

A Study on Labour Consciousness of the North Korean Residents

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Introduction

In recent years the food shortage in North Korea became so bad that it had to ask help of international society. There is also an unbelievable report that several million died from hunger. Despite these serious food shortages, however, the political system is still stable. The mass media in North Korea is still demanding the loyalty of the people for Kim Jong-il and they are obeying the Kim Jong-il regime.

Pyongyang has experimented with cautious, gradual, and partial opening by establishing the Rajin-Sonbong Free Economy and Trade Zone in an attempt to resolve the serious economic difficulties and food shortage problem. In this process, economic interchanges with South Korea, though passive in nature and limited in its scope, have been made, and in this process some related information has also been released by the North Korean authorities.

Seoul has turned away from the past policy of linking political and economic issues to that of separating them. Pyongyang also seems to understand that a diverse pattern of economic cooperation with Seoul and other countries is needed to get out of the current economic crisis. The only resources that Pyongyang can rely on to attract foreign investment are, in my opinion, land and labor. So it seems simply natural that Seoul-Pyongyang economic cooperation would be made through the combination of North Korean

labor and South Korean capital and technology. The important issue here is the quality of the North Korean labor.

In this article, I would like to evaluate the North Korean labor force on the basis of my personal experience in North Korea and the existing studies on the subject. In North Korea, where ideology plays an important role as a guide to social development, individual life is organized according to the ideology-guided societal frame. In this respect, we will focus on working life of the workers in North Korea.

Also intended here is to evaluate the quality of the North Korean labor by examining workers' consciousness and values on labor. Finally, the future prospects and tasks for economic cooperation between the two Koreas will also be discussed.

Current State of North Korean Workers

Work Mobilization of Students in School

The life style of the North Korean workers is simple with the uniform and fixed work pattern. Even their consciousness has been nurtured and controlled according to the guidelines of the state. The first step in the creation of the controlled workers is the work mobilization in school.

Work mobilization in North Korea is one of the indoctrination projects designed to adapt the residents to the social system of North Korea. Work mobilization in school nurtures attitudes and consciousness that fit the ruling ideology and social system from the early stage of the formation of the people's outlook toward the world. Students in the third grade of the "upper-middle" school (aged around 15 and 16) participate in obligatory work mobilization called "Combat for Agricultural Support."¹ Students are organized into work teams and sub-units and given a certain amount of work which they have to finish together with the members of the cooperatives. Students' work load is about 60 to 70 per cent of that of adult workers. They work under the direct control of the teacher, Youth Corps, and cadres (also students) of the Socialist Labor

¹ Ministry of Public Relations (1994), *Life of Youth in North Korea*, p. 87

Youth, and under the indirect control of the members of the cooperatives. The work is obligatory but with no reward.

Work mobilization of this kind makes up for the short supply of labor in the rural areas. But the more important function is to nurture the sense of duty to social labor and enhance the adaptability to collective labor. Daily evaluation of the work performed spurns the negative feelings toward the unrewarded labor however it might be difficult, and familiarizes the students to the national mobilization system. Student cadres learn to play the role of authoritarian elites during this work mobilization and come to acquire a power-oriented way of thinking.

Career Choice

There are three occasions in which North Korean residents choose their career. Some choose their career after graduation from "upper-middle" school, some after the completion of military service, and the rest is the case of college graduates.

Students, during the last days of the 11 years of mandatory education, choose among taking a job in society, military service, and further education in college.² In order to be able to study in college they need recommendations of the school and the Party. Students who choose to have a job have to consider three factors. The first factor is the evaluation by teacher on the capability and character of the student and the ability of the parents in terms of political, social, and economic strata. Second is the demand and supply of labor in the job category in which student hope to work. The third factor is whether the state allocates students in a mandatory way according to the needs of the specific sectors at the time of job choice. The job placement of those who graduate "upper-middle" school (after the mandatory education) are made by the state labor administration rather than by respecting students' choice. As a result, students get their job according to the evaluation of teachers and power of their parents. But if there is a collective allocation by the Party, there is no room for choice.

Those who finished military service can choose the job they

² Seo Dong-ik (1995), *The Life of People* 2, p. 63, 66

want. The administrative organization of their home town issues a "Dispatch Letter" according to their wishes. But this is just a principle. The fact of the matter is that there are more occasions of collective allocation according to the order of the state. Those who are from rural areas are advised to work in cooperatives. Soldiers are supposed to move with the convoy officers who keep the individual documents³ of the soldiers, when they are discharged. So if soldiers are given their own individual documents they are likely to choose their own job as they wish.

College graduates are "national cadres" of the North Korean society, constituting a core elite group. They are specially allocated as lower-level leaders in the administrative organs and factories or as workers to be trained for the executive positions by the order of the Dept. of Cadres of Provincial Party.

The most important factors in choosing a job are individual capability and social background of job seekers and capability of their parents and relatives. Due to the lack of consideration about the character and hopes of the job candidates, this kind of recruitment might not lead to the highest development and best exertion of one's own talent and potential.

Favorite jobs among the workers in general are those with more material rewards or higher possibility of social advancement. For those who are not party members, jobs with political rewards are popular. The material rewards here means complementary rewards other than monthly salary. The fact that jobs with possible political rewards are popular indicates the importance of being a party member as a universal value in North Korean society. Those with a good class origin prefer power-oriented jobs.⁴ Those who are confident about one's ability and from a common origin prefer nationally acknowledged jobs with higher possibility of social advancement, which enables one to be a party member in short time. These kinds of jobs sometimes include short-term work such as a construction project of national importance or special kinds

³ Individual documents includes documents for food rationing, a letter of organizational transfer issued by the Party and Socialist Labor Youth, an evaluation paper of the military, information on family and relatives. These individual documents are not disclosed and sometimes take the place of "labor note."

⁴ Power-oriented jobs refer to those jobs that can be used as a foothold to become a executive regardless of kinds of work. These jobs are available only for those who belong to a special strata.

such as "(construction) Raiders". Some workers choose to work in a certain job category for long to improve one's class status.

Due to the above-mentioned irrationalities, North Korean workers tend to be unsatisfied with their jobs and show inclination to change their jobs. But changing to a new job is very difficult, because rewards differ mostly depending on the job. Extra pay, not the salary itself, makes up a greater portion of one's income. There are those, though not very many, who choose to take a job that fit one's character and aptitude or one's life-style.

A job switch of voluntary nature is very difficult due to the highly developed control system. Unpopular jobs are easier to get and difficult to quit and popular jobs vice-versa. Abuse of power by the executives in popular jobs and hire-for-bribery make job switches even more difficult.

There are several forms of job switches; by promotion, by enforcement, and for individual reasons. Forced switches include allocation to a new factory by state order, switch due to the professional qualification, and transfer from urban to rural areas or from urban to mining areas (formally a "voluntary advancement")⁵ made by state order. Switch by promotion is very rare among the workers. Job switches occur in most cases for individual reasons, which are illegal except for reasons recognized by the state.⁶ Job switches are controlled by several mechanisms including a Certificate for Organizational Transfer (Socialist Labor Youth, the Party, Occupational Confederations), a Certificate for Food Ration⁷, and Labor Note.⁸ Illegal switches of work include using bribery and personal connection to get one's favorite job.

⁵ The mass media and the publications of North Korea describe "voluntary advancement" as 100 per cent free choice. But those who "advanced" in early stages accepted job switch for political or other reasons. Most of them are simply described as "voluntary" by administrative decisions.

⁶ Reasons recognized by the state include the need to serve one's old parents, health problems proved by hospitals, and transfer of husband's workplace in case of women.

⁷ A certificate for food rations is needed for the workers to get food rations. Workers have to transfer this certificate from an old work place to a newly transferred place to get food rations.

⁸ A Labor Note is a certificate that record workers' life. Without a labor certificate workers cannot switch or get their jobs. Labor administrative organs in the province, city, and county level place the workers according this Note.

Wages and Extra Payments

(1) Wages

Wages are paid based on the standard set by the state and several extra payments are added.⁹ One of the characteristics of the state-set wage system, is that wage level is determined considering its political, economic, and social impacts, not by the quality and quantity of labor. For example, mine workers cannot receive more than 999.99 won even though they garner several times of target production. White collar workers cannot get more than 120 per cent of the base wage.

The economic crisis and food shortage in North Korea which brought about the paralysis of food rationing and emergence of the black market have long made it impossible for the wages to provide living expenses. In the past, until around early 1980s, only twenty to thirty percent of the wages went to basic necessities such as soy sauce, rice, vegetables, and utility payments. Most of the workers and clerks did not have any big spending need other than for these basic necessities. The rest of the income went to the savings for the family's future and consumption in the black market. It might be added just for information that the state deducts about three to five per cent of the wages as expenses paid for the support for construction works and relief for the veterans for some specific occasions of the year.

In recent days, however, due to the economic crisis and food shortage, wages seems to make up less than five per cent of the living expenses.¹⁰ It is impossible for the workers to maintain their lives solely on the basis of monthly salary in the 1990s.

Reduction of purchasing power of this magnitude must be decreasing motivation to work and creating hurdles to higher productivity. In this respect, wages in North Korea have come to lose its proper function as a provider of the living expenses.

⁹ Korea Labor Institute. *Aptitudes and Utilization of the North Korean Workers*, p. 27

¹⁰ This projection is based on the testimonies of the defectors from North Korea that I interviewed. The rice price, for example, cost 80 won for two kgs, which is the same as monthly salary of the workers.

(2) Extra Payment System¹¹

Since wages have been insignificant in supporting one's life for long, the popularity of a certain job category is judged based on the quality and quantity of "Rear Supply", rather than based on the wages. This is the North Korean version of extra payments.

The extra payment system emerged together with the Work System of Dae'an, which was a new economic management system instructed by Kim Il-sung. Kim Il-sung created the Dept. of Rear Supply to secure food for the workers in large factories. This "Rear Supply" system developed further when the factories and plants began to produce their own food for the workers as the economy began to decline from the 1970s. Food and basic necessities were given out in the form of prizes when material rewards had been utilized to propel large-scale construction work or propaganda work of the industrial sector, or to solve the foreign currency shortage. Cloths and electric appliances were also distributed to stimulate foreign currency earnings. But this kind of foreign currency business cannot be done by ordinary firms. The original role of the state in the national supply network¹² began to be replaced by the factories as the official supply system came to be paralyzed from the early 80s. This led to an expansion of the "Rear Supply" system which had been run by factories in a small scale just to provide food, in a way to include stone coal, soy sauce, cooking oil, meat, and liquor. Popularity of the factories differed depending on the products provided by the factory.

The Extra Payment System can be divided into two categories. One is "Rear Supply" system where factories of various size provide their own necessities. The Dept. of Real Supply even provides stone coal and food that are needed during holidays and varying seasons. Some large scale firms and major state organs (including the Party, Ministry of Security, Ministry of Defense) produce grains and potatoes in their own land and distribute them according to

¹¹ Extra payment here refers to food and basic necessities provided by each factory and firm where workers work, not bonuses or incentives.

¹² National supply network here refers to the food stores, fish stores, vegetable stores, and stores that sell industrial products that regularly provided soy sauce, cooking oil, liquor, cigarettes, meat, and shoes.

the ranking of the employees, which greatly help solve the food shortage problem (sometimes amount of rear supply is greater than a monthly ration). Each factory provides needed radish and chinese cabbage for the winter pickling called kimjang. Since the food ration is also provided through the official supply system, this is a great benefit for the workers given the high price in the black market.

The other is the "Preferential Products"¹³ system that is run by factory-firms that produce strategic items or earn foreign currency income. They are firms in the military industries, food industries, industries that produces basic necessities, export industries, raw material firms at the central level, trading firms, and special firms. The amount of supply varies depending on the characteristics and capability of the firms.

Preferential Products provided by the state on a regular or irregular basis depending on the value of products made in these firms enhance the popularity of these firms among the workers. For example, the fertilizer plant in Sariwon is very popular despite inferior working conditions such as poisonous gas, because it provides preferential supplies such as electric products, clothes, and foods during the holiday season due to the fact that it garners foreign currency income for the Party by refining gold.

Factories that produce basic necessities sell these products to the employees by turns which can be sold in the black market at a high price, sometimes enabling workers garner even more income than the salary. In the case of children's bicycle factory where I worked, state-set price of this bicycle was 25 won, while it sells in the market at 120-123 won.

There are other illicit forms of extra payment depending on the products of the factory. It includes illegal sale of the parts, or sale of whole products after the assembly work at home, and illicit sale of food in the black market. Even these illicit extra payments enhance the popularity of the factory as long as it provides such opportunities.

¹³ The range of preferential products is very diverse including apparel, electric appliances such as refrigerators and TVs, necessities such as food, and sometimes foreign currency.

Working Conditions of the North Korean Firms

Working conditions of the South Korean firms reported on TV remind me of those of North Korea. The characteristic features of working conditions in North Korea are that it is formal, backward, and propaganda-oriented.

Kim Jong-il demanded that "inside the factory (it should look) like a palace, outside the factory (it should look) like a park" when he declared that "our world is the world of the working class" trying to build his own image in the 1970s. Improvement of working conditions was selected as one of three elements - production, thought, working conditions - in the "Movement for Grappling the Red Flag for Three Great Revolutions." Another campaign to improve working conditions was "No. 26 Model Flag Creation Campaign." But, except for the model firm, working conditions are mostly inferior.

Only the firms that Kim Il-sung or his son Kim Jong-il had visited for "site direction" or the firms that are designated for the foreign guests have improved working conditions. Other than those cases, painting of the machinery or the outside walls is all they get.

For example, the Heungnam Fertilizer Plant is severely exposed to ammonia gas. Sariwon Fertilizer Plant and Jeongju Refinery are also producing a lot of poisonous gas. There are no safety facilities in the machine factories. Industrial accidents happen quite often due to the non-observance of safety procedures. Workers are supposed to work in turns as "safety teams" to raise the safety level, but this measure tend to be ignored due to the priority given to the completion of the target production.

There are many female workers in North Korea all across the industries. Firms usually provide locker rooms for female workers but most of the firms do not provide shower facilities except for the mining sectors and sites with heavy work. But even these locker rooms and shower facilities are very primitive and poor.

Production Organization of the Factory Firms

The lowest production unit in North Korea is a work team.

Incorporated into the production organization is the multiple layers of control mechanism. The team leader, head of (political) organization (Youth League, and Occupational League), and a cell secretary of the Party are respectively in charge of controlling the administrative, political, and ideological aspects of the workers' lives and productive activities. These organizations hold a "Life Evaluation" session every week through which workers are controlled by engaging themselves in self and mutual criticism about their own productive and organizational activities.

The work team's production plan is carried out under the responsibility and order of team leader. In general, a work team sets up dual plans on the monthly target: combat plan and production plan. The production plan is determined by the state, while the combat plan is set up by the workers in the site at a higher level than that of the production plan, supposedly reflecting "voluntary" enthusiasm and loyalty.

The team leader is in charge of organizing the production process and controlling workers on the basis of technical qualification, responsibility, and political loyalty. He puts forward the task of the day in the morning meeting. Specialized factories and firms have their own given production targets according to the goal of the year. After daily production is over, the team leader evaluates the day's work. In principle, each member of the team is supposed to evaluate their own work performance according to the "Independent Account System," but this makes things so complicated that individual evaluations are mostly being omitted.

Administrative responsibility of the production rests on the team leader, but joint liability¹⁴ falls on the cell secretary¹⁵ who is in charge of ideological control. If team leader has a substantial power, the cell secretary has an ideological power that affects members' individual evaluation or social advancement. These two sources of power create conflicts between team leader and cell secretary. Thus, transgression is possible only under the tacit consent from both team leader and cell secretary. Sometimes they share

¹⁴ Joint liability means that, in case outcome is not up to the target, not only the team but also the cell secretary is responsible for it, making him subject to reprimand from above and loss of power.

¹⁵ A party cell consists of several small production teams or one big production team.

interests in transgression because their small power does not guarantee enough income for living. This obviously has a negative impact on the production system of North Korea. In some big work teams, conflicts between team leader and cell secretary develop into the conflicts among the team members.

Overall, the production organization in North Korea is constituted of multiple control system including political and doctrinal control as a well as a check and balance mechanism. From the 1980s, economic difficulties brought about a situation where low-ranking leaders share interests and participate in transgression under mutual tacit consent.

Selective Work Mobilization at the Workplace

Selective work mobilization is very important in the life of North Korean workers. Work mobilization undermines stable and hard work in one's own workplace, especially among the young generation. Work mobilization is divided into two categories: voluntary and mandatory mobilization.

Voluntary participation in work mobilization is aimed at attaining Party membership in short time by working hard at the construction sites. If there exists a possibility of becoming a Party member, workers usually endure hard work voluntarily for a certain period (from 6 months to several years). Some work in the housing construction site to achieve the right to be allocated a house.

Mandatory mobilization refers to national mobilization by the state such as rural work mobilization or important construction work. It does not entail political rewards, and people want to avoid it. Those who are left behind in the production team, extra work force, and newly admitted workers are the main candidates for this kind of mobilization. Newly admitted workers are usually the first target. Sometimes, those who are not in good terms with team leader or cell secretary are called out to an enforced mobilization.

Labor Consciousness of the North Korean Residents

Meaning and Value of Labor

Labor in North Korea is “meant to realize independence..., is a purposeful activity of social human beings, and becomes creative in the socialist system,”¹⁶ according to the North Korean ideology. In reality, labor is given two meanings: self-realization through the realization of ideal values; and means to satisfy material needs (rations and salary).

In North Korea labor is a means to express one’s loyalty to the Great Leader or to the Party, rather than a means to develop one’s self or to achieve valuable goals of each individual. People are demanded to be loyal to the Party and Party ideology and Great Leader through labor. Labor is essential and mandatory for all the adults in North Korea. Absenteeism in the work place is subject to the investigation of the Party, Socialist Labor Youth, and Ministry of Security. As the economic situation is getting worse, people find the meaning of labor not so much a realization of self as an attainment of social values,¹⁷ more specifically, adapting oneself to the multiple control mechanism and securing means of subsistence. Only a few people have an opportunity in which their labor is rewarded by the membership in the party or by social advancement.

In the real world, people feel proud of labor when their work is given an official commendation or rewarded with a party membership. In the longer term, hard work is rewarded by one’s being accepted in the ruling class as a beneficiary of the system or having a chance to become a part of the national elite. Everybody wants to become a elite cadre but party membership does not guarantee the privilege to become a beneficiary of the system. Only a few rise to the model of the workers and enjoy the honor of being granted a title or given the “present of love”, and feel the worth of one’s labor.

Accordingly, the superior class origin one has, the more worth

¹⁶ Encyclopedia of Science Publishing Co. (1997.2), *Study on Economy*, p. 19

¹⁷ Social values here refer to the peculiar value in the North Korean society represented by such things as party membership, official commendation, or attainment of power and authority as a member of the ruling elite.

one feels from labor in a given environment. The inferior social origin one has, the less chance one has to feel proud of labor. One is inclined to feel proud of labor when one has a job which pays more, commands a better future, and for youth, stands a better chance of becoming a party member. Those who work in the state organs such as military industries, the military, Ministry of Security, Ministry of Defense, and those who earn foreign currency would be more proud of their work. In terms of age, the younger generation is more proud of work in the job category in which sufficient rewards are granted and there exists some chance for social advancement.

Work Ethic: Diligence and Sincerity

Work ethic can be defined as socially expected norms and attitudes in conducting professional or occupational activities. These attitudes may be expressed in the spirit, disposition, and ethos.

Socialism had been able to attain visible achievement through the socialist industrialization in the 1950s and mass movements like Chollima Campaign in the 1960s and early 1970s. Those who lived through these periods attest that diligence, commitment, and spirit of sacrifice had existed among the people in those days.¹⁸ In these periods, most of the people worked hard and were proud of exerting oneself for the nation and the Party.

But from the late 70s, North Korea reinforced ideological control creating social mistrust and a terrifying mood in the midst of a declining economy. The abrupt fall in the standard of living and discrimination of people according to the class origin destroyed the balance of distribution, leaving the workers to pursue personal interests rather than the sincere work ethic seen during the Chollima campaign. People came to have dual attitudes: on the surface they behaved as if they were doing everything to be loyal to the state to avoid political punishment, but deep inside they

¹⁸ North Korean people aged more than 60 testify that during 1960s people really worked for the benefit of society and the nation. These people of the older generation are worried that people are not working hard in recent years (the 1980s and 1990s) as they did during 1960s, which is, in their opinion, one of the reason why North Korea is suffering from economic difficulties.

became insincere in work and came to pursue individual interests whenever possible to get around economic difficulties.

These dual attitudes are reflected in the fact that workers are more concerned about their own individual work to make extra income, for example, doing parts processing work for personal gains rather than accomplishing a target set in the plan, and growing vegetables on the farm for one's own consumption. North Korean workers have developed an active and enthusiastic attitude in improving one's material gains while being passive and detached for the work of the nation and society which does not involve any chance of personal gains. For example, if the machines are of the same model and made with same technology, machines made in 70s are much better in quality than the one made in 80s.¹⁹

The said phenomena occurs because the real work ethic has been lost in the midst of all kinds of formalities involving control, learning, "struggles, campaigns, and combats." Workers lost any real sense of participation and came to simply follow whatever orders were coming from above. Living is guaranteed not by workers' labor but only by the capability of firms and individuals. This discrepancy in the attitudes toward work may be attributed to cruel punishment and control by the authorities, gap between supply and demand, contradiction between policy direction and reality, and wage differences resulting from different backgrounds and power resources of the workers.

But it is true that North Korean residents have built their own ideological consciousness as a result of training and education under the closed system for a long time. The "sea of tears" that North Korean people shed when Kim Il-sung died proved the charisma of Kim Il-sung and still effective grip of the North Korean system.

While feeling suspicious of the policy put forward by the state, North Korean residents are trying to do their own share of work out of sense of a responsibility cultivated by repeated indoctrination. There is no other way to explain why North Korean people

¹⁹ "Red Flag" electric locomotive made in Kim Jong-tae electric locomotive factory and a compressor made in Hamheun Compressor factory in the 80s are of a lesser quality than those of made in the 70s. I experienced it myself and my friends testified the same.

keep working, being careful about their behavior, keep participating in the organizational life, and keep hoping for the future even when they don't get any food rationed for several months or even a year. Social and ideological standards of work ethic coexist with the deviations, individual selfishness, and complaints, which constitutes a unique dual structure in the mind of North Korean people.

Since the distinctive work ethic of this kind has been formed over a long period of time through continued and repeated education and training, it will not change easily as long as the North Korean system survives, nor would it help recover economy.

Conclusion

The range of possible interchange and cooperation between Seoul and Pyongyang is increasing with Kim Dae-jung administration's more progressive "sunshine" policy toward Pyongyang. It turned out that "Juche thought" and "Self-reliance" alone could not guarantee maintenance or development of the North Korean system and economy. Cooperation with the external world became imperative to escape from economic crisis and food shortage.

The North Korean work force is considered cheap and educated. South Korean firms that deal with North Korean producers for the commissioned production do not seem to be worried about the quality of work. North Korean workers who work in "export firms" are selected by the authorities and are being coveted by other workers. These workers have special interests and enthusiasm in their work, because these "export firms" pay more than any other factory. Residents of Rajin-Sonbong Free Economy and Trade Zone are reported to be selected through rigorous examination from all over North Korea. Residents in this zone are different from other ordinary workers. They are aware of their privileged position and feel pride in their work. We might as well evaluate that the workforce in that zone must be good.

However, most of the workers in North Korea are not committed to active accomplishment of their work, though they formally obey the rules imposed by the system. This duality of conscious-

ness cannot be corrected without a radical change of the existing system and ideology. Deviation in the behavior and consciousness of the workers constitutes a major stumbling block on the road to economic recovery.

It will be necessary to study and come up with a concrete action program to change the deviant behaviour and dual consciousness of the North Korean workers to prepare for eventual reunification. After reunification, we need to educate them on the meaning of work and a work ethic under the market economy system. The point of education will be that work is not something that has to be obeyed to subsist but an important means for individuals to accomplish one's hope and goals in life.

In the event foreign (including South Korea) investors advance into North Korea and come to employ North Korean workers, the investing party should be alert and prepared from the start to maintain needed level of skill and quality of labor over a long period of time. This is especially so because it will be North Korean authorities who supply the needed work force while these authorities (Socialist Labor Youth and Occupational Confederation) will continue to intervene in the life of workers. Management also has to pay due attention to the North Korean "extra payment system" and find a way to elevate spirits and standard of living of their employees in order to secure high productivity. ■