

# Studying North Korea

## Interview with Dr. Jongchul Park



Interview with Dr. Jongchul Park, 2014 president of Korean Association of North Korean Studies, currently senior research fellow of Korea Institute for National Unification. By ROGER MATEOS MIRET and JELENA PROKOPLJEVIĆ

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Jong Chul Park is a Senior Research Fellow at the Korea Institute for National Unification. He received his Ph. D. in Political Science from Korea University, Seoul, South Korea. He was a visiting scholar at Harvard University in 1997-1998, a visiting scholar at Tokyo University in 2007, and a visiting research fellow at Japan Institute for International Affairs in 2007. His recent publications include: *Integration Policies for Conflict Transformation after Korean Unification* (2013), *Prospect for Change of Kim Jung-Un Regime and South Korea's Policy Directions* (2013), *Easing International Concerns over A Unified Korea and Regional Benefits of Korean Unification* (2012), *An Evaluation of South Korea's Policy toward North Korea in 2000s and Policy Alternative* (2012), *Peace on the Korean Peninsula and North Korea's Denuclearization: An Application of Cooperative Threat Reduction to Korean Peninsula* (2011), and *A New Approach of 'National Community Unification Formula' and Its Implementation Measures* (2010), et al.

As a researcher and president of the Korean Association of North Korean Studies, we would like you to explain to us the specificity of North Korean studies in comparison to other social studies. What is the main method of

## study and which research material is commonly used?

Unlike other social sciences, there are many difficulties when it comes to fact finding in North Korean Studies. First of all, site visits, a prerequisite in area studies, are difficult to undertake. Second, it is a task to obtain usable primary sources because it is hard to trust the official documents produced by the North Korean government.

Until the 1990s, scholars in North Korean Studies mostly relied on officially documents produced by the North Korean government. However, following the settlement of many North Korean defectors in South Korea in the 2000s, it has become a popular research method to utilize these defectors as resources. Nevertheless, defectors have a limited amount of knowledge of a particular topic. Moreover, it is difficult to confirm their testimonies as truthful facts. More recently, the methodology used by North Korean Studies scholars has ventured beyond the social sciences to utilize those of anthropology, urban studies, architecture, photographic intelligence studies, and more.

**Which has been the progress made in recent years in the quality and quantity of knowledge of reality in North Korea? Recently the World Conference on North Korean Studies, which hopefully has set the foundation for a global network of scholars, took place in Seoul: what is the current level of cooperation between South Korean and international centers of North Korean Studies?**

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North Korean Studies in South Korea has developed greatly both qualitatively and quantitatively in recent years. Whereas North Korean Studies in the past focused mainly on ideology, politics, economy, diplomacy, and inter-Korean relations, the field has expanded to studying marketization, social stratification, urbanization, changes in citizen awareness, culture, movies, arts, etc in North Korea.

North Korean Studies is producing great outcomes in descriptively analyzing the micro aspects of North Korean society. Some examples of these instances are: combing the study of ecosystems and livelihoods of particular North Korean cities such as Hamheung and Sinuiju, descriptively depicting North Korea's marketization process, investigating the various aspects of stratification in North Korean society, and exploring North Korea's external trade networks and information distribution channels.

The World Conference on North Korean Studies, hosted by the Korean Association of North Korean Studies in October 2014, was an opportunity for Korean and

foreign experts on North Korea to exchange research and advance the field of North Korean Studies. Until now, there was limited opportunity for South Korean scholars on North Korea to exchange knowledge with their foreign counterparts. While foreign language skills were obstacles for South Korean experts, the lack of Korean language skills of international scholars hindered opportunities for exchange amongst the two groups. Moreover, experts from different fields of studies had not been able to communicate actively across the various disciplines. In this regard, the World Conference on North Korean Studies had great meaning in providing a forum and a stepping stone for interdisciplinary exchange in North Korean Studies.

**How far is a similar conference with the participation of North Korean scholars? Do you have any knowledge about “South Korean Studies” in North Korea?**

Exchange between South Korean and North Korean scholars is very limited. There is only some degree of exchange in broad areas of history, culture, science, technology, environment, et cetera. In reality, however, the more sensitive matters of politics, ideology, and unification problems are near impossible to achieve a scholarly exchange on.

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In fact, “South Korean Studies” in the North advanced more quickly from the 1950s than did “North Korean Studies” in the South. Unfortunately, most South Korean Studies conducted by the North are mere criticisms that rationalize the North Korean regime and its state-centric policies. Actual scholarly research on South Korea is only a minute portion of its agenda.

**The majority of studies on everyday life in North Korea is based on interviews with refugees in the South. What is their legal status? Do they have a special status, such as people from the former colonies in Spain, or are they treated as ordinary immigrants? It is difficult for them to integrate into South-Korean society?**

Although South Korea and North Korea are registered at the United Nations as two separate entities, the South Korean Constitution (Article 4) considers the North Korean region as South Korean territory. Therefore according to the Constitution, North Korean citizens acquire the same legal status as South Korean citizens. The South Korean government acknowledges those defected from North Korea as South Korean citizens and continues to support the entry and settlement of these defectors into Korean society. In 1997, a law supporting the safe and stable settlement of North Korean defectors into South Korea was enacted.

Furthermore, many South Korean citizens actively support the settlement of defectors from various aspects of society.

Nevertheless, it remains difficult for those born and raised in a completely different system to adapt to life in South Korea. In particular, it is realistically difficult for defected North Korean youths to compete for employment with their South Korean counterparts. According to the economic activity status report of North Korean defectors announced by the Database Center for North Korean Human Rights, the unemployment rate of North Korea defectors in their 30's is four times higher at 10.5% compared to their South Korean counterparts (2.7%). Moreover, many defectors continue to struggle psychologically with the culture and customs of South Korean society.

The South Korean government along with various municipal authorities and private organizations continue to implement support systems to aid North Korean defectors' settlement into South Korean society. The smooth adjustment of these defectors into South Korean society is part of the preparation process for an eventual unification.

**After the case of Shin Dong Hyuk, who faked his personal history, some have questioned the reliability of some testimonies of North Korean refugees because they may be magnifying their cases to draw media impact. Do you find these reservations founded? What precautions should be taken when collecting such evidence?**

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North Korean Studies scholars began to use the testimonies of North Korean defectors as research materials since many of them settled into South Korean society following the North Korean economic crisis of the 1990s. As of March 2015, there are about 27,000 North Korean defectors in South Korea.

Many of these North Korean defectors still have family who live challenging lives in North Korea. Some even have family in North Korea who are oppressed by the government due to their family member's defection. Such may be the reason many defectors testify to human rights suppression stories as if they were their own.

Defector testimonies can only represent a limited amount of the general phenomenon in North Korea. These defectors are generally from the North Korea-China border region, particularly North Hamgyeong Province, who experienced food shortages and human rights violations. Moreover, many of them are those

who remained in either China or other Southeast Asian countries for at least a year to five years before they were resettled into South Korean society.

These testimonies are no doubt a valuable resource when it comes to North Korean Studies. However, we must remain cautious when utilizing North Korean defector testimonies as research material. First, we must confirm the factuality of the information. Second, it is practical to utilize testimonies related to the defector's hometown and occupation. Third, a verification process of information through cross-checking other similar testimonies is advised.

**Do you have notion of the fluctuation in the number of refugees in recent years, specifically, have you perceived changes in some sense since the rising to power of Kim Jong Un?**

There are several explanations as to why the number of North Korean defectors has decreased in recent years. First, the number of defectors has decreased since Kim Jong Un came to power and strengthened North Korean border controls. Second, many of those who mass defected in the mid to late-1990s have illegally settled down in China and Russia, and some have resettled in South Korea, thus decreasing the number of wandering defectors globally. Lastly, North Koreans are now opting to travel short-term to China to do business or find a job instead of embarking on a risky and dangerous journey for defection.

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**Do you perceive any political change since the enthronement of Kim Jong Un? Or does the immobility continue?**

There are talks of instability in North Korea following the execution of Kim Jong Un's uncle, Jang Seong-Taek, in 2013 and more recently the purge of Hyon Yong-chol, the Minister of the People's Armed Forces. However, from the outside it appears that North Korea has maintained its stability. First of all, North Korea's elite remains united as ever. Although several leadership personnel have been purged of, there are no signs of collective crackdown within the leadership. Second, even with institutional changes such as the expansion of the market, the Workers' Party of Korea remains in staunch control of the North Korea society. Even aberrations and corruption are advanced under the party's control and condonement.

Three and a half years into Kim Jong Un's reign, it is safe to say that North Korea has overcome its initial state of crisis and has entered a stage of stability. Nonetheless, Kim Jong Un's "politics of terror" can become the cause of anxiety among the elites and thus lessen their sense of loyalty in him.

Are there noticeable evidence to affirm that the North Korean regime is starting a reformer shift in economic policy? Do you believe that there is a debate within the upper ranks of power in Pyongyang on whether to be inspired by the Chinese model?

In order to overcome the persisting economic crisis that started in the mid-1990s, North Korea has, to a certain extent, pushed forward a reformed economic policy. In 2002, North Korea enforced a measure to improve economic management, which enabled autonomy in areas such as agricultural production and trade. Moreover, in 2003 not only did they officially acknowledge the general market, but implemented a series of actions that guarantees individual profit gain in the production market. However, these measures remain in extremely restricted areas of economic management and are far from full-out open and reformed policies.

Instead of undergoing overall reform, which could hinder the stability of the North Korean regime, Special Economic Zones are promoted in order to attract foreign investments and open certain areas for trade. Currently North Korea has designated five Special Economic Zones and 19 Economic Development Zones. However, the open-door policy, which is the focus of the Special Economic Zone projects, has remained unable to produce a fruitful outcome due to reasons such as the unstable security situation in the Korean Peninsula, North Korea's interference with corporate management, and the lack of infrastructure within North Korea.

It is difficult to spot an economic policy debate take place in North Korea. This is due to the fact that all decision making lies solely with Kim Jong Un. It is virtually impossible to suggest a different opinion. In particular, since the execution of high-ranking officials such as Jang Seong-Taek, it has become clearer that it is intolerable to present a differing opinion.

**What is your opinion, from the standpoint of North Korean studies, on the apparent changes in North Korean society and the new image of a consumer welfare the regime wants to project?**

Kim Jong Un claims he will improve the living standards of the North Korean people. However, rather than pursuing economic reform and open market policies, he is taking on projects that are more noticeable and sporadic such as housing construction, farming, and greenhouse building. Moreover, he has built a ski

resort, horse-riding track, and an amusement park to ostensibly display the improved living conditions of the North Korean society.

Social stratification as an outcome of marketization is a phenomenon worth paying attention to. An emerging upper-class has developed in North Korea owing to increased trade and commerce. Consequently, there has developed a considerable rich-poor gap between big urban cities such as Pyongyang and other rural regions.

Another occurrence that is worth noticing in North Korea is the new tendency to stress wealth and individualism. In addition to marketization, over 2 million mobile phones have been supplied to the North Korean people stimulating easy information circulation to the outside world. These changes cause loyalty to the leadership and state to be different from the past. Even so, there is yet to be any potential for movement of degradation or public display of dissatisfaction by the North Korean people.

**What is the popular view (in general) in South Korea on politics and society in the North? What do young people think nowadays about the war, division, separated families, etc.? Is this a subject of public debate in the South?**

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South Korean perception of the North can be separated into two ideological inclinations. While the conservatives criticize North Korea's human rights issues, nuclear/missile development programs, economic hardships, and believes that the North Korean system is due to collapse soon because of its instability, the progressives suppose that despite its many problems, the North Korean regime will not easily cave in. The problem of unification often becomes a political debate and a cause of tension in the South Korean society.

Over 75% of the South Korean youth were born after the Korean War of 1950. This population is comparatively indifferent to matters of war, division, and separated families. Rather, because this generation grew up reaping economic benefits, they are more worried about the instability and economic costs that they will have to burden once unification happens. However, recent trends show that more people are realizing the economic growth potential, job creation opportunities, and economic benefits that could come with a Korean unification.

**What is the current status of South Korean investments in the North? Will they be increasing over the next years? Is the expansion of existing special economic zones, especially the Gaesong industrial complex expected?**

Currently, the Exchange and Cooperation Project between South Korea and North Korea is at a stalemate due to the '5.24 Measure' put in place as a response to the military provocations by the North in 2010. Many South Korean businessmen have not been able to visit North Korea for at least five years let alone collect the capital and supplies they invested.

Gaeseong Industrial Complex is the only economic cooperation project that is still operating. There are 124 South Korean corporations and about 54,000 North Korean laborers working at Gaeseong. Gaeseong's case successfully grafts North Korea's cheap land and labor costs and South Korea's business and technology know-how. Unfortunately, no further investments have occurred at Gaeseong Industrial Complex as it has not been able to realize the first of the three stages of the development plan.

**Which is the position of the current government in Seoul on the process of reunification? Is still current the vision of one country, two systems? How is this process envisioned; is there a prevision regarding the time and the necessary resources?**

The current South Korean government emphasizes unification more than any administration that came before it. South Korea's official National Community Unification Formula comprises of three processes: 1) Reconciliation and cooperation stage – 2) South and North Korean Commonwealth – 3) A unified nation. The second process of South and North Korean Commonwealth takes into account the differences and gap between the two systems, thus proposing a transitional system based on peace and cooperation that comprises of 'two systems – two governments.' Unification, in the end, will be to achieve a unitary state under one country and one system.

The Park Geun-hye government puts emphasis on preparing for a Korean unification. Although we cannot precisely predict when and how unification will occur, the government realizes that preparations for unification are necessary and thus a semi-governmental Unification Preparations Committee that is directly operated by the President has been formed. With regard to North Korea, there are hopes that small channels concerning exchange in humanitarian, environmental, and cultural spheres will lead to a broad unification scheme. Domestically, groundwork is being laid down to produce relevant laws and institutions, train manpower, and prepare funding for a forthcoming unification. Moreover, unification diplomacy is pursued internationally to obtain global support and cooperation for a unified Korea.