



From Scarcity to Style: Sartorial Hierarchy and Hybridity in Marketizing North Korea

Jein DO, Inyoung EOM, and Youngsun JEON

Abstract

The present research explores North Korea's sartorial consumption during the post-crisis period in the 2000s to evaluate the impact of transnational/transsystemic cultural influence in a state socialist context. Based on interviews with North Korean refugees, we examine how the increasing desire for foreign consumer goods such as clothing, including those from capitalist countries, affected the practice of socialist identity. The testimonies revealed a particular sartorial hierarchy and hybridity formed since the Arduous March, effecting a transition from scarcity to style under which official ideology was both depreciated and appreciated. Two factors emerged from the interviews to explain this outcome: first, the lack of China's cultural appeal; and second, the ambivalent consequences of marketization. While recognizing the quantity of Chinese economic clout, North Koreans did not regard China as a yardstick of quality. Struggling to achieve basic subsistence, the North Korean population held de-politicized and pragmatic outlooks, adopting means of self-expression in compliance with state controls. Marketization and external cultural influence as experienced in the illiberal, impoverished, and ultranationalist setting resulted in distinct notions of aesthetics and affluence. Given the interview findings, the significance of the market as a vehicle for reinforcing capitalist culture and values should not yet be overstated.

Keywords: North Korea, China, clothing, socialism, consumption, marketization

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Introduction

The present research explores North Korea's sartorial consumption during the post-crisis period in the 2000s to evaluate the impact of transnational/transsystemic cultural influence in a state socialist context (David-Fox 2011; Péteri 2004). Based on interviews with North Korean refugees resettled in South Korea, we examine how the increasing desire for foreign consumer goods such as clothing, including those from capitalist countries, affected North Korean practice of socialist identity. This inquiry draws our attention to (1) the post-crisis era of the 2000s as a period marked by the official recognition of market-oriented mechanisms, resulting in intensive modernization and rapid transformation in the everyday material environment of North Korean citizens; (2) the paramount role of China as the chief supplier of consumer goods and primary conduit of external cultural influence; and (3) clothing as the most visible indicator of socialism's failure to meet consumer needs, triggering the search for transnational/transsystemic sources of the consumer market.

In 2002, the North Korean regime adopted the July 1 Economic Management Improvement Measures (hereafter the July 1 Measures), which had wide-ranging effects on prices and wages, fiscal policy, agricultural and industrial production, the consumer market, commercial and services sectors, and foreign trade/investment (M. Cho et al. 2005, 147; Hong et al. 2018, 77–88; Kim 2018, 4–5; Kim and Song 2008, 367; Yang 2013, 41–52). Two novel elements stand out concerning consumption: first, the conversion of the previously existing farmers' market (*nongmin sijang*) into general markets (*jonghap sijang*) in 2003, legalizing the market trade of industrial goods, including imports; second, the increasing proportion of consignment stores (*witak sangjeom*) in the official retail chain. The emergence of the general market expanded business opportunities for state enterprises as well as individuals, the latter of which were permitted for the first time by Cabinet Decision No. 24 to sell their own products (Hong et al. 2018, 88; M. Cho et al. 2005, 147). Individuals, cooperatives, and state enterprises were all permitted to rent space (stalls) at general markets (Kim 2018, 16). Moreover, retail stores were permitted to sell goods on consignment, including

individually produced goods, at market or similar prices (Kim 2018, 15). The increase of consignment stores effectively signaled the marketization of the official retail chain (M. Cho et al. 2005, 162; Yang 2013, 46–47; Yun 2017, 61).

Such market-oriented measures concerning consumption and trade drastically elevated the significance of China as the primary foreign source of the consumer market from which capital, productive capacity, and goods originated (Hong et al. 2018; Lankov and Kim 2008, 71; Yang 2013, 62–68; Yun 2017, 62). As North Korea's gateway to the world and safety valve, China enabled North Korea to simultaneously engage globally and disengage from the rest of the world, allowing the leadership to address material scarcity while pre-empting undesired cultural/ideological contamination. Due to cross-border exchange with China, in the 2000s the North Korean population transformed into modern consumers who became more knowledgeable about global trends. Concerning sartorial consumption, most of the ready-made-clothes sold in the markets were either imported or smuggled from China or produced locally with Chinese fabric (M. Cho et al. 2005, 147–148; Kim and Song 2008, 368; Seo 2018).

Sartorial diversity is one of the most salient aspects of the transnational/transsystemic dimension of North Korean consumer culture mediated by China in the post-crisis era. Unlike housing or food, however, clothing was a basic consumer item for which the North Korean people were unable and unwilling to rely on the state even before the breakdown of the Public Distribution System (PDS). This situation required merchants and consumers to mobilize wide-ranging means, including unplanned, autonomous, and transnational practices described in the interview results section of the present research, to cope with the lack of abundance and allure in North Korean dress culture. Exploring the external source of change in North Korean sartorial consumption reveals a great deal about the country's sociocultural transformation in the 2000s.

The structure of this study is as follows. In the next section, we explain our analytic framework, drawn from previous studies of socialist Eastern Europe which established consumption involving transnational/transsystemic opening as an important area of socialist state activity (Fidelis 2007,

539). Several outstanding analyses of sartorial consumption in a state socialist context emerged from this scholarship. This section also includes a description of our interview methodology and details about the respondents.

Based on the interview results, we provide details about the hierarchy of sartorial choice that was formulated in the 2000s. This section reveals the dominance of Chinese garments in everyday sartorial culture and the extent of North Koreans' desire for capitalist consumer goods from Japan and South Korea. This analysis is followed by an examination of the hybridity of sartorial culture in which state ideology was depreciated and appreciated due to first, the lack of Chinese cultural appeal; and second, ambivalence about marketization. These conditions contributed to distinctly North Korean standards of aesthetics and affluence. We seek to offer 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 post-crisis era of the 2000s after which market mechanisms were officially sanctioned without relaxation of social controls.

Analytic Framework and Methodology

Analytic Framework

In the study of socialist Eastern Europe, scholars identified two particularly important ways to revitalize economic development: (1) switching to a greater stress on the production of consumer goods; and (2) strengthening Western connections as a way of learning Western practices (Fidelis 2007, 539; Miklóssy 2016, 68–73). Specific measures included importing clothes and textiles, allowing their citizens to travel, and even to emigrate, to the West in large numbers.

An important question in this scholarship centered on how the increasing availability of Western consumer goods and the incorporation of capitalist practices affected the definition of socialist identity in the Soviet Union and countries that became socialist after World War II where Western influence was felt much more directly and concretely (Gronow and Zjuravlev

2015, 32). Namely, countries such as Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Yugoslavia, and East Germany were the most prosperous and consumer-oriented communist countries (Patterson 2012, 116). Socialist consumerism in such cases came to be intimately linked with comparison with the outside world, in particular the consumer societies of the “West” (David-Fox 2011, 898; Péteri 2004, 115).

To specify the relationship between the material reliance on the West and practice of socialist values and ideals, scholars investigated the ebb and flow of socialist and capitalist fashion. The guarded acceptance of Western fashion contributed to a state-society symbiosis “born out of necessity” (Veenis 2012, 4) and relative political stability (Bartlett 2010, 242; Bren and Neuburger 2012, 12; Chernyshova 2013, 10; Shevchenko 2002, 844; Stitzel 2005, 144–271; Veenis 2011, 513; Villinger 2024, 5). Yet, Western fashion also inspired outlooks and desires incongruent with the communist regimes’ goals and conferred an identity set off from socialism (Fehervary 2009, 534; Lipovetsky 1994, 149; Luthar and Pusnik 2022; Medvedev 2008, 272; Patterson 2012, 134). Socialist Eastern European regimes were unable to offer an alternative form of modernity as an effective counterpoint to capitalism (Chernyshova 2013, 9).

State socialist countries were unable to “define genuinely new terms and standards of economic, social, and cultural progress” (Péteri 2004, 104). According to Zdenek Mlynar, Secretary of the Czech Communist Party during the 1968 Prague Spring, Nikita Khrushchev’s motivational slogan for the Soviet Union to “catch up with the West” fundamentally changed the perception of the world for the average Soviet person, “insofar as over many years, the Soviet people continued to compare their lives to American living standards” (Miklóssy 2014, 18). The West increasingly came to be regarded as a “constant point of reference for superior living standards and the standard for ‘normality’” (Fehervary 2009, 435).

This observation should not be taken to mean that the history of the Eastern Bloc should be defined by Western narratives of the consumer experience, or by a *modernization theory* that assumes all societies develop along the lines of a familiar American consumerist model (Bren and Neuburger 2012, 6). But in their simultaneous pursuit of regimentation and

revitalization, socialist Eastern European countries could not prevent ordinary citizens from embracing Western products as a yardstick of quality, price, and modernity (Stitzziel 2005, 162; Pence 2012, 197), or as Veenis (2012, 500) put it, the “recognition of Western goods as the real stuff.”

Nowhere was the cultural shift more pronounced than in the world of fashion. The most consumer-oriented communist countries in the Eastern Bloc competed with the West based on a shared set of modern symbols of affluence such as haute couture and values such as choice and individual distinctions (Stitzziel 2005, 162). Socialist and capitalist fashion shared the “fundamentals of a symbolic language that the West undeniably controlled” (Stitzziel 2005, 68). In parallel with the slow and monotone official version of modernity, everyday fashion in the Hungarian and Yugoslav boutiques was bound up with the dynamics of Western modernity (Luthar and Pusnik 2022; Medvedev 2008). Parisian fashion was in practice often the main source of inspiration for Soviet designers (Gronow and Zjuravlev 2015, 20). By the 1970s, capitalist trends informed Soviet notions of what was fashionable, including jeans, running shoes, mini-skirts, maxi-skirts, women’s trousers, T-shirts with insignia, turtle necks, etc. (Chernyshova 2013, 30).

Methodology

Considering the foregoing insights on socialist Eastern Europe, the present analysis explores the impact of North Korea’s new consumer-oriented strategies contained in the July 1 Measures, which were essentially mediated by the presence of China, on the practice of socialist ideals and values. Centered on North Korean sartorial transformation, we focus on (1) how the desire for sartorial diversity was accommodated by the external networks linked almost exclusively to China; (2) what factors contributed to the sartorial hybridity of the period under investigation; and (3) whether North Korea’s markets can be considered as a site of capitalist practice and a vehicle for the creation and reinforcement of capitalist culture and values.

To answer these questions, we conducted in-depth, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews during the 2021–2022 period with sixteen North Korean refugees now resettled in South Korea. For interview analysis, we

employed thematic analysis, wherein the material was read closely and repetitively to detect patterns, connections, and recurring themes (Luthar and Pusnik 2022). The synthesized material enabled us to generalize and search for similarities and differences among the respondents. The respondents were selected based on their career, family, or educational relevance to at least one of the five following criteria: (1) work experience in the clothing production sector, or home-based workshops (*ganae jageoppan*); (2) direct experience in market trade or cross-border smuggling through Chinese counterparts; (3) family ties or other links to Chinese Koreans in North Korea (*huaqiao*), Chinese Koreans in China (*chaoxianxu*), or returnees from Japan affiliated with General Association of Korean Residents in Japan (Chongryon); (4) study abroad or work experience (in the Soviet Union or China); or (5) worked in a position of party/government authority and able to speak on policy matters.

Interviewing North Korean refugees raises concerns regarding confidentiality and sample bias (Y. Cho 2004; Choi 2003; Jung and Dalton 2006; Kang 2015). To address the first issue and ensure maximum reliability of interview data, the entire interview process observed the Bioethics and Safety Act of the Republic of Korea which requires researchers to inform the interviewees about the specific terms of confidentiality in a letter of consent subject under the approval of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the author's employer institution. The letter of consent explicitly states that the video recordings and transcripts of the interviews are saved in encrypted USB or external hard drives and accessible only to the participants of the present research. The letter of consent also makes it clear that the interview results are not disclosed to anyone outside the present research team, and that no personal information about the interviewees is disclosed upon the publication of the interview results in a peer-reviewed journal.

The second issue regarding sample bias is further complicated due to the regional imbalance of the North Korean defectors, who mostly come from the two provinces closest to the border with China, namely North Hamgyong and Ryanggang (Y. Cho 2004; Jung and Dalton 2006; Lankov and Kim 2014). These two provinces account for only around twelve percent of the North Korean population, and the rural-urban gap is much wider in

North Korea than in developed countries (Song and Denney 2019, 453). Furthermore, they do not “constitute a representative sample of North Korean society because they have chosen to leave, meaning that their opinions about politics are systematically biased” (Dukalskis and Lee 2020, 1055). The over-representation of the two northern provinces reflects the regional imbalance of the defector community, as in other studies on North Korean defectors (Lankov and Kim 2014, 71).

Additionally, the authors tried to address concerns arising from sample bias and regional imbalance by selecting some interviewees who had lived

Table 1. Profile of Interviewees

	Sex	Age group	Residence	Left NK	Education	Employment
1	F	50s	Yanggang Province	2009	College	Trading Company
2	F	40s	Yanggang Province	2018	High school	Clothing sales
3	F	30s	South Hamgyong Province	2009	High school	Clothing sales
4	F	50s	North Hamgyong Province	2006	High school	Customs agent
5	F	20s	Pyongyang	2015	High school	Overseas workers
6	M	20s	Pyongyang	2015	College	Government official
7	F	30s	North Hamgyong Province	2007	High school	Factory worker
8	F	30s	Gangwon Province	2009	University	Soldier
9	F	50s	Yanggang Province	2017	High school	Garment factory worker
10	F	50s	Yanggang Province	2019	High school	Clothing sales (smuggling)
11	F	20s	Yanggang Province	2010	High school	Clothing sales
12	F	20s	Yanggang Province	2011	Primary school	Clothing sales
13	M	50s	Pyongyang	2008	College	Teacher
14	F	40s	Yanggang Province	2019	College	Clothing sales (smuggling)
15	M	50s	Pyongyang	2012	College	Government official
16	F	40s	Pyongyang	2009	College	Trading company

Source: Authors.

or worked in provinces other than the two northern provinces; focusing on “behaviors and processes that can be externally validated rather than on political opinions” (Dukalskis and Lee 2020, 1055; Suh 1998); and cross-referencing the interview results against other published analyses of refugee interviews (Choi 2003, 330). The interview questions focused on the daily lives and popular sentiments of ordinary people to minimize the impact of political prejudice (Y. Cho 2004, 72). 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. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Some information about their background is summarized in Table 1. To protect the identities of the respondents, we refer to them by code number in this text. In the discussion section, code numbers are paired with sex identification (F for female and M for male).

Sartorial Hierarchy in Post-Crisis North Korea

One crucial dimension of the changes precipitated by the July 1 Measures was the tremendous increase in consumer goods from China (M. Cho et al. 2005, 164; Hong et al. 2018; Lankov and Kim 2008, 71; Yang 2013, 62–68; Yun 2017, 62). These goods appeared not only in the markets but also in the official retail chain which previously sold products made in state-run factories (Kim 2018, 15; Yang 2013, 46–47; Yun 2017, 162). From the early 2000s, individuals linked to either *huaqiao* or *chaoxianxu* businesses began selling goods from China (M. Cho et al. 2005, 166–178; Joung 2009, 232; Lankov and Kim 2008, 58–71; Lee 2014, 32–33). Even in Pyongyang, the most heavily regulated city in North Korea, one could find foodstuffs, alcohol, and other goods for daily consumption which were smuggled from China (13M).

Sartorial diversity is one of the most salient aspects of the transnational dimension of North Korean consumer culture mediated by China in the

Table 2. Proportion of Chinese Products Sold in Consignment Stores

Proportion of Chinese goods	Respondents	Percentage (%)
Under 60%	6	3.8%
Around 70%	16	10.2%
Around 80%	29	18.5%
Around 90%	55	35.0%
More than 95%	51	32.5%
Total	157	100%

Source: M. Cho et al. (2005, 164).

Note: The figures contained in the table reflect interviewee responses to the question, “What percentage of goods sold in North Korean consignment stores are Chinese?” in the study conducted by M. Cho et al. (2005).

2000s. The availability of diverse clothing generated a hierarchy of choice among garments from Japan, South Korea, China, and North Korea. All respondents recognized that Chinese consumer goods were essential for alleviating material shortages. Clothing from China, including items of Japanese, South Korean, and other capitalist origins, satisfied basic and higher sartorial needs. Foreign expatriates, such as restaurant managers or wives of diplomats residing in Russia, Cambodia, Vietnam, or Laos, obtained consumer goods made in those countries for market trade in North Korea (5F). Since most foreign goods were from China, even Southeast Asian products were highly coveted (5F). Luxury brands such as Chanel were “worshipped” (5F).

As foreign goods became a staple in the markets and official retail chains, North Korean consumers recognized their functional and stylistic superiority. From the respondents’ recollections, we detected a hierarchy in which Japanese and South Korean garments were placed in the top tiers; Chinese garments fulfilled basic needs; and North Korean productions were the least preferred. As one respondent put it, “Japanese clothing featured unmatched sophistication and details; Chinese garments were commonplace and cheap; and those from South Korea fell somewhere in between” (F8). Although most respondents agreed that Chinese clothing was cheap, some

said that many lived on subsistence levels that made even Chinese goods unaffordable (13M).

The Superiority of Japanese Fashion

Japanese goods were introduced to North Korea by Zainichi Koreans who were repatriated starting in 1959 under a scheme that organized the first mass migration of people from a capitalist (Japan) to a socialist (North Korea) country. The lifestyles of returnees from Japan displayed capitalist material affluence erstwhile unknown to ordinary North Koreans (Joung 2009). As unanimously recognized, Japanese goods were *insanely* popular—North Koreans were simply fascinated with the exceptional quality and design of Japanese goods, ranging from electronic appliances to watches, food stuffs, fabric, clothing, shoes, accessories, etc.

Returnees from Japan were viewed as trend-setters in the otherwise monotonous sartorial culture of North Korea (5F, 8F). The privileged upper class of Pyongyang were in particular captivated by Japanese styles. In the 1980s, buying an article of clothing in a foreign currency store using the *oehwawa bakkum donpyo* (bill exchanged from foreign currency) was the “biggest hope of women in Pyongyang” (15M). Such women frequented retail stores (foreign currency stores or consignment stores) or purchased second-hand Japanese clothing through door-to-door sales (13M). To don the latest Japanese styles, men and women consulted tailors from Japanese returnee backgrounds (13M).

Popularly referred to as “*bonsanje*” (literally, products made in Japan) (5F, 8F), Japanese clothing was transported by the *Man Gyong Bong*, a cargo-passenger ferry between Japan and North Korea that operated until 2006, when Japan banned all North Korean vessels in opposition to Pyongyang’s missile tests. Even after the ban, however, there was a huge demand for *bonsanje*, which were traded in the markets or through door-to-door sales (8F, 14F). Large cities such as Pyongyang or Hamhung, where returnees were concentrated, continued to function as sources of supply for Japanese goods (14F). One respondent remembered traveling to Pyongyang or Hamhung in search of unique and fashionable items that could not be found

among Chinese goods in the markets (14F). Usually, those who had some sort of connection to Zainichi Koreans loyal to the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan or returnees themselves put them up for sale in their homes; sometimes, *bonsanje* were exchanged for rice instead of money (5F).

Once, a respondent spotted a bikini at the home of a returnee from Japan and remembered being “completely shocked” (5F). Another saw a pair of jeans on display—although it was not possible to wear jeans in North Korea, the informant thought they looked good (8F). Anything made in Japan was immensely “coveted and complimented” (8F)—according to one interviewee, “it was worth risking your own life (*moksum geolgo*)” to get hold of an article of clothing from Japan, “even if it was just second-hand” (5F). Children of returnee families were always the best dressers (8F). There was a fantasy about the culture and lives of returnees (5F).

Although widely admired, only the privileged few could afford the luxury of donning Japanese garments, which were approximately four times more expensive than those from China (14F). After the Arduous March, US dollars were used to pay for *bonsanje* (5F). Payments could be made in installments since Japanese goods were usually pricey (8F). One respondent who engaged in door-to-door sales said that her clients consisted of wealthy individuals such as merchants or *donju* (money masters) or high-ranking officials such as judges, police and security officers, or smugglers who were linked to illicit economic activities (14F). Around “five percent of our population,” she estimated, could afford Japanese clothing (14F). They would make visits to her house upon her phone call to inform them of the latest items in stock, obtained from market vendors or commission stores which specialized in Japanese goods. Japanese sartorial influence was more pronounced in the city of Wonsan the former home port of the *Man Gyong Bong* (7F), while Chinese influence was more pronounced in cities like Chongjin, which were closer to the border with China (8F).

Fancying South Korean Styles

During the post-crisis era of the 2000s, North Koreans became increasingly

knowledgeable about South Korean material conditions, including fashion trends. The implementation of inter-Korea economic cooperation through the Kaesong Industrial Complex made South Korean products more available. Moreover, the immense popularity of South Korean TV dramas (such as *Stairway to Heaven*, *Autumn in My Heart*, *Winter Sonata*, and *Sandglass*) turned leading actresses such as Kim Tae-hee, Song Hye-kyo, Jun Ji-hyun, and Koo Hye-sun (F5) into “fashion role models” (13M), which was a reputation previously reserved only for returnees from Japan or North Korean actresses who donned Japanese fashion.¹

With the suspension of shipments from Japan via the *Man Gyong Bong*, South Korean clothing from China was increasingly considered the trendier substitute (14F). As one respondent recalled, even “South Korean second-hand clothing was immensely popular because its design and details were superior to Chinese products” (3F). Compared to the subpar quality of Chinese needlework, South Korean clothing seemed meticulously designed and tailored (14F). Items stolen from the operation sites of South Korean companies in the Kaesong Industrial Complex, such as work uniforms, socks, underwear, and shoes, were traded through door-to-door sales only (14F, 16F).

Since stolen items from the Kaesong Industrial Complex or South Korean goods were banned from being sold in the markets (7F, 14F), it was more customary for consumers to purchase imitations of Kaesong styles produced in the city of Pyongsong (2F, 10F). North Korea’s most prominent center of private tailoring, Pyongsong hosted the operations of the most skilled tailors whose labor was carefully compartmentalized (3F) and whose craftsmanship aroused the envy of Chinese tailors who would say “we wish Pyongsong did not exist” (9F). Knockoffs of Kaesong styles produced in Pyongsong appeared in markets across the country (2F, 6M). According to one respondent who traded them in Hyesan city, Yanggang Province, only

1. However, even though many women were enamored with what they saw in South Korean dramas, they felt that those styles were unsuitable for living conditions in North Korea, which could involve such things as transporting heavy loads of goods by bicycle or walking on muddy roads (3F).

imitations of South Korean styles produced in Pyongsong could be traded openly (7F, 14F). One interviewee stated that out of many options available in the department stores or markets, she purchased only Kaesong styles for her daughter who insisted that “now all the kids are wearing Kaesong Industrial Complex clothes” (10F).

In addition to the knockoffs of Kaesong Industrial Complex styles, K-dramas further aroused the desire for individuality and distinction (5F). South Korean styles satiated the thirst for uniqueness: “everyone was keen to wear clothes that was different from what you could buy in the markets” (8F). Previously, North Koreans always dressed alike in work, school, or military uniforms (9F). However, with the broad mass appeal of K-dramas, and influence of South Korean fashion donned by North Koreans or their relatives in Yanbian (9F), tailors were asked to produce bell-bottoms (8F) or winter coats (5F) based on photos of South Korean actresses. One respondent took pictures of them with her Nikon camera (which was just becoming available) to present to her tailor (16F). If the tailor’s job was unsatisfactory, she would then give the picture to a friend who was going on a business trip to China and asked the friend to purchase a similar style, even if the price was exorbitant (16F). Anything that even “remotely resembled the red scarf or pompom beanie in *Stairway to Heaven* or *Winter Sonata* sold like hotcakes” (5F). Even though these were about ten times more expensive than Chinese or North Korean products sold in markets, fashion-conscious North Korean men and women adored South Korean items, or knockoffs thereof.

China in the Fulfillment of Basic Sartorial Needs

For all their popularity, Japanese and South Korean garments were still rare or unaffordable; for the most part, Chinese goods fulfilled the basic sartorial needs of the broader masses. From the early 2000s, massive amounts of Chinese investments were directed at normalizing and augmenting the production capacities of North Korean footwear and clothing manufacturers in major cities. It was 100 percent Chinese investment that provided the North Korean manufacturers with electricity and raw materials (13M).

However, quality goods produced in such facilities were usually earmarked for exports, mainly to China (10F). In this context, ordinary citizens relied almost exclusively on Chinese products. As one interviewee recognized, “without China, we could not have anything to wear” (14F). Even though Chinese clothes “stretch easily and their colors fade quickly,” they were “cheaper and added diversity to our clothing culture” (10F).

The influx of Chinese goods involved different people in numerous capacities. At first, *huaqiao* served as the main conduit with the support of the Ministry of State Security (15M) (M. Cho et al. 2005, 166). From the early 2000s, *huaqiao* businesses were promoted to prevent them from relocating to South Korea after the establishment of diplomatic relations between Seoul and Beijing in 1992 (15M).

In addition, service center (*bongsaso*) managers, many of whom were women, would travel to Dandong, China, for example, and come back with gunny sack loads of clothing that were sold at prices 15 to 20 times higher than the original price in Dandong (5F). Service Center managers were nominally state appointed but contracted to make a designated amount of payment in exchange for a business permit (6M). A winter padding jacket bought for 2–3 US dollars in Dandong, China, would appear in North Korean market stands at 20–30 US dollars (5F).

Aside from service center managers, individual merchants were active in the cross-border exchange. One respondent stated that she hired *chaoxianzu* aids for 500 yuan/day to accompany her to Wuai Market in Shenyang (14F). Catering to the taste of North Korean women was difficult, because they like “things that are classy and new, but they did not like things that are too flashy” (14F). She also had *chaoxianzu* acquaintances in Changbai County, Jilin Province (which faces Hyesan) who would bargain on her behalf and mail purchased items to her in North Korea (14F). Another respondent described the process by which the influx of Chinese clothing occurred through the mediation of *chaoxianzu* operatives. They would send truckloads (1.5 tons) of clothing packed in gunny sacks worth about 10,000 yuan each (3F). North Korean merchants would line up early in the morning at the points of destination (usually private homes) to purchase the items from China and put them up for sale in the markets (3F). Wives of

diplomats engaged in market trade from their husbands' posts in Shenyang or Dandong. These wives purchased clothing on request from their personal or business acquaintances and sent items to North Korea with the assistance of train staff or cross-border transportation authorities (5F). Wholesale merchants or acquaintances would receive the items upon their arrival in Pyongyang (5F).

According to several respondents, there was a hierarchy of preference within Chinese garments. There were two routes through which Chinese goods entered North Korea. The first was Dandong (to Shinuiju) and second was Yanji (to Hyesan or Rajin). Clothing from Dandong (called '*jungang jepum*,' meaning goods from the center) were considered more fashionable and expensive than those from Yanji (called '*jibang jepum*,' meaning goods from outside the center) (3F, 13M). Therefore, Shinuiju merchants could make bigger profits in Hyesan or Rajin if they sold clothes from Dandong (13M). Shinuiju became the source of many trend-setting items, such as winter padding jackets (*dalleodongbok*).

Sartorial Hybridity in Post-Crisis North Korea

Continued Acceptance of Socialist Lifestyles

Asked about the meaning of dressing in the socialist style, the respondents referred to state regulations and inspections. The primary purpose of the state's sartorial control was to keep out "bourgeois Western style" (1F) or "capitalist yellow wind" (*jabonjuui hwangsaek baram*) from South Korea (3F) and enforce socialist Korean good taste. Even though a wide variety of foreign styles were introduced during this period, a rigid ban on pants (16F) for women in Pyongyang and jeans (10F) remained intact. One respondent admitted purchasing a pair of bootcut jeans from a vendor who sold goods from overseas but not having the courage to put them on (16F). The ban on wearing jeans represents the starkest contrast with the production of jeans that started in 1973 in the Soviet Union (Chernyshova 2013, 141) or the licensed versions of the highly coveted Levi's in the 1980s in Yugoslavia and

Hungary (Bartlett 2010, 268).

One respondent remembered that in 2005, high school students were prohibited from wearing anything that had foreign letters. Therefore, English brand names such as Asics, Adidas, or Nike had to be covered with masking tapes (5F). Mothers would create their own Adidas knock-off training pants for their kids at home by attaching three white stripes on the outer side of each leg (6M). Disciplinary guards accused anyone wearing tight clothes as fans of South Korean dramas—in such case, a notice would be sent to one's workplace as a warning against violating socialist lifestyles (16F). One interviewee was caught by the disciplinary guards while she was watching the South Korean drama *All about Eve*: “in one sense, that was the moment I made the decision to flee North Korea” (16F).

In the context of *songun* (*seongun*, military-first) politics of the post-crisis Kim Jong-il era, military jackets and high-heeled combat boots were considered a common “socialist style”; men and women alike wore imitations of Kim Jong-il's military jacket—such styles, known as *seongunbok*, could be found in any market across the country (1F, 15M) and came in many different shapes and forms (depending on the use of zippers, buttons, and collar styles) (2F). Wealthy people would have military uniforms tailored with the finest fabric and wear them as formal attire on special occasions and functions (13M). Any style that Kim Jong-il wore became very popular (5F, 9F).

In addition to military uniforms, people generally considered wearing the traditional Korean dress, known as *joseonot* (*hanbok* in South Korea), as a “socialist dress.” Female university students would have *joseonot* (white top and black skirt) tailor-made; people thought they were pretty and tidy (8F). This practice differs from that of South Korea where *hanbok* is worn almost exclusively for national holidays and special functions such as weddings; female students in college do not wear them as daily attire.

The emphasis on the socialist style—conceptually inseparable from the Korean style—produced certain rules and preferences that people came to accept as proper and appealing within their political and cultural context. These became clearer in the respondents' assessments of what they found odd or strange about South Korean dressing styles. According to one respondent,

South Koreans did not seem to observe *proper* dressing rules (emphasis added)—e.g., pairing sneakers with skirts or suits instead of wearing heels, revealing ankles or calves in cold weather, sporting baggy clothes, wearing skirts without stockings, all seemed strange (14F). The sight of women wearing tank tops and ripped jeans was shocking—making them look like cheap prostitutes (8F). While North Korean styles are neat and tidy (*danjeonghada*, *gosanghada*), South Korean styles are not sophisticated: oversized fits, stretched out sleeves, too much color, etc., were common in second-hand South Korean clothing from China (14F). When copying Kaesong Industrial Complex styles, alterations were made to suit North Korean preferences—the colors were subtle, the fit neither too short nor too long (10F).

Even as North Koreans became more informed about global trends as consumers in the post-crisis era, they continued to adopt socialist Korean styles as well. Then what are the main reasons that ideology was both depreciated and appreciated in the realm of consumption? Two factors emerged from the interviews to explain this outcome: first, the lack of China's cultural appeal; and second, the ambivalent consequences of marketization.

Lack of China's Cultural Appeal

According to the respondents, North Koreans fully recognized their economic reliance on China. As one respondent put it, “Chinese economic power is what makes it still possible for North Korea to get by” (16F). In the realm of sartorial consumption, “North Korean cannot have clothing culture without China” (14F). One testimony was particularly revealing about the special nature of Sino-North Korean relations as experienced on the ground: “Back in 2009, Wen Jiabao [then head of the Chinese government] visited North Korea and gave a hefty sum of two hundred million dollars in cash which came from the premier's personal funds rather than government sources” (15M). Chinese input, both in forms of consumer goods and special alliance relations, was critical for keeping the North Korean system afloat. In a related vein, many respondents talked about the positive

consequences of Chinese opening and reform and acknowledged that the Arduous March profoundly changed their thoughts about China.

Residents in border areas may want Chinese style changes due to the influx of outside information. They are thinking about it, but they are not saying it. In the 1970s and 1980s, China was a complete mess. But seeing how things have changed in just ten years, people think we could have lived better if we had done things like Hu Yaobang. (1F)

The respondents remembered how their parents spoke favorably of Deng Xiaoping (6M) and wondered in their minds “why are we at a standstill when other countries are making rapid technological and economic progress?” (1F). In the eyes of ordinary North Koreans, the lives of Chinese Koreans seemed “well-off and free” (9F).

Yet, while China was viewed as an example, it was not necessarily an ideal. While recognizing the *quantity* of Chinese influence, North Koreans did not seem to regard China as a yardstick of *quality* in the realm of consumption. The cultural appeal of China seemed to be undercut by a strong sense of nationalist pride. Some respondents stressed that North Korea used to be more successful as a socialist country prior to the Arduous March. North Koreans felt that Chinese living standards were much lower until the mid-1980s (13M). Many respondents used the words “beggar” (*geoji*) or “pitiful” (*bulssanghae*) to describe the living conditions in China before the country’s opening and reform era.

Several respondents spoke of their views on the superiority of North Korean socialism. When Chinese Koreans’ small-bag trade started in the mid-1980s, North Koreans considered Chinese living standards to be inferior (1F); the expansion of small-bag trade in itself was viewed as evidence of “malfunction within the institution of Chinese socialism” (15M), and conversely, the ability of North Korean socialism to take good care of overseas diaspora by “permitting Chinese Koreans to benefit from kinship networks in their socialist motherland” (15M).

Even after the Arduous March, there were remnants of this pride. On this point, one interviewee commented that unlike South Korea where

flunkeyism (*sadaejuu*) is rampant, socialism might be one reason that North Korea maintains some measure of national pride (6M).

Although we are materially dependent on China, there is no dependence on foreign countries or flunkeyism. In South Korea, if you want to become a university professor, it is almost a must to obtain an American doctoral degree. There are too many illusions about the United States. Why it is necessary to earn a degree in the United States in the field of Korean studies? This is weird. Why do gifted children need to learn English from an early age? There is none of this nonsense in North Korea. Even if North Koreans interact with China, they do not send their children in kindergarten to learn Chinese language. Even though North Korea is subjugated to China economically, there is an effort to retain a sense of national pride. I wonder if it is possible in North Korea because of socialism. South Koreans need to do more for the sake of national pride (6M).

Ambivalence about Marketization

In addition to the ambivalent consequences of the material reliance on China, the desperate efforts for basic subsistence since the Arduous March has made ordinary North Koreans normalize the state's ideological control. Many respondents used the word "capitalism" or "half-capitalist" (*banjabonjuui*), to describe the prevalence of money in everyday survival, law enforcement, social relations, etc. However, their desperate need for money did not translate to an entirely favorable view of marketization. The respondents stated that they were forced to resort to market trade due to the collapse of the PDS and the dysfunction of socialism (14F). In the early 2000s, market trade, which is called *jangsa* in Korean, was referred to as "8.3 efforts" instead. "8.3 efforts," which meant cash payments made by laborers to obtain the autonomy to be absent from their regular jobs in state-run enterprises or factories and instead engage in market activity, was a term adopted to "dignify *jangsa* which used to be looked down on" (13M).² For example, a

2. Until the early 1990s, the North Korean population in general were not very inclined to resort to market trade, and in fact frequently saw such activities as ethically suspect

pledge to pay 50,000 won per month bought time off from the weekly life review (self-criticism) session; 100,000 won allowed a certificate of business travel which exempted the employee from attendance for one month (13M). Based on this arrangement, many men, for example, traded second-hand Japanese bicycles instead of going to work (13M).

But although money bought ordinary citizens the leeway to pursue their independent paths of survival, in most cases it was barely enough for basic subsistence. Only a small fraction of the North Korean population had the means to become a *donju* (money masters); in general, having rice on the table required a day-to-day struggle (12F). Marketization enabled ordinary citizens to make ends meet, but did not necessarily produce, let alone guarantee, financial security (12F).

Since I made a living by breaking the law [e.g., smuggling], I always thought that I was a sinner. If the state gave us a job that allows us to work legally, we would not get involved in market trade. Even if we make money, we are always worried because we don't know when we will be caught. Furthermore, we cannot keep all the profits to ourselves. More than half of the profits are used to bribe as many people as necessary to secure legal protection. No matter how much money we make, we cannot consider it ours. Someday everything will be taken away. In North Korea, there is a saying that one who can make a lot of money has a lot to lose [emphasis added]. (14F)

Likewise, speaking of the huge gap between rich and poor, which seemed to be “even bigger than in South Korea,” one respondent stated that wealthy individuals had to restrain themselves because inordinate spending would subject them to criminal investigation or financial penalty (5F). In North Korea, “rich people fear spending money and poor people do not have

(Lankov and Kim 2008, 57). “August 3 laborers” refer to those who are exempt from state-designated work duty and instead engage in autonomous market trade. “August 3 laborers” obtain this autonomy from the factory manager or party secretary by pledging to make a monthly cash payment (Yun 2017, 52).

money to spend” (16F). If a service center vanishes one day, it was a sign that the “owner was focused too much on making profits for him/herself and not giving enough to support public duty” (5F). After witnessing repeated crackdowns on individual wealth, high-ranking party cadres would say that it was “foolish to accumulate more than US 300,000 dollars.” Since inheritance was prohibited, this amount was deemed sufficient for sending kids to college and marrying them off without the need for collecting bribery (15M).

Since money did not necessarily translate to security, unification conceived as the domination of South Korean-style capitalism triggered a sense of instability and fear about the future.

We were primarily concerned with any change that might restrict economic activities. No one paid any attention to subjects like military-first politics in daily conversations. After the 2006 nuclear test, and the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, we wondered if there was any increased possibility for opening and felt that regime collapse might happen and lead to unification. If the country opens and South Koreans come in, we worried they might take over all our jobs and we would be left with menial jobs like shoe-shining. So, I suddenly felt very anxious and thought that it would better to leave the country and make money so that my family could start a business [emphasis added]. (3F)

In this volatile context, North Koreans tried to shield themselves against crackdowns on their market trade by claiming that it *served*, rather than weakened, socialism. Previously, arguing with security guards in the markets was unthinkable. But following the Arduous March and legalization of market trade, merchants contended that their activity defended socialism because it enabled them to make a living and keep their children fed so that the young generation can continue the revolution (13M). Likewise, foreign currency workers created slogans such as, “Let’s show our loyalty to the party by earning foreign currency” (5F). The emphasis on socialism in this new line of justification made it difficult for the authorities to impose extreme restrictions on market activity.

The foregoing recollections reveal the extent of uncertainty that pervaded North Korean lives in the market-driven economy of the post-crisis era. In this situation, ordinary citizens could not be concerned with military-first politics or socialism (13M), which were thought to be irrelevant to their daily survival (2F, 8F). Those people who continue to navigate the economic hardship in North Korea “take pride in having weathered the extreme calamity of the mid-1990s” (3F). To achieve daily survival, North Koreans were focused on resolving their present ordeals. Therefore, as one respondent categorically stated, “there is no such thing as political consciousness in North Korea” (15M).

Conclusion

De-politicized and pragmatic outlooks shaped the hierarchy of choice and sartorial hybridity in the post-crisis era of North Korea in the 2000s. During this period, marketization and external cultural influence as experienced in the illiberal, impoverished, and ultranationalist setting resulted in distinct notions of aesthetics and affluence.

North Koreans embraced the functional superiority of capitalist consumer goods and complied with the state’s sartorial regulations at the same time. The increasing circulation of goods from capitalist countries and knowledge about the outside, both of which were mediated through China, might have bred certain desires and views incongruent with official ideology. Yet they did not substantially alter the practice of socialist ideals and values in North Korea.

The interviews revealed a transition from scarcity to style which neither contradicted nor favored official ideology in the realm of sartorial consumption. The respondents spoke from their experience as self-managers of economic shortage rather than followers of political ideology. Given the interview findings, the significance of the market as a site of capitalist practice and a vehicle for reinforcing capitalist culture and values should not yet be overstated.

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