., school or work uniform) on special occasions (e.g., Kim Il Sung's birthday on April 15) [Interviewee 2]. Under these circumstances, people's options at the state-run stores for industrial goods or women's clothing were limited. According to interviewee 2, "they sold pencils, socks, and underwear at stores, but not clothes. You had to make your own." Even with purchasing tickets (*kumaegwŏn*), very little was available for consumption in the state-run stores [Interviewee 4, 11, 12]. After 1988, "there was nothing left in the stores" [Interviewee 7]. In addition to the lack of quantity, there were also repeated references about the poor quality of clothing produced domestically (uneven sleeve length, missing buttons, dull colours, and etc.), not to mention the uniformity [Interviewee 11, 12, 15].

These conditions left women searching for their own means to address the lack of abundance and allure in the clothing culture. The recollections of the interviewees made it clear that the transnational flow of goods into North Korea from China and Japan enabled the people to find a safety valve and outlet for unmet needs and desires. As one interviewee put it, "there was no way that the people could have clothing culture without Chinese or Japanese goods" [Interviewee 10].

The supply of fabric, which was the most basic way through which the people provided for their own clothes, depended largely on Chinese small bag traders at the borderland [Interviewee 3]. As mentioned the above, people generally found clothing sold at the state-run stores distasteful. Therefore, fabric was much more popular than purchasing tickets distributed once a month [Interviewee 11]. Chinese fabric (most commonly tetoron) was called *kangch'ŏn*, which literally translated to 'fabric brought across the river' [Interview 13] and appeared to be far superior in quality than domestically produced fabric [Interviewee 3]. These were sold at the state-run stores along with Russian and domestically-

produced fabric [Interviewee 11]. Chinese fabric was used for the mass production of such items as school uniform [Interviewee 9]. The volume of Chinese goods that failed to pass through border customs (*hoesusangp'um*) also ended up in the domestic commercial network and would be sold in the state-run stores [Interviewee 6].

Privately, people would take the fabric to the tailors or sew for themselves dresses, skirts, sweaters, and the like according to their individual needs and tastes, as long as they did not violate *chuch'e* socialist sartorial codes [Interviewee 2, 4]. It cost about 5-10 won to have pants or other items tailor-made at shops or the 'Convenience Cooperatives' [Interviewee 2]. Small bag traders also supplied underwear [Interviewee 11] and sweat suits called *tanbok* as described in the above [Interviewee 4, 7, 15 16], and scarves (cicada or dragon fly wings) [Interviewee 12].

The scarves, fabric, and sweat suits were traded privately at home (if you had relatives) and more broadly at a venue called the 'Hong Kong Market' (*hongk'ongshijang*) [Interviewee 3, 4, 15, 16]. According to Interviewee 15, the reason for this appellation had to do with the tendency among the North Korean people to associate Hong Kong with the "utmost cultural and ideological disorder and indecency. The name was used to indicate that you could purchase anything and everything." Unlike the conventional farmer's markets, the "Hong Kong Market" was the "place to find what you needed in diversity" [Interviewee 16]. The 'Hong Kong Market' operated not only at the borderland but across the entire country [Interviewee 3, 15]. In Hoeryŏng, there was a 'Hong Kong Market' located right in front of the train station [Interviewee 16]. Chinese fabric (with flower prints), scarves, skirts, blouses, short-sleeve tops, and pants were exceedingly popular [Interviewee 2]. Chinese fabric was also widely used to make pajamas and underwear, as well as prohibited items like bell bottoms [Interviewee 1]. In addition to fabric, small-bag traders brought blankets, lighters, zippers, towels, shoes, scarves, watches, zippers, cosmetics (lipstick), Chinese herbal medicine in exchange for North Korean seafood, solid fuel, sea cumber, octopus, pollack, and *Kalmaegi* (seagull) brand bicycles [Interviewee 1, 4, 8, 16].

If the borderland trade with China satisfied basic needs, the supply of Japanese clothing catered to higher tastes. Despite the propaganda and politics of the 'anti-Japanese revolutionary guerrilla struggle,' the interviewees commonly acknowledged, *without reservation*, that the quality and novelty of Japanese goods were unmatched. People imitated everything from Japan, including clothes, shoes, and even hair accessories [Interviewee 14]. The availability of Japanese goods, which dominated the foreign currency stores located in major cities, was far more uneven than Chinese goods. For example, there was no Japanese goods allowed in Chagang Province, not to mention the returnees, because it was a site of military industrial production [Interviewee 9]. "It was hard to spot Japanese clothes outside of Pyongyang. No one outside of Pyongyang had any access to foreign currency. Even in the city of Chongjin, there were more Chinese products than Japanese products" [Interviewee 6].

The return of Korean residents in Japan, which began in 1959, had a profound impact on the material culture of North Korea (Joung Eun Iee, 189–227). The first mass migration of people from a capitalist to a socialist country, the lifestyles of returnees displayed capitalist material affluence. As controversial as they were, they held irresistible allure particularly for the privileged upper class in the urban centres such as Pyongyang. Buying an article of clothing in a foreign currency store using the 'bill exchanged from foreign currency' (*oehwawabakkumdonp'yo*) was the "biggest hope of women in Pyongyang" [interviewee 15].[10] Only the wives of high-ranking party cadres could afford to wear Japanese clothes [Interviewee 4].

Within the PDS, Japanese clothing in the foreign currency stores would be allotted to the upper echelons of the power hierarchy, leaving only a few articles for ordinary citizens (Interviewee 5, 14). Due to the returnees from Japan, Japanese yen was the most

[10] Aside from foreign currency stores, the 'bill exchanged from foreign currency' (*oehwawabakkumdonp'yo*) was handled at several additional spots in Pyongyang such as the Trade Bank, Koryo Hotel, and Taedonggang Diplomats' Lodging. USD 100 was exchanged for 210 won. The blue bill was used to purchase imported industrial goods. The bill was used to purchase imported food items" [Interviewee 15].

common form of foreign currency being circulated in foreign currency stores which sold mostly Japanese-made goods [Interviewee 15]. Among the most popular were dresses, which would be imitated in domestic factories. Some people in Pyongyang wore "*only* Japanese clothes and used Japanese cosmetics" [Interviewee 5, emphasis in the original]. For them, Chinese clothes were considered "unfit for human consumption" [Interview 5].

There was also a huge demand for second-hand clothing from Japan as well as underwear. In fact, underwear was the most radical change in women's clothing culture attributed to the Japanese returnees in the 1980s: "Previously North Korean women made their own bras and panties. When Japanese bras and panties began to appear in the foreign currency stores, they became extremely favoured by North Korean women" [Interviewee 12]. This explosive demand for underwear and clothing from Japan contributed to the returnees' or their families' investment in '*aeguk*' (patriotic) garment factories in Wonsan, Pyongyang, P'yŏng-sŏng, Sariwŏn [Interviewee 12].[11]

4.3. Regulation and Deregulation

Both basic and higher sartorial needs were fulfilled through the transnational flow of fabric, clothes, and underwear from China and Japan. It is notable that during the 1980s, the growth of small-bag traders from China and the capitalist lifestyles channelled through Japan did not raise serious ideological problems in North Korea. Rather than stoking an inner desire for money, or inspiring outlooks that contradicted the regime's political goals, the transnational flow of goods from China and Japan operated as safety valves that mitigated the impact of material scarcity.

During the 1980s, neither the ascent of money nor *changsa* (business or market activity) for individual profit-seeking in its post-crisis sense of the term was a common feature of North Korean life: "Back then, truly industrious people did not wish for

[11]The 'Patriotic' designation recognized the economic contribution of financial investment from Korean residents in Japan or returnees from Japan.

money. We had no need for money because education and medical care was free. Those who were attracted to money were idlers (*kŏndal*) looking to make profit from smuggling public assets (e.g., aluminium, copper) or illicit dealings of such things as drugs" [Interviewee 15]. Goods like rice or pigs were more commonly used for bribery rather than money [Interviewee 11]. Trade was conducted as an exchange of *commodities or materials* rather than money.

Both in rural and urban areas, the acquisition of clothing outside the state-run stores were conducted through barter trade. This was how the small bag trade with China operated. The same mechanism was practiced in the acquisition of Japanese commodities. Shipments of North Korean pine mushrooms or salted Pollack roe would be sent to Japan, and the ships would return carrying all sorts of Japanese goods including fabric and clothing. For example, a Japanese scarf (dragon fly wings or cicada wings) would be traded for approximately 8kg of rice, fabric traded for a certain amount of eggs, or clothing traded for alcohol or cigarettes [Interviewee 11]. For example, fishermen would take their produce such as clams to the government's foreign currency earning authority, which would purchase them at government-designated rates. With the income generated by this transaction, the fishermen would purchase the necessary consumer goods such as fabric [Interviewee 11]. Such practices were fully controlled by the state and were not considered to have a destabilizing impact on socialism.

The transnational flow of Chinese and Japanese goods were enabled by a certain measure of deregulation and cultural relaxation that were *sanctioned officially* to address the shortage economy and revitalize socialism. The prime example of this measure was the relaxation of travel restrictions not only for the Korean Chinese relatives, but for the permission of North Koreans to visit relatives in China. These new trends allowed a certain section of the North Korean people to experience first-hand the consequences of Chinese opening reform at both sides of the Sino-North Korean border.

While most interviewees agreed that Chinese products were popular and that ties with relatives in China were highly coveted, these sentiments did not seem to have translated directly to a widely shared envy of China's opening and reform. Granted, some interviewees were openly envious of China's growing material affluence: "After the borderland trade with China started, everything made in North Korea looked completely outdated" [Interviewee 7, 8]. Some thought that North Korea would not be able to sustain itself without Chinese-style opening and reform [Interviewee 2, 6, 8]. One interviewee recalled having a grandfather, a Korean-Chinese, who had the rare opportunity to visit both North *and* South Korea in the 1980s [Interviewee 2]. This grandfather, after having visited both Koreas, stated that "Kim Il Sung is not doing his job well" [Interviewee 2].

Yet, North Koreans generally believed that their country fared better than China and many interviewees attached the words 'beggar' (*kŏji*) or 'pitiful' (*pulssanghae*) to describe the living conditions of China they witnessed [Interviewee 5, 6. 15, 16]. One interviewee remembered how her family members would bring clothes to China for her relatives who "lived like beggars" [Interviewee 2]. It was not until sometime after the mid-1980s that the Chinese production of commodities increased; North Korea began to fall behind China decisively "after the 1989 Youth Festival" due to the huge amount of debt incurred to host such an expensive international event [Interviewee 5]. Another interviewee remembered feeling sorry for the small-bag trading relatives who were placed in that position because of the 'failure' of socialism in China [Interviewee 16]. The interviewee recalled how the relatives said that they became better off financially thanks to the small-bag trade (sanctioned by the government of North Korea) and that the profit enabled them to educate their children and support their basic subsistence back in China. In regards to these circumstances, one interviewee argued that the small bag trade was sanctioned by the North Korean regime to help the overseas compatriots make a better living, which was necessary because the collapse of socialism in China forced them to the ordeal of cross-border small-bag trade [Interviewee 15].

The flow of capitalist styles from Japan was similarly controlled by the state to cater to the people's needs and desires. Japanese second-hand clothing was circulated in the commercial management chain to make up for the unpopularity of domestic productions. According to Interviewee 15,

> Second-hand clothing from Japan were shipped to the city of Wonsan in *Man'gyŏngbongho* in boxes weighing about 180kg each, which cost about 300 USD (30,000 Yen). Since the boxes did not indicate what was contained inside, buyers (store managers, *sangjŏmjibaein*) had no idea what was actually in the boxes they purchased. If a box was full of women's underwear[12] or men's suits, it was considered disastrous. What was considered the luckiest draw were winter sweaters, turtle-necks (*dokuri*), men's sweat suits (*tanbok*) with double white strips, because they could make more than 1000USD from an investment of 300USD.

The reason that the state approved such transactions of second-hand Japanese clothing was that state-run store managers could not meet the assigned profit quota by selling domestically produced goods: "Japanese goods were by far the most popular among the North Korean people. Once the people heard that the shipments of second-hand Japanese clothing arrived at stores, they would immediately line up outside the stores to buy them" [Interviewee 15]. The store managers usually borrowed Japanese yen from the returnees. If they made a profit from the sales, store managers paid the returnees back with a 15–20% interest and made mandatory payments to the relevant authorities. Store managers were required to pay 2% of the profit to the State Planning Commission, Ministry of State Security, Ministry of People's Security, and Machine-Building Mobilization Bureau (National Defense Commission), respectively [Interviewee 15]. Store managers were not allowed to keep more than 30,000 won in their

[12]This was because it never occurred to most of the North Korean women to wear fashionable underwear. Women made their own underwear and generally did not purchase them from stores [Interviewee 2, 4, 11, 12, 16] until the arrival of Japanese women's underwear in the foreign currency stores in the 1980s [Interviewee 12].

safe for more than one night [Interviewee 15]. These controls virtually eliminated the possibility of private profit-seeking among ordinary North Koreans.

5. Conclusion

The interview results showed that: (1) there was a significant class and regional divide under socialism; (2) North Korean women were not only subjects of the state's sartorial control but also agents of creative strategies which conditioned them for self-empowerment without the state's endorsement of gender equality in the general sense of the term; (3) for all the emphasis on *chuch'e*, fabric and clothing from China and Japan proved indispensable to soften the impact of the material scarcity. Due to the restrictions imposed on displays of Western modernity, women's ingenious and unplanned actions, and the alternatives provided by links with the Korean-Japanese and Korean-Chinese communities, the material promise of 'in-our-style' *chuch'e* socialism was not seriously discredited *despite* a palpable economic downturn throughout the 1980s.

In the end, the predominance of *chuch'e* had a stabilizing political and ideological impact. *Chuch'e* did not mean that North Korea rejected the flow of goods from the outside world. Rather, it meant that they refused to compete with the West on the terms that the latter dictated; the regime promoted its own version of modernity, socialist good taste, and symbolic measure of prosperity while avoiding a direct visual and material competition with the capitalist West/South Korea. Consequently, the people generally did not contest the regime's promotion of *chuch'e* or question its ability to advance the cause of socialist unification on the entire Korean peninsula before famine struck in the mid-1990s.

The relative political stability and legitimacy of the North Korean regime was sustained not only by coercion alone but also by the women's strategies for survival. The ingenuity and perseverance with which they tried to make up for material scarcity demonstrates how women have shaped their own capacity and empowerment even as the state ideology remained fixated on a highly indigenous and Koreanized understanding of gender

equality. Looking at the at the practices, experiences, and sentiments of the people, rather than state ideology, illuminates the possibilities for ordinary North Korean women to transform and empower themselves. These women may be building the conditions for the implementation of SDG 5 even though the conceptual indigenization of gender equality parallel to the Koreanization of revolutionary history continues to dominate state policy.

Since gender equality is considered a political and national agenda already achieved by Kim Il Sung's initiative, the achievement of SDG 5 will be elusive if it is seen to be imposed from the outside. For SDG 5 to take root in the specific context of North Korea's complex gender reality, the promotion of SDG 5 in North Korea must be tailored to local conditions. Due to the indigenized meaning of gender equality and a strict division of gender roles in the construction of socialism spanning over seventy years, expanding education and employment of women, which are generally understood to be conducive to female empowerment (Kim Eun-Mee, 239–244), may not necessarily have the same impact in North Korea. It is unclear whether North Korean women understand that gender equality must entail the eradication of gender stereotypes.

Notwithstanding, it should be recognized that North Korean women have empowered themselves through their resourcefulness and creativity to make up for the chronic material scarcity and contribute to the stability of *chuch'e* socialism. The story of women's fashion and consumer culture shows that SDG 5 does not necessarily have to be imported; it can be cultivated and redefined from within. By illuminating the normalizing qualities of *chuch'e* socialism and the role of women in their formation, the 'Cultural Turn' has a harmonizing impact on inter-Korean scholarly dialogue by underscoring the areas of commonality across different cultures and ideologies.

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