

A Dance between Structure and Agency Cultural change on the Korean Peninsula

Lonnie Edge

Hankuk University of Foreign Studies

lonnieedge@hufs.ac.kr

ABSTRACT: For comparative case studies, North and South Korea provide political and social theorists with the perfect laboratory to control for factors like language, culture and history due to their near identical conditions in terms of these factors at independence. This research examines and discusses the impact of the social structures and constraints on individual agency that resulted in the aftermath of the nearly 80-year-old division of the Korean peninsula on the cultures of the Koreans. First, section two examines theoretical perspectives on the relationship between structure, culture, and agency to frame our discussion and then focuses on theory of cultural change that most pertains to the North and South Korea we see today following nearly 80 years of nation building. Then, section three examines some indicators of state structures such as coercive capacity, national economy, and political freedom to show the structural disparity between North and South Korea. Institutions are the real world embodiments of structure and these statistics are reflections of the capacity of their relevant institutions to constrain and influence agency. Section four highlights some ways that the numbers from section three have influenced agency in both Koreas over time. Then, section five examines how structure and agency influenced changes in culture in South Korea and North Korea. Section six concludes by offering some thoughts on the implications of the findings.

This article contributes to the literature in two respects. First, it engages in a nuanced discussion of agency and structure not by simple dichotomy but by showing the mutual interplay between the two on the Korean peninsula. Second, in terms of structure and agency, it compares North and South Korea

according to several indices while providing a comprehensive and deep interpretation of the two Koreas' social and cultural evolution to non-Korean readers.

KEYWORDS: North Korea, South Korea, social theory, culture, structure, agency, consumerism, materialism, commodification, poverty

논문초록: 해방 당시에 언어, 문화, 역사 등의 측면에 있어서 거의 동일한 상황에 처해 있었던 남한과 북한은 비교 사례 연구 분야의 정치·사회 이론가들에게 이런 요인들을 변수로 삼는 완벽한 실험실을 제공한다. 본 연구는 약 80년에 걸친 한반도 분단의 여파로 형성된 사회구조 및 개별 행위자(agency)에 대한 제약들이 남북한의 문화에 미친 영향을 관찰하고 논의하고자 한다. 2장에서는 논거의 틀을 마련하기 위해 구조, 문화, 행위자 간의 관계에 대한 이론적 측면을 검토한 후, 건국 이후 거의 80년에 걸쳐 생성된 현재 남북한의 모습을 문화 변화 이론을 중심으로 분석한다. 3장에서는 남북한의 구조적 격차를 강제력, 국민경제, 정치적 자유와 같은 국가구조의 몇 가지 지표를 중심으로 설명하는데, 이때 기관은 구조의 실제 구현이며, 통계수치는 행위자를 제약하고 영향을 주는 관련 기관들의 역량을 반영한다. 4장에서는 3장의 수치들이 시간의 흐름에 따라 남북한의 행위자에게 영향을 끼친 방식을 조명한다. 5장에서 구조와 행위자가 남북한의 문화 변화에 어떤 영향을 미쳤는지 살펴본 다음, 6장에서는 연구 결과의 의미에 대한 몇 가지 의견을 제시하면서 결론을 맺는다.

기존 연구에 대한 본 연구의 기여는 두 가지 측면에서 평가할 수 있다. 첫째, 단순한 이분법 대신 한반도에서의 남북한의 상호작용을 보여줌으로써 주체와 구조 문제를 다룬다. 둘째, 구조와 주체 면에서 여러 지표에 따라 남북한을 비교하고, 외국인 독자들에게 남북한의 사회·문화 발전에 대한 포괄적이고 심도 있는 해석을 제공한다.

핵심어: 한국, 북한, 사회이론, 문화, 구조, 주체, 소비, 물질주의, 상업화, 빈곤

1. Introduction

The formation of two modern nation states following the Japanese colonial period meant that foreign ideologies that guided the creation of new political, legal, and economic structures were imposed on both North and South Korea. 30 years of Japanese colonization had indeed altered the culture of the Korean people and their identity but, in the aftermath of this colonial experience, both North and South Korea were independent nation states, at least within

the context of their respective sides of the Cold War and their patrons. From independence onward, the cultures of the nation states on either side of the 38th parallel have evolved based on the structures that constrained them. North Korea is known as a brutal dictatorship that was formed in the early stages of the Cold War under the ideology of communism. Early South Korea also experienced dictatorship and eventual democracy from 1989, all the while firmly entrenched in the capitalist camp of the Cold War. In other words, the technology of modernity that is the nation state in its many ideological colors, through structures of coercion, economy, and political freedom have pushed the cultures of North and South Korea in different directions, creating culturally different nation states.

North and South Korea provide political theorists with the perfect laboratory to control for factors like language, culture and history. Once part of the Chosun Dynasty, North and South Korea were previously a unitary kingdom. Unfortunately for the Korean people, the Korean peninsula's collision with modernity resulted in a tumultuous journey of the economically and militarily weak, inward looking, Chosun being colonized by the Empire of Japan and then divided by the USSR and the US, a condition that continues to this day. While this is no doubt a tragedy for Korean people who wish for re-unification, it does provide a ready-made comparative case for scholars who wish to study a variety of phenomena related to nation building and national identity. In addition, how different political systems influence how culture changes over time can be examined. Especially within the context of the structure vs agency problem. While the author's PhD thesis used the division of the peninsula to control for cultural and historical factors in research pertaining to political theory, this research will instead examine the culture itself in terms of the nation building trajectories of the twin Koreas' cultures and the impact of the social structures and constraints on agency that resulted following the nearly 80-year-old division on those cultures.

This paper is organized as follows. Section II is a literature review that examines theoretical perspectives on the relationship between structure, culture, and agency to frame our discussion and then focuses on the theory of cultural change that most pertains to the North and South Korea we see today following nearly 80 years of nation building. Section III examines some indicators of state structures of coercive capacity, national economy, and

political freedom to show the structural disparity between North and South Korea. Section IV highlights some ways that the numbers from Section III have influenced changes in culture on both sides of the 38th parallel. Section V concludes by offering some thoughts on the implications of the findings and the futures of the cultures of North and South Korea.

2. Literature Review

This section deals with theory pertaining to structure, agency, and culture, beginning with broad strokes and then narrowing to theory that pertains to obvious characteristics of the North and South Korean nation building. It should be noted that this is not meant as a comprehensive survey of the literature related to either sociological theory or the two Korea's national identities. It is simply meant to establish a framework by which a comparison of the cultures of North and South Korea may be undertaken.

2.1 Structure, Agency and Culture

Scholars of social theory have grappled with the complexities of the structure versus agency problem since the birth of the field. This was further complicated by adding culture to the confusion. Hays (1994) identifies the multiple conflicts and ambiguities that have characterized the debates and attempts to unpack the concepts of structure, agency, and culture in such a way as to clear up the confusing ways scholars have muddied the waters through their lack of consistent definition of terms.

2.1.1 Structure

For Hays (1994, p. 58), structure is an aspect of social theory that is often prioritized over agency or culture. She notes that Gusfield (1981) views structure as 'institutions', Berger (1981) as material circumstances, Bellah et al. (2007, p. 6) as economy and the state, Geertz (1973, pp. 331, 337) as "political instruments", "institutions," and the "power element", and Willis (1977) as a production system. In such definitions, structure is juxtaposed with agency, playing the role of a material, scientifically observable and objective

component of social theory versus agency which is voluntarist and reflects choices predicated on cultural values and creative human nature (Hays, 1994, p. 60). In the world of the devoted structuralist, structure is an independent variable that is determinant of society with the thoughts and choices of individuals being weak dependent variables.

Instead, if in the vein of Durkheim (1964), Giddens (1984), and Sewell (1992, 1985), social structure is defined as “patterns of social life that are not reducible to individuals and are durable enough to withstand the whims of individuals who would change them; patterns that have dynamics and an underlying logic of their own that contribute to their reproduction over time”, then a mutually constituting relationship between structure and agency becomes possible. This comes with the recognition that all social structures are created, at least at first, by people. While they may seem to operate behind a curtain of society, they would not exist without the participation of individuals (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Giddens, 1984). Another aspect that balances the structure-agency relationship is the fact that structures not only constrain but they also enable, empowering individuals and giving them a sense of belonging and meaning. For example, one’s position in a society not only constrains movement from that position but also provides a foundation for one’s identity and a sense of freedom to behave as an actor within that society. Hays (1994, p. 61) argues that without structures ‘there are no rules, there is no grounding for, and no direction to, one’s personality, and therefore no possibility for conscious, purposive action.’ Finally, structure has different levels of structure that can be more or less deep, more or less hidden from daily life, more or less powerful in guiding our thoughts, and more or less open to being altered by human action (Sewell, 1992).

2.1.2 Agency

The above definition of structure allows a more nuanced discussion of agency. Hays (1994) explains:

Agency explains the creation, recreation, and transformation of social structures; agency is made possible by the enabling features of social structures at the same time as it is limited within the bounds of structural constraint; and the capacity of agents to affect social structures varies with

the accessibility, power, and durability of the structure in question (p. 62).

This can be understood in several ways. Notably, it can mean that people and structures are mutually constitutive or it can mean that agency is conferred when an individual makes a choice that has significant transformational consequences for the social structure. The first sense implies that social structures are real but can only exist through the individual (Alexander, 1987; Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Giddens, 1984). As a person acts within society in accordance with norms of social conduct, social structure is reproduced across time and space (Giddens, 1984, p. xxi). This implies that the majority of our actions merely constitute and reproduce social structure and that we seldom act in ways beyond what the structure dictates. The second sense of agency is less mundane and deals with transformation of social structure. This sense views social structures as human creations that are subject to consequences and change as a result of human thought and behavior (Hays, 1994). Revolutions and even political or economic transitions that have been wrought by groups intending to change the social structure would be examples of this type of structurally transformative agency. Given that agency may be mundane or transformative, agency may then be viewed having a continuum upon which an individual's choices and actions can be placed (Hays, 1994, p. 64) depending on the degree of social change the actions result in, the power of the individual, and scale of the milieu in which the choice is made (Giddens, 1984; Lukes, 1977).

2.1.3 Culture

Culture is often dismissed in social inquiry as subjective, immaterial, and malleable. However, culture is also a type of social structure. Culture may be defined as:

A social, durable, layered pattern of cognitive and normative systems that are at once material and ideal, objective and subjective, embodied in artifacts and embedded in behavior, passed about in interaction, internalized in personalities, and externalized in institutions....Culture is both the product of human interaction and the producer of certain forms of interaction....both constraining and enabling...a social structure and

underlying logic of its own (Hays, 1994, p. 65).

Hays argues that there are two main interconnected elements to social structure, those being systems of social relations and systems of meaning. Social relations are patterns of roles, forms of domination which dictate where an individual falls within various social classifications such as class, gender, race, education, and religion, among others. Meanwhile the latter, systems of meaning, has to do more with what we traditionally identify with culture as it pertains to beliefs, values, language, knowledge, common sense in conjunction with their resulting products, practices, rituals and ways of life these things foment (Hays, 1994). Therefore, in order to understand individual or group behavior, it is necessary to take into account their cultural and relational particulars since the two work in conjunction with each other as two aspects of social structure (Hays, 1994, p. 66). Archer (2005) notes that, like structure, ‘some of culture’s most important causal powers are those of constraints and enablements’ (p. 25).

2.2 Contemporary Culture Pertinent to the Korean Peninsula

Unfortunately, as a result of division and the different governing systems installed thereafter, the fortunes of the two Koreas have diverged drastically in economic terms. South Korea is a top tier world economy while North Korea is an economically isolated, impoverished state. This is likely the most stark difference between the two Koreas and as such, it is necessary to understand some theoretical perspectives pertaining to cultural outcomes of capitalism in South Korea and poverty in North Korea.

2.2.1 Consumerism

Within a capitalist society many concepts serve to explain the functioning of the economy and what that means to day to day life. An invisible hand is said to guide the market economy to efficient outcomes with supply and demand being the nexus between producers and consumers making choices of which and how much to purchase of the products they desire. Central to this market and the concept of modern capitalism is the idea of consumption (Trentmann, 2004, p. 373). Consumers may simply be purchasing the things

they need for survival or, as affluence increases, things they want, although Bourdieu argues needs and wants are learned and not absolute (Slater, 1997, p. 163). Consumerism is defined by Stearns (1997, p. ix) as ‘a society in which many people formulate their goals in life partly through acquiring goods that they clearly do not need for subsistence or traditional display.’ Consumers are viewed by economic historians as utilitarian driven individuals while culturalists or post structuralists view their consumption as a component of their identity construction as individuals (Baudrillard, 2016). This closely echoes Veblen’s (1899) discussion of how those who embrace ‘materialism’ as a value system see material possessions as defining their social status. In addition, Cohen has argued that America is a Consumer’s Republic where society achieves greater affluence and freedom results from mass consumption (Cohen, 2004, p. 175). While affluence is ostensibly far preferable to poverty, research on consumerism has found that those embracing the superficial values of materialism have lower levels of mental and physical well-being (Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002; Kasser, 2002), were more likely to experience anxiety and unhappiness (Kasser & Ahuvia, 2002), and had lower quality social relationships (Kasser & Ryan, 2001, 1993). Research by Bauer et al. (2012) also confirmed that the need to acquire more and engage in conspicuous consumption reflects a culture where individuals feel the need to compete and jockeying for social status. In spite of this competition, there are no winners as Malpas (2004, p. 122) argues that postmodern consumers can never be fulfilled by ‘sham objects’ that are ‘characteristic signs of happiness’ that lack any ability to confer real happiness to the consumer.

2.2.2 Commodification

Another aspect of capitalist culture that is prevalent is the phenomenon of commodification. This is the phenomenon whereby a thing is given a price to be sold in the market. For traditional goods this is to be expected but the logic of capitalism lends itself to the commodification of things that one may not naturally assume are commodities or should be (Sandel, 2012). For example, public goods the government is expected to provide to ensure a lawful and equitable society may be viewed as things that should not be commodified. In most liberal democracies, a police force or public schooling would fall under such categories. This is because it would be unfair in a democratic society

for the wealthy to have better police or schools. As another example, most would agree that commodifying sex is an undesirable outcome for women in a society as well. Putting a price on things such as this is likely to promote the wealthy using their wealth to tilt the playing field in their favor, ossifying societal inequality and increasing polarization between the rich and poor, the powerful and the weak within a society. Such a state of affairs in a country alters the value system of the people living within that society to value money as something that can buy things to get ahead in life. This means the level of agency an individual may exercise is determined by money. Money can buy equal or greater opportunity and choices while those lacking money are stuck in their place or face decline. The rich get richer and the poor get poorer.

2.2.3 Poverty

Poverty is a condition whereby an individual or individuals fall short of an economic welfare level that is viewed as a minimum either in absolute or specific relative standards of a given society (Lipton & Ravallion, 1995, p. 2553). This 'economic welfare' is often measured in terms of a person's consumption of basic goods and services and the 'minimum' implies consumption at a subsistence level. Beyond this definition however, Small et al. (2010, p. 9) observe that being impoverished may be the biggest obstacle to escaping poverty, not merely in economic terms but also in terms of behavior and choices of the poor. Poverty acts as a structure or habitus that limits agents' ability to not only make choices but also to even imagine that they have those choices (Young, 1999, p. 202). Coming from an impoverished background means that the other individuals you encounter may not be able to demonstrate or communicate how one escapes poverty. In addition, an environment of poverty may entail the choosing of survival over pursuing means of social advancement such as education or job training (Young, 1999). Thus poverty as a social structure constrains agents to play a role in the further reproduction of poverty. That said, Bourdieu and Wacquant argue that habitus is a product of history that can be altered by new experiences (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 133). Environments experiencing poverty experience a lack of social, cultural, human and financial capital that could help an individual overcome their circumstance and are often beset with endemic violence (Young, 1999, p. 204). The stark reality of this situation

means, while an individual was raised with the same norms and values as most individuals in society, when survival or personal safety is at stake, norms and values may not play as strong a role in dictating their behavior. In fact, their identity within such a social environment may lead them to have behavioral preferences that are consistent with that identity (Akerlof & Kranton, 2002, 2000). Individuals experiencing poverty often find alternate forms and avenues of capital accumulation, legal or otherwise, as a means of survival and escape from poverty (Young, 1999, p. 221). Although not referring to those who partake in illicit activities exclusively, Hessels et al. (2008) term these individuals who are pushed into entrepreneurship by circumstance 'survivalist entrepreneurs'. Such activities and the risk involved lead to a sense of isolation and wariness of social bonds, leading the impoverished to shy away from taking advantage of social capital (Young, 1999, p. 223).

2.2.4 Globalization

Giddens (1995) argues that, since the onset of globalization, many of the issues faced by societies around the world are a result of what he terms manufactured uncertainty. This man-made risk is a result of pervasive transformations to everyday life that have accompanied globalization and alter how we understand the world and ourselves in it (Giddens, 1995, p. 3). He also argues that life has become 'detraditionalized' as a result of 'social reflexivity' where multiple sources of information and knowledge force us to reflect upon the conditions of life. This reflection makes agents weigh existing traditions and institutions such as gender relations, sexuality, marriage, family, and beauty standards and to come to their own conclusions about them and the societal pressures they entail (Giddens, 1995, p. 4). This imparts greater autonomy to them as they question the social order as agents in a 'post-scarcity society' where abundance allows freedom to consider these things (Giddens, 1995, p. 8). Among the trends he identifies in this society are:

- Increasing political debate with questions of life politics
- Diffusion of manufactured risks that no one can escape such as climate change
- Decline in 'productivism' whereby one sees paid work as the sole defining feature of social life and there is a pre-eminent commitment to economic

growth

- A recognition that modernity's problems cannot be solved by more modernity

Giddens argues that this type of society and the trends observed are leading to 'life style bargaining' which means that agents evaluate tradeoffs of modern society and try to manage the risks that each aspect entails (Giddens, 1995, p. 9).

3. Structure

As mentioned earlier, North Korea and South Korea are the products of the Korean peninsula's collision with modernity following WWII. Oddly though, while both were essentially culturally identical at the outset of their respective independences, the systems of modernity and related institutions installed were drastically different, with the US pushing for a democratic regime in the South and the Soviet Union installing a communist regime in the North. This meant that the foreign structures the Korean people found themselves in constrained them differently as agents, altering their behaviors and beliefs, ergo changing their cultures differently as well. It must be noted that the security, political, and economic institutions in North and South Korea are the real world manifestations of social structures created by states and the statistics related to each reflect the capacity and type of constraint these institutions exercise over agency. This section will empirically examine these structures over time in an effort to show the degree to which agents were constrained in terms of coercive apparatus of the state, economic capacity of the state, and political freedom they found themselves in.

Meanwhile, in the case of South Korea, there is a wealth of data showing how the authority and legitimacy of the state has been institutionalized, first through the coercive capacity via the military, then through economic growth, and then finally through institutionalized political freedom and civil liberties. Unfortunately, in the case of North Korea, there is much less data to refer to. Both in terms of economic data and human rights data, North Korea has maintained such a tight grip on information that little is shared that may portray the state's authority in a negative light. This presents a significant

challenge to scholars attempting to study North Korea. Therefore, this section will make use of the minimal data that is available not only for South Korea but for both North and South Korea.

3.1 Coercive Capacity of the State

Often viewed as a basic component of sovereignty, coercive capacity is a structure that confers the authority of the state to exercise its monopoly on the use of force to coerce citizens and other nations in its defense. In addition, a state may produce a threat narrative which influences the people in such states to perceive a strong coercive capacity as necessary for survival. This also serves the purpose of providing the state with a means of putting down popular dissent if necessary. Most developed nations have a professional military and as such view the military as a career choice, not a day to day necessity. Some argue that conscription is an inefficient allocation of human resources and these states tend to use voluntary recruitment as it is more efficient in human resource allocation (Ross, 1994). In certain cases, there may be a compulsory military service but the terms are brief and the training simply the training of a reservist force, not the main body of the military. This shows a lower perception of threats by the populace due to a lower reliance on coercive capacity for the legitimacy of the authority of the state and unwillingness to perform military service for little compensation (Wolfowitz, 2003). Stephan Pfaffenzeller (2010, p. 483) claims evidence shows conscription can be justified only as an obligation to participate in national defense and that it requires the motivating factor of an existential threat.

States that draw legitimacy from economic welfare, political freedoms, and civil rights are unlikely to engage in threat narratives that prioritize security in the identity of the populace. By comparison, states relying more heavily on coercive capacity for legitimacy, due to the expense of paying professional soldiers, would typically have a longer term of compulsory military service to fill the ranks of their military and a larger force by percentage of their population. In simple terms, the threat narrative makes for a larger military as a percentage of the population, signifying the degree of reliance on coercive capacity for legitimacy and the population's willingness to endure poorly compensated military service to ensure their security in the face of such threats. It should be noted that threat perception can vary over

time and a coercive discourse can become dominant in times of perceived threat. The situation in Israel and the current situation in North Korea demonstrate the power of threat perception (Boo, 2017, p. 3) to shift society towards a focus on coercive capacity. Figure 1 shows the percentage of the populace devoted to military service in both North and South Korea from 1950-2006.

Figure 1: Korean Peninsula military personnel as percentage of the population¹

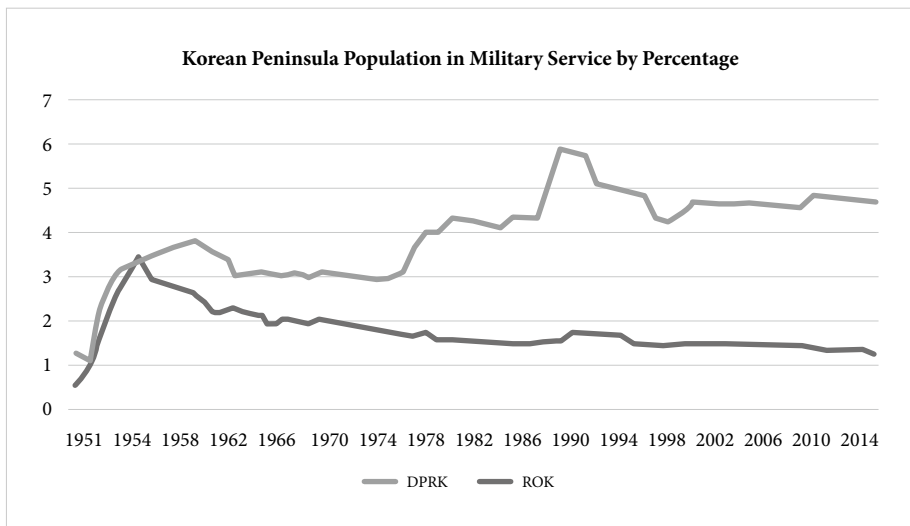


Figure 1 shows how during the Korean War and for a time thereafter, both sides had a similar percentage of the population engaged in military service. It should be noted that the populations of each Korea were different and in fact South Korea's much larger population meant that the ROK had a larger military up until the mid-1950s. However, over time North Korea shows an increase, especially from the late 1970s onwards. This shows North Korea's coercive capacity and threat perception/narrative in the face of the nearby US military presence.

Meanwhile, as one would suspect, South Korea shows a high percentage

¹ This chart is based on data from Our World in Data's (2022) compilation of military expenditure as a share of GDP (OWID calculated based on NMC (National Material Capabilities Index), COW (Correlates of War Database) and SIPRI (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute Military Expenditures Database) (2017).

of the population devoted to the military during and following the Korean War. This gradually declines over the next few decades to today. This follows the historiographical discussion that shows a decline in coercion as a prime component of state legitimacy. It should be noted that even during the period of the military regime, the coercive capacity of South Korea gradually declined. Of course, with North Korea 4 km away, it should come as no surprise that the *ppalgaengi* (commie) threat narrative still resonates with many South Koreans even today. It should also be noted that while the decline is gradual, South Korea's population is aging and the fact that the troop levels are declining gradually as a portion of the population may be partly attributed to this slowing population growth rate. Finally, it must not be forgotten that the US troop presence and mutual defence treaty provides a significant coercive capacity that the South Korean populace, already possessing a technologically superior military, need not bear directly in terms of manpower, and thus, given the assurances of the nuclear umbrella, threat perception is lower than it might be otherwise.

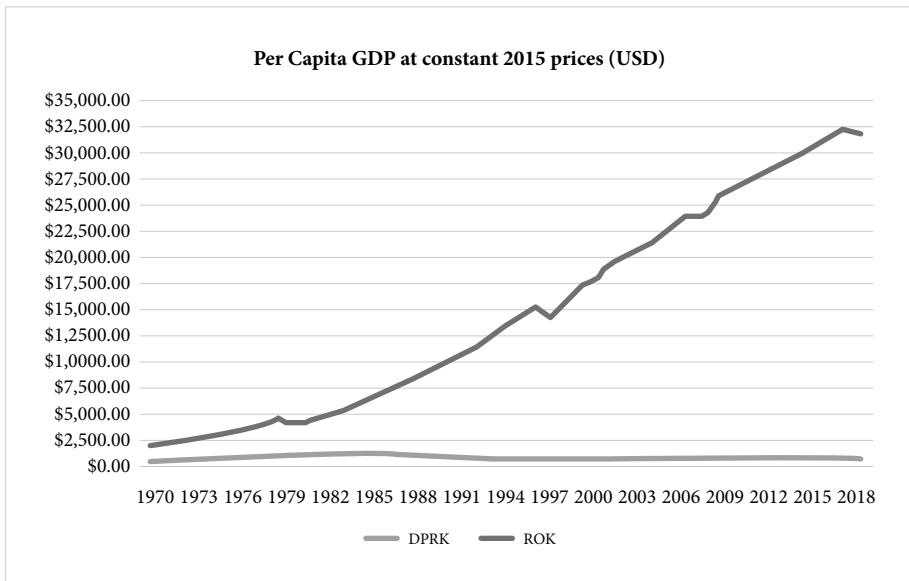
3.2 State Economy

The structure of the economy is arguably the most important state institution. Individuals whose motivation to acquiesce to an authority is based on coercion have an expectation that the security they receive will allow them to pursue their lives and secure the gains they may make from this endeavour. Therefore, it is rare to find a long-term coercive regime because there is less transparency and a tendency for these regimes to become corrupt or mismanage the economy.² Individuals that do not receive at least some economic benefit will tend to be dissatisfied with the arrangement and desire change. This line of logic falls in line with Zakaria's observation that both democratic and authoritarian regimes tend to be equally unstable without sufficient economic welfare for citizens while they also tend to be equally stable when the income level of the populace reaches a certain point (Zakaria, 2007). In communist states, the way in which an economy was managed and the way in which the gains divided was central to state ideology and

2 For a discussion of corruption and regime type see Ying (2004) and Kong (2004).

government legitimacy. In capitalist states as well, administrations are elected and fall based on how well they ensure the economy runs smoothly and the distribution of wealth is more or less fair. Therefore, economic development is central to state legitimacy and economic growth in terms of GDP per capita, while not the only measure of economic stewardship, may give a sense of how well the state authority is performing. Figure 2 shows the GDP per capita (in 2015 dollars) on the Korean peninsula since 1970.

Figure 2: Korean Peninsula GDP per capita at constant 2015 prices³



While not shown by Figure 2, North Korea had an economy comparable with that of South Korea, at least in terms of GDP per capita, from the 1950s up until the 1970s. Therefore, during this time it would be expected that the regime could claim coercive and economic legitimacy. This may partly explain why Kim Il Sung was so revered by North Koreans since propaganda during his early rule actually may have somewhat matched the realities North Koreans saw around them. However, from the mid-1970s we can see that the two economies diverged and North Korean economic growth began to stagnate. It

³ Authors compilation from UN Stats. <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/snaama/index>, accessed on April 9, 2022.

is interesting that our discussion of coercive capacity shows a sudden increase in size of the military from this point as well. It is difficult to say for certain, but this may represent the point at which North Korea began to rely more on coercive legitimacy since economic legitimacy had failed and there was a fear of uprising. Regardless, the stagnation in the North Korean economy continued until a sharp decline beginning in the early 1990s. This economic downturn after the Cold War is why North Korea is often viewed as an anomaly, and North Korea collapses, who never tire of being wrong, constantly predict that a loss of control due to sources of competing information from the outside world, leading to a collapse of the state is they did in Eastern Europe and Russia. There is also a notable coincidence of the economic downturn and the rapid spike in coercive capacity in the 1990s following the Cold War which may reflect an attempt to coup proof the state. In addition, it should be mentioned that while the growth has been modest, there has been growth since the early 2000s until 2017 which is not reflected in Figure 2.

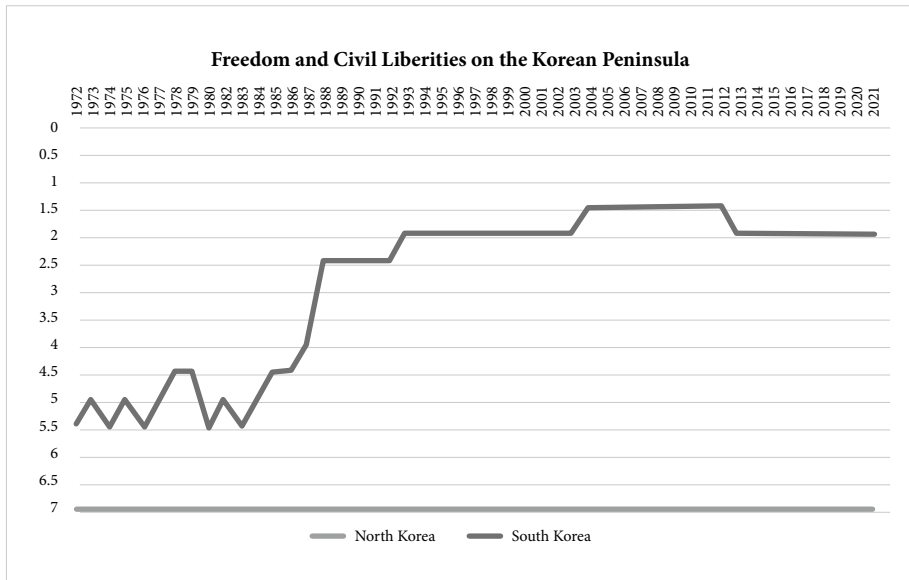
South Korea's economic fortunes in Figure 2 show a constant upward slope. GDP per capita, a growth measure South Korea holds in high regard even today, is seen as proof of the strength of their nation. Meanwhile, South Korea has followed a trajectory that has been shared by many developmental states. First securing the nation with coercion, then developing economically while staying strong in the face of the North Korean threat and Cold War fears, and finally incorporating political and civil rights through democratization. There is little surprising in terms of what figure 3 conveys regarding South Korea. As a result of constant economic development in South Korea there is even enough economic legitimacy in South Korea to justify the authoritarian excesses of Park Chung-hee in the eyes of many South Koreans (Kang, 2016, p. 52). The economy faced a challenge during the financial crisis in 1997 but was strong enough to survive this crisis and recover. Today, while not experiencing the same high growth of early industrialization, South Korea continues to be an economic power, now boasting an enviable high tech sector.

3.3 Political Freedom and Civil Liberties

The social contract is a social structure whereby the individual exchanges their absolute personal freedom for the security provided by a nation state.

Therefore, the individual freedom that is given up in this contract has a value and is only given up so that an individual may pursue their life without fear of losing it or whatever they gain from their work. This freedom is conceptually valuable and this is recognized by both the individual and the state. Therefore, if an individual can be secure without surrendering all of their freedom and the state can share in the gains of the individual's life, without taking all their freedom, it stands to reason this is a positive. Therefore, the state may allow some personal freedom which is more palatable to the individual and unburdens the state from focusing all of its resources on coercion. People who believe they are free due to the efforts of the state require less coercion to give up a portion of their gains from work. Most democratic countries and even many authoritarian ones try to build freedom into their national identities. However, the extent to which this is true may be and is actually measured by a number of organizations devoted to human rights and/or democracy. Figure 3 below is based upon the ratings of nations in the world performed by Freedom House of Political Freedom and Civil Liberties since 1972 (Freedom House, 2022). For the purposes of visualizing this in a chart the two scores have been averaged to provide a single score with one being the most and seven being the least free.

Figure 3: Freedom and civil liberties on the Korean Peninsula



Unfortunately, the data for both Korea's does not go so far back as the coercive capacity and economic data used earlier. However, in the case of North Korea, given the constant lowest score possible from 1972 to 2021 as demonstrated in Figure 3, it may be realistic to expect that this level of freedom, or lack thereof, would likely have continued into the past. There is zero variation in the scores for the period shown with North Korea receiving sevens for both Political Freedom and Civil Liberties for over four decades. From total control of information to a state-run economy, to the famine of the mid-1990s, to the often reported labor camps (Fahy, 2016, p. 110), to clamp down and purges (Woo, 2016, p. 255) during leadership successions of Kim Jong-Il and recently Kim Jong-un, it is difficult to find disagreement with the results of this figure. All of these examples show that even with the recent marginal economic growth, North Korea has made little inroads in terms political freedom or civil liberties that have been noticed by the international community. It should be pointed out that, given the difficulty in obtaining reliable information on North Korea, a generalist survey of world freedom such as this may have missed certain progress in North Korea that may require a specialist to ascertain. That said, it is hard to imagine an index that would give North Korea a good score on either political rights or civil liberties and their actions confirm this.

South Korea again fares much better according to Figure 3. The scores are quite low during the early 1970s to the early 1980s. At this point, there is a modest growth in scores which spike with the democratization of the country in the later part of the decade. From the beginning of the democratic governance of Korea until the mid-2000s, with the election of two prominent democracy activists to the presidency consecutively, there are modest gains in freedom until, in accordance with Freedom House's assessment, South Korea is given a status of 'free'. From the late 2000s until now there is a slight decline in freedom but this status remains. The actions of the state in South Korea during the military government and the institutionalization of its democracy show that their political freedom and civil liberties have changed gradually over time, likely leading to a big change in the society.⁴ South Korea has also

4 The public acquiescence to accepting this legitimacy of the government is evidenced by the peaceful candlelight protests in both 2008 and 2016. In the 1980s the protests were much more violent due to the public's challenging of the government's legitimacy.

seen a decline in coercive capacity and now enjoys high levels of economic welfare and growing political freedom. These two factors are part of growing national pride and play a large role in the government narratives of the Han River Miracle and *uri nara* (our country).

4. Agents

At the outset of their respective independences, the peoples on either side of the 38th parallel may have hoped for a future of self-determination. In a manner of speaking they did achieve this but only as a nation divided. The nation building projects embarked upon in both Koreas required that the people adhere to their respective nation state's ideology and stance vis-à-vis the other Korea. The strict societies took a largely Confucian agrarian people and applied capitalist and communist ideology to them. Even if they had been separated from family by the division, they were not permitted to show too much sympathy to the other Korea. The Cold War dictated that no dissent would be tolerated and purges of 'anti-government' forces occurred on both sides. This culminated in the Korean War shortly after independence, an outcome no ordinary Korean citizen of either country would have chosen. In short, modernity did not allow for much in the way of agency for a Korean individual.

4.1 North Korean Agents

In the case of North Korea, the level of constraint posed by the state and its institutions is daunting. Often termed a totalitarian dictatorship, or a hermit regime, there is little room for agency due to the structures put in place by the government which have largely been in place since the founding of the nation. Demick (2009) details how North Korean escapees' accounts of their lives before the famine in the 90s was very regimented and state controlled. All male citizens were and are conscripted into the military, currently for 7 years, in response the threat narrative of the Cold War and the Kim regime, not to mention the US troops stationed in Korean and Japan. The public distribution system provided food and healthcare. Capitalism and markets were largely frowned upon. The cult of personality of the Kim's and their

ideology was the only accepted type of political discussion. Indeed, most North Koreans did not question this reality until these systems began to break down and show cracks during the so-called Arduous March during the famine of the late 1990s. Faced with starvation, North Koreans began making decisions that went against the dogma of the North Korean state. Engaging in market activities, crossing the border into China, and even escaping to South Korea or third countries became much more common at this time. Demick's book highlights how their considerations changed over time from more or less loyal obedient citizens to individuals making choices and engaging in activities that prioritized survival. One does not need to be a field expert in security, economics, and political science to see that the situation in the country is a difficult one for individuals but, if all of the trials and tribulations did not inspire action on the part of agents to change the situation beyond survival tactics, it seems that whatever agency may exist in North Korea, at least in terms of state coercive apparatus and political freedom falls on the part of Hall's spectrum where agents simply reproduce the system. That said, these agents did manage to marketize portions of the Korean economy through these survival tactics, creating a nascent capitalism and changing the structure and corresponding culture resulting in the millennial *jangmadang* (market) generation.

4.2 South Korean Agents

In the case of South Korea, agency may be seen to have fluctuated over time depending on the aspect of life considered. In the throes of the Cold War, and faced with an aggressive neighbor in North Korea, not to mention the Cold War competition, South Korea maintained a strong military deterrence which limited individual agency. Fortunately, the US alliance allows South Korea to dedicate less manpower to this coercive capability and its economic performance has allowed it to eclipse the conventional military abilities of North Korea. In addition, its rocketlike trajectory in terms of economic development, partially facilitated by aid from the US following the Korean War (Loke, 2016) and Japan following normalization of relations, has given South Korean citizens a great deal of wealth and agency as consumers. That said, the structure of the Korean economy, sometimes described as crony capitalism, whereby the state development model picked winners and

fostered a close relationship between Korean *chaebol* (conglomerates) and the government (Cha, 2003, p. 503). This relationship has stunted growth of small to medium enterprises, put employee welfare second to company profit, and created intense competition to get the educational credentials necessary for employment at these conglomerates, all limiting agency of entrepreneurs and regular individuals. Finally, in terms of political freedom and civil liberties, South Korea wavered early in its history but the ability of individuals to make life choices and pursue life in the way they choose has expanded greatly, enabled by the structural change from a militarized capitalist dictatorship towards a liberal democracy. Recently, this increased agency is evidenced by the left side of the South Korean political spectrum's modest efforts to increase contract employment, expand employee rights and pay, author an antidiscrimination law, and address sky high housing prices. Even so, the logic of capitalism and the market is the overbearing structure that limits economic agency for South Koreans.

5. Cultural Change

How the interplay between structure and agency has influenced the evolution of culture from roughly the same cultural starting point is the crux of this article. Both North and South Korea recreated Cold War structures corresponding to their super power sponsor states, the Soviet Union and the United States respectively. A largely traditional Confucian agrarian culture was married with modern statehood under the guise of Communism or Democracy and Capitalism that simultaneously espoused the vilification of their brethren in the other Korea. South Korea had lapses into authoritarianism but eventually saw greater levels of agency for people to act within the structures while North Korea largely remained stagnant until the state could no longer provide basic food and services to the people, forcing them to reassert their agency in the name of survival. Over time this has led to unavoidable changes in the respective cultures of North and South Korea, a few examples of the many changes being the subject of the remainder of this article.

5.1 Cultural Change in South Korea

5.1.1 Confucian capitalism?

Confucian Capitalism has been argued by scholars as the specific economic structure of South Korea. In Confucian Capitalism, Confucianism substitutes for the Protestant ethos and discipline that Weber argued was required for Capitalism to thrive (Cha, 2003, p. 501). Yun (2010) argues, however, that the economic system has rather eroded Confucian values and led to several recent phenomena. For example, in traditional Korean society the eldest son or the children more broadly are raised by their parents and expected to return the favor by providing for their parents in their old age. This justified parents pouring all their resources into the raising and education of their children since it served as a type of Confucian retirement planning. However, with the stunting of entrepreneurship and the inability of the *chaebols* to sustain the type of growth that ensures there are enough well-paying jobs for the young people that graduate from college, young people often choose to build up their resumes by acquiring specs in a qualification arms race to compete for jobs with conglomerates. Meanwhile, the elderly in recent decades have taken to working late into life in order to hedge their retirement bets (Yun, 2010, p. 238). A 2016 *Korea Herald* article documents this trend showing that Koreans planning to take care of their parents dropped from 70.7 percent in 2002 to 31.7 percent in 2016. The same article also remarked trends among the elderly such as 20% of them living alone, 77% receiving no financial support from their children and even cases of elderly parents suing their children for financial support more than doubling between 2004 and 2015 (Lee, 2016). This has led South Korea to lead the OECD in elderly living below the poverty line and represents a significant cultural shift from traditional Korean culture and values.

5.1.2 Consumerism, materialism, and disparity

Another effect of capitalism in South Korea is the consumerism *cum* materialism that goes hand in hand with a market economy. This leads individuals to prize jobs that pay more and put more importance on the amount of money one has, enabling consumer agency within the economy. This has fostered competition for well-paying jobs at *chaebol* while many young people shun SME jobs (Yun,

2010). While the agency consumers feel may impart a sense of identity, numerous studies have demonstrated that materialist values do not impart happiness or life satisfaction to individuals. This is especially true when ‘market discipline which is premised on survival of the fittest, has brought about disparities of power and wealth among social groups’, leading to a 50% rise in inequality from the 1990s to the late 2000s (Park, 2013, p. 271). In a society where owning things imparts identity there is always someone with more possessions and the constant comparison and disparity with others reduces satisfaction. Lee and Kawachi (2019, p. 11), in their examination of subjective well-being from the Korean General Social Survey (KGSS) found that, among four personal values categories of social relationships, extrinsic achievements, health, and spirituality, those who prioritized spirituality were happiest and those who prioritized social relationships with friends, family, and neighbors were second happiest. The least happy in Korean society were those who prioritized extrinsic achievements and pursuits such as money, power, educational attainment, work, or leisure. Lee and Kawachi (2019) infer that pursuing self enhancement or self-centered value does not result in happiness because it facilitates comparisons (Kasser et al., 2004) and decreases the quality of interpersonal relationships (Kasser, 2016). This is borne out by the UN happiness index where South Korea consistently ranks low in life quality/satisfaction (Choi, 2021) and consistently leads the OECD countries in terms of suicide rates among multiple age groups (Lee, 2021). Park et al. (2003, p. 90) found that GDP growth and unemployment rates are significant factors in the suicide rates of those over 20 while only GDP growth showed an influence on suicides those under 20. This clearly demonstrates the cultural influence of capitalism. With the tearing down of traditional family values, a rapidly aging population, and impoverishment of the elderly, the elderly commit suicide due to loneliness and poverty while the young commit suicide due to academic, interpersonal relationship, career, and family stress (Kim, 2020, p. 3). It is not an exaggeration to say that in South Korean culture as with elsewhere, money cannot buy you happiness.

5.1.3 Commodification

South Koreans have a highly developed service industry that should be the envy of others. However, there are sectors of the Korean service industry that sell more than simple products and cater to Koreans eager to get ahead

in society, leading to commodification of things that may contribute to economic inequality in society such as education and beauty. The result is that private education has supplanted public education as the source parents trust for educating their children and ensuring they get into top tier post-secondary institutions (Park, 2007, p. 449). This has the effect of education inflation where a college degree no longer guarantees a job, leading to a further market for training in technical qualifications and job skills, shifting the burden of training employees from employers to job seekers. It also means that the children of the wealthy are more likely to be able to access this private education and go to the top schools, keeping the rich at the top and the poor at the bottom and further polarizing society (Park, 2007, p. 439). In addition, when skills alone will not suffice, altering one's appearance in order to better compete for jobs or marriage partners has also become commonplace. Park et al. (2019) state that 'with the rise of lookism in South Korea, plastic surgery has grown from a subculture into a mainstream culture that penetrated deeply into the society' and 'external appearance is now considered a pivotal factor that contributes to professional achievements and interpersonal relationships.' Han et al. (2018) conclude that while lookism and concern over body image and 'lookism' are common in many East Asian countries, South Korea is an extreme case with body management practices considered essential to acquiring and keeping a job in a competitive labor market. The never ending pressure on the quest to get the job at the end of the education tunnel that either never ends or does not have a job at the end of it has been termed by South Korea's youth as 'Hell Chosun'. Recently, the dystopian nature of this hyper capitalist reality have supplanted the glitzy consumer friendly images of PSY and BTS with the success of the movie *Parasite* and the Netflix series *Squid Game*, providing social commentaries on economic inequalities and commodification so extreme that the wealthy can commodify human life with the poor being so desperate to get ahead in life that they actually agree to it.

5.2 North Korean Cultural Change

5.2.1 Survival entrepreneurship, the rise of North Korean women, and consumerism

In the case of North Korea, it is far more difficult to observe changes in

culture for two reasons. First, the state structures of North Korea are rigid and strict which limits agency and forces individuals to self-censure to avoid punishment, leading some to view North Korean society as unchanging and frozen in time. Second, North Korea does not release much in the way of information or data nor does it allow outsiders to conduct research within North Korea so much of the inner workings of society there remain somewhat of a mystery. Keeping these two aspects of North Korea in mind, this research has highlighted examples of the agency of North Koreans which in fact could be argued as structure changing agency. The famine of the 1990s weakened the structure of the state and many of its institutions became ineffective or essentially defunct, such as the economy writ large or the public distribution system specifically. This meant that workers were not paid and often factories were idle, a situation made even worse by the fact that food was not being provided by the state. As the situation worsened and deaths by starvation mounted, North Koreans were forced to face the reality that the regime was not going to rescue them and they needed to fend for themselves in spite of the dangers of being caught, although restrictions on travel were also reduced by the famine and by the resulting corruption of border guards and officials who were also trying to survive (Schwekendiek & Xu, 2020, p. 124). The resulting grass roots survival capitalism that sprouted from these individuals' choices to go against the rules and engage in black market activities changed the economy of the country to a market economy (Schwekendiek & Xu, 2020, p. 124). As many crossed the Chinese border to look for economic opportunity, the falsehoods the Kim regime had told them about the outside world were exposed, prompting some to choose to escape to another country and never return. Those that continued to engage in this trade, termed the '*jangmadang* generation' also changed North Korean culture in several regards. With men tied to the military and their state assigned jobs and women being relatively free and willing to engage in trade, much of the black market economy is run by women (Jung et al., 2018). Their efforts not only changed the economy and brought much needed income to their households, but also contributed to saving many North Korean lives from starvation (Haggard & Noland, 2010, p. 15). This exercise of agency fostered a culture among these women of self-reliance and confidence in the abilities of women. With one study estimating that women earn roughly 200 times the amount a factory worker makes, it is understandable that some see the erosion of patriarchy, improved status

and independence of women, and more influence of women in household decision-making (Lee & Park, 2011). This has also reportedly led to a rise in negative view towards husbands who are seen to contribute less (Jung et al., 2018) and a growing number of female headed households and divorces (Jung & Dalton, 2006). Schwekendiek & Xu's (2020, p. 142) interviews with defectors show that this marketization of the North Korean economy has also ushered in a culture of consumerism that values money as a panacea above all else, bringing North Korean culture more into line with South Korea and boding well for cultural integration should the two Koreas reunify.

6. Conclusion

This article has examined the structure and agency on the Korean peninsula to show how North and South Korean culture changed due to the differing state structures put in place post-independence and the degree of agency that could be exercised within these structures. As the theoretical discussion pointed out, an organized group that aims to change the structure may effect structural level changes while most agents acting within the confines of structure merely reproduce that structure. In the case of North Korea, there was little in the way of structural or cultural change until the state structures were weakened following the Cold War and the agents were forced to engage in activities for survival that were previously strictly frowned upon or forbidden by the state. This led to a shift to a nascent grassroots capitalism that supplanted the state distribution system and most of the centrally planned economy. Thus, it is no surprise that younger North Koreans display many of the same cultural changes that occurred in South Korea decades before. For South Korea's part, the effects of capitalism and agency as consumers are the most pervasive in terms of influencing cultural change resulting from the negative effects of consumption, materialism, competition and commodification. Democracy is a more recent development than capitalism in South Korea but it has allowed much broader agency in terms of personal freedoms and lifestyle choices, leading to a much more pluralistic culture and civil society.

This article does not claim to be a comprehensive study of North and South Korean structure, agency, or cultural change. The breadth of

the history and scope of the perspectives from which these things can be examined would require a book, if not volumes to address in any great detail. Instead, the goal herein was to discuss structure, agency, and culture in the broad terms and to highlight how the two nations, beginning with nearly identical cultures, were shaped culturally by the structures of modernity and the agency those structures constrained to differing degrees. By highlighting some easily identifiable changes in Korean culture that have expressed themselves in recent decades, it is hoped that readers will see the value in the endeavor and the value of the Korean peninsula for studying issues pertaining to structure, agency, and culture. In addition, it opens up the possibility of future in depth research on any of the cultural phenomenon addressed herein or additional ones not dealt with here due to the limitations of space.

Funding

This work was supported by the Hankuk University of Foreign Studies research fund of 2022.

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Professional Profile

Lonnie Edge is Assistant Professor at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies. He is the Managing Editor of both *North Korean Review* and *the Journal of Territorial and Maritime Studies*. His research interests include Northeast Asian international relations, inter-Korean relations, nationalism, political communications, and politics of identity and reconciliation. He contributed a chapter on South Korean Relations with North Korea to the *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary South Korea*.