The Formative Power of K-Content in North Korean Youth Human Rights Consciousness

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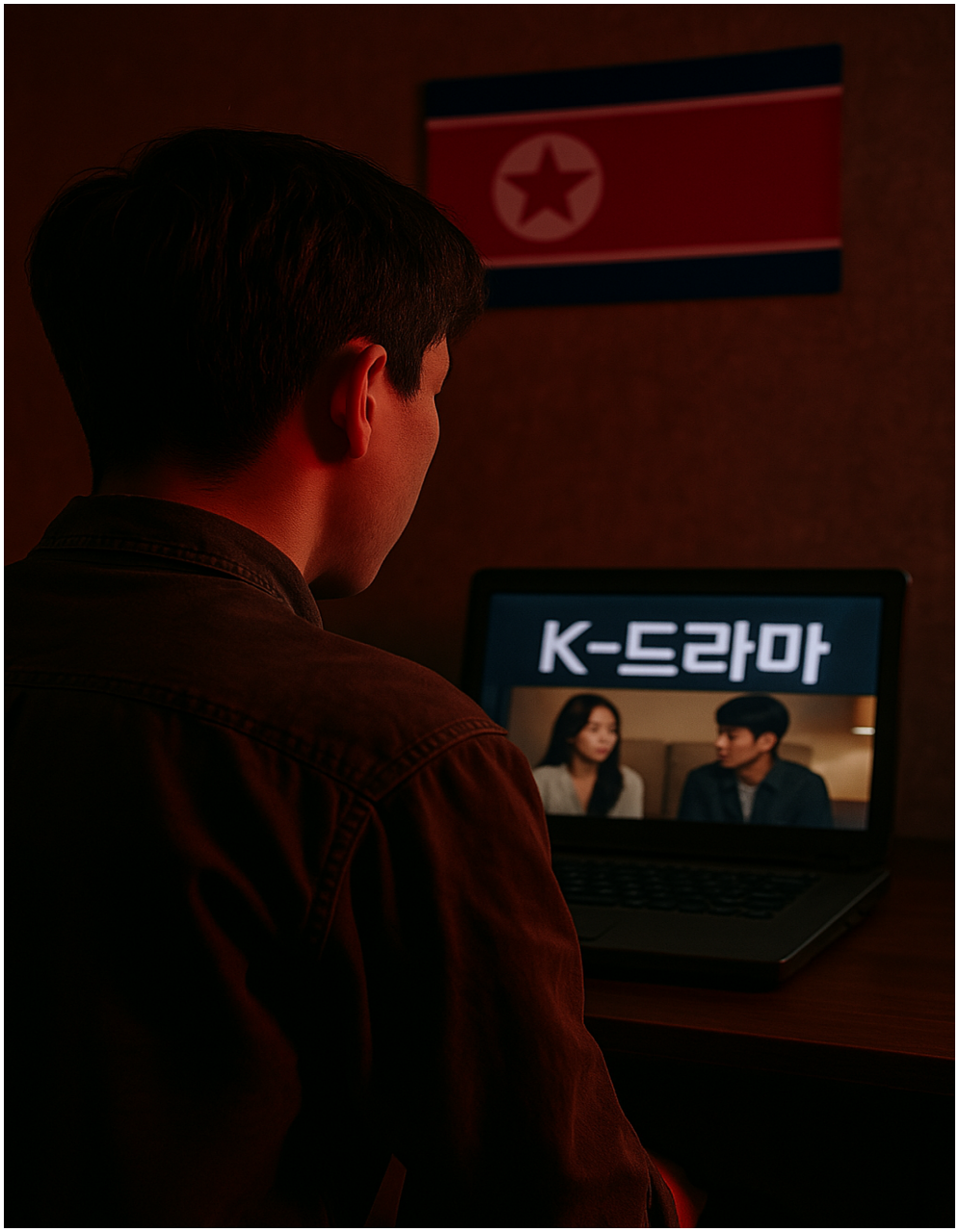

Exhibit A - Image: “Secret Watching”

This AI-generated image was created based on descriptions provided by my interview participants. It depicts a North Korean boy secretly watching South Korean dramas, a highly dangerous act that is regarded as a crime by the Kim regime.

ABSTRACT

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This paper contends that North Korean youth live a Janus-headed existence, projecting ideological conformity to the brutal Kim Jong Un regime while simultaneously cultivating rich, autonomous inner worlds. Drawing on interviews with 28 North Korean youth defectors, this study borrows Erving Goffman's formulation of two stages—the front stage and backstage—to examine how public displays of loyalty operate on the front stage of Korean society, while assertions of human dignity and self-determination are made backstage. Through their engagement with banned "K-content," media products made in South Korea, North Korean youth begin to awaken to their inherent human rights—freedom of thought, expression, and cultural access—and in some cases, are impelled to fully reclaim their rights by defecting. To deepen the analysis of their covert resistance, James C. Scott's concept of a hidden transcript and Roland Barthes' theory of semiology are applied to the interviewee data. By building on the research of Youna Kim and Ahlam Lee and situating the stories of North Korean youth within the broader framework of international human rights, this paper argues that K-content consumption can function as a quiet but impactful mode of political resistance by way of raising rights consciousness within a totalitarian system.

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I. Introduction

In North Korea, it is difficult and dangerous to access foreign media due to the Kim Jong Un regime's robust surveillance system and strongly xenophobic ideology and policies. Nevertheless, K-content, which consists of Korean dramas, movies, and music, has increasingly become a gateway to the outside world. Throughout history, banned media have galvanized youth living in oppressive regimes. The desire for freedom evoked by songs such as *Imagine* and *Wind of Change*,[1] the anti-establishment rock music of Czechoslovakia in the 1980s, the illegal tape culture of the Soviet Union, and the airing of Western radio stations by East German youth are prime examples.[2] North Korean youth are following in this lineage. Today, the procurement and consumption of K-content through a black market economy enables North Korean youth to experience imaginative escape, and in some instances, K-content gives them the push needed to defect.

This paper investigates how K-content consumption by North Korean youth functions as a stimulant for the formation of human rights consciousness, which is defined by legal scholar S.E. Merry as "individuals' capacity to define problems and obstacles regarding rights."[3] K-content catalyzes North Korean youth to imagine and construct inner zones of freedom, spaces in which alternative visions of selfhood, dignity, and agency can be quietly cultivated under repression. In this way, the cultural practice of foreign media consumption can be understood as an expression of desire for increased human rights. This paper contributes to the literature on

[1] Lionheart Revival, "The Song That Brought Down Walls: Wind of Change," Accessed April 17, 2025, https://lionheartrevival.com/tpost/dex8p7dip1-the-song-that-brought-down-walls-wind-of.
[2] Slavenka Drakulić, How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed (New York: Harper, 2016).
[3] Sally Engle Merry, "Rights Talk and the Experience of Law: Implementing Women's Human Rights to Protection from Violence," *Human Rights Quarterly* 25, no. 2 (2003): 343–81, https://doi.org/10.1353/hrq.2003.0020.

how external cultural products not only challenge authoritarian control, but also nurture human rights in environments where formal rights protections are absent.

II. Theoretical & Conceptual Framework

A. Human Rights Consciousness and the Korean Wave in North Korea

North Korea is one of the most closed countries in the world in terms of information flow. All media are state-owned and serve the ideological function of reinforcing the regime's agenda; obtaining outside information is a serious crime. However, research has shown that since the late 1990s, the global rise of South Korean media content, also known as the "Korean Wave," has seeped into North Korea through portable digital media devices such as USBs, SD cards, and Notel, a portable media player made in China.[4] Youna Kim's work illustrates how this cultural influx has had an impact on the human rights consciousness of North Korean citizens. Similar to the aforementioned rights consciousness definition provided by S.E. Merry, Kim borrows Anthony Giddens' concept of *reflexivity* to refer to the ability of individuals to reassess their lives and the world as they absorb new information and engage in critical thinking about existing norms, arguing that K-content equips North Koreans with the critical faculties needed to be able to reevaluate their social conditions.[5] South Korean dramas and music convey various tableaux that are repressed or forbidden under the North Korean regime, including scenes involving free human relationships and material abundance. As such, K-content serves as a sort of human rights textbook that leads North Koreans to question the structural elements of their society that inhibit their freedom. The younger generation in particular secretly imitates South

[4] Youna Kim, ed., *The Soft Power of the Korean Wave: Parasite, BTS and Drama*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2021): 221, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003102489.
[5] Youna Kim, "Illicit Media, Reflexivity and Sociocultural Change in North Korea," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 27, no. 2 (2024): 169, https://doi.org/10.1177/13678779231211919.

Korean expressions, fashions, and hairstyles. These micro-political acts of resistance are examples of what James C. Scott calls "weapons of the weak."[6] Such practices quietly disturb the daily symbolic order of the North Korean regime and enable the reconstruction of—or at least a holding onto a shred of—personal autonomy and identity.

External content is circulating in North Korea at a time when marketization and consumerism are also on the rise.[7] Unlike past generations of North Koreans, who could rely to some degree on the largesse of the state, today's rising generation must often engage in independent economic activity, which contributes to the formation of new desires. Exempt from having to enroll in mandatory military service, women have greater access to the informal black market and are thus increasingly exposed to South Korean cultural content.[8] Kim describes how this phenomenon is fomenting new economic practices:

> Private marketization is motivated by profit and demand-driven networks, not by state propaganda or dominant ideology... Youth and women are likely to become enterprising individuals through 'do-it-yourself' individualization in the quasi-capitalist market of emerging consumerism and the corresponding circulation of outside culture and information that permeates all levels of society.[9]

This shift is significant because it potentially weakens the ideological control of the North Korean regime. What once was a closed system of thought is now opening as a function of everyday consumption. In this sense, K-content does more than entertain—it fosters a mindset that is desirous of fundamental human rights, such as freedom of thought and self-expression.

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[6] James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 9.
[7] Changyong Choi, "Everyday Politics in North Korea," *Journal of Asian Studies* 72, no. 3 (2013): 655–673.
[8] Ki-Eun Sung and Sunwoong Cho, "Why Are North Korean Women More Likely to Defect than North Korean Men?" *Asian Women* 34, no. 3 (2018): 97–118.
[9] Youna Kim, "Illicit Media, Reflexivity and Sociocultural Change in North Korea," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 27, no. 2 (2024): 173, https://doi.org/10.1177/13678779231211919.

The influx of external media depicting South Korean cityscapes, high living standards, a vibrant food culture, and home appliances enables North Koreans to see the sizable gap between the North Korean regime's touting of domestic grandeur and their actual lives. In one scene of a South Korean drama, leftover food is given to dogs. Seeing this, one North Korean interviewed by Kim thought, "I realized I was not eating better than the dog. It was amazing to see the plenty of food in the modern kitchen and running water from the shower."[10] This is an example of how information can function as a kind of "soft power" that can plant the seeds that may eventually produce systemic change. Among others, Historian Mitchell Lerner has contended that the soft power of South Korean popular culture—amplified by digital media technologies—may ultimately pose a more effective challenge to authoritarian control than direct measures by subtly undermining the regime's legitimacy from within. Lerner states: "The appeal of South Korean media culture can be a noncoercive and seductive force of propaganda operating on emotions. Its penetration into the North offers for the first time a legitimate threat to the regime's grip on power and control over the North Korean population."[11]

Ahlam Lee's work arrives at a similar conclusion: South Korean dramas and music make a difference in terms of spurring North Koreans to alter their worldviews, and in some cases, defect. Understanding North Korea's historical context helps explain the emergence of this phenomenon. According to Lee, the Great Famine in North Korea in the mid-1990s brought about fundamental changes in North Korean society.[12] Noland et al. estimate that between 2.8 million and 3.5 million people died of starvation in North Korea during this period, and an

[10] Youna Kim, "Illicit Media, Reflexivity and Sociocultural Change in North Korea," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 27, no. 2 (2024): 175, https://doi.org/10.1177/13678779231211919.
[11] Mitchell Lerner, "Markets, Movies and Media: The Growing Soft Power Threat to North Korea," *The Journal of East Asian Affairs* 29, no. 1 (2015): 41–70.
[12] Ahlam Lee. "The Korean Wave: A Pull Factor for North Korean Migration." In *South Korean Popular Culture and North Korea*, edited by Youna Kim, 85–99. Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2019

increasing number of North Koreans began to cross the border into China in search of food.[13] In the early days of the famine, defection to China was a short-term attempt at survival rather than a permanent goal. However, repeated trips to and from China exposed North Koreans to outside culture and sparked their curiosity about the rest of the world.[14] The collapse of the North Korean Public Distribution System (PDS) after the famine accelerated the development of the *Jangmadang* economy, or black market, forcing residents to participate in illegal economic activities, such as the distribution of external media, to make ends meet.[15] As a result, foreign media consumption became ingrained in the social underground of North Korea.[16] Like Kim's work, Lee's also propounds that North Korean residents began to form a new perspective on human rights as they came into contact with external media, especially K-content, which depicts an attractive lifestyle that is at once exotic and accessible to North Koreans due to sharing a language and history with South Korea. She writes:

> North Koreans' innate desire to explore an unfamiliar and attractive world is a natural phenomenon that is almost impossible for the regime's coercive power to stifle or manipulate…The people who have already had a taste of the Korean Wave media culture are becoming more curious about the outside world and are increasingly demanding outside culture and information to meet their human needs despite the risk of severe punishment.[17]

The North Korean regime strictly prohibits external media and has imposed harsh punishments on those who get caught viewing or disseminating it. Nevertheless, the proportion of people who

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[13] Marcus Noland, Sherman Robinson, and Tao Wang, "Famine in North Korea: Causes and Cures," *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 49, no. 4 (2001): 741–767.
[14] Ahlam Lee. "The Korean Wave: A Pull Factor for North Korean Migration." In *South Korean Popular Culture and North Korea*, edited by Youna Kim, 96. Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2019, 96-106
[15] Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland, "Gender in Transition: The Case of North Korea," East–West Center Working Papers, Economics Series, no. 124 (November 2011).
[16] National Public Radio, "Watching Foreign Movies Is Illegal in North Korea, But Some Do It Anyway," July 5, 2017.
[17] Ahlam Lee, "The Korean Wave: A Pull Factor for North Korean Migration," in *South Korean Popular Culture and North Korea*, ed. Youna Kim (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2019), 103.

have already accessed South Korean media in North Korea has reached approximately 88%.[18] Indeed, even security personnel and high-level officials actively consume external media.[19] As such, the spread of foreign content is expanding to a degree that the North Korean regime seemingly cannot control, which may have major political implications. For North Koreans, initial exposure to South Korean media tends to engender feelings of confusion and doubt, but as time goes by, most North Koreans become fascinated by K-content and begin to actively imitate and adopt South Korean mannerisms.[20] One interviewee described their first encounter with South Korean dramas as follows:

> At first, I was very suspicious. I thought the dramas produced in South Korea were propaganda designed to brainwash us. But the more I watched, the more I realized that South Korea was telling stories about people who honestly expressed their emotions, while North Korea is a country that wants to hide everything.

This initial disorientation does not tend to last long; most interviewees stated that they soon actively sought out more K-content. For them, K-dramas did not simply afford a glimpse into another world—they were emotionally revelatory, offering access to depictions of authenticity, freedom, and human complexity. One commonly repeated sentiment among the interviewees was that there may be some North Koreans who have never watched a K-drama, but there is no one who, once exposed to K-content, watched a South Korean show only once. This statement reflects the considerable attractiveness of K-content for North Korean viewers. In particular, the younger generation has grown up without the blind loyalty to the state that is characteristic of

[18] *Chosun Daily*, "88% of North Korean Defectors Watched South Korean Films When They Lived in North Korea: North Korean Regime Can Be Collapsed by Hallyu like the Trojan Horse" [in Korean], December 27, 2017.
[19] Daniel Tudor and James Pearson, *North Korea Confidential: Private Markets, Fashion Trends, Prison Camps, Dissenters and Defectors* (Rutland, UK: Tuttle Publishing, 2015).
[20] Eunsun Kim and Sébastien Falletti, *A Thousand Miles to Freedom* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2012).

their parents' generation. As such, they have a stronger desire for information and freedom, which in some cases translates to attempts at defection.[21]

B. Clandestine Identity Formation: Theoretical Lenses on North Korean Youth

In order to illustrate how K-content affects young North Koreans, this study weaves together three theoretical frameworks. James C. Scott developed the idea of a *hidden transcript* in which the oppressed use language that conforms to the hegemonic system in public spaces but create a completely different set of norms in private.[22] Hidden transcripts are often intimately shared, emotionally saturated counter-narratives to official scripts. This concept dovetails with Erving Goffman's formulation of *front stages* and *backstages*.[23] In contrast with the stiff performance of loyalty in public spaces (i.e., the front stage), North Korean youth express their identities more openly and fluidly in private spaces (i.e., the backstage), and through this dual performance, they navigate between oppression and autonomy. Finally, Roland Barthes' exploration of myths shows how ideologies are packaged to appear natural and self-evident.[24] Myths such as the divinity of the leader and the supremacy of loyalty, which the North Korean system tirelessly reproduces, are undermined by K-content, which emphasizes free love, individual desire, and subjectivity. This novel content in turn holds the potential to erode the legitimacy of the prevailing myths and enable North Korean teenagers to begin to internalize a new sense of self and worldview undergirded by a foundational yearning for basic human rights.

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[21] Yeonmi Park and Maryanne Vollers, *In Order to Live: A North Korean Girl's Journey to Freedom* (New York: Penguin Books, 2015), 101.
[22] James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 4.
[23] Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh, Social Sciences Research Centre, 1956), 238.
[24] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1972).

This study also incorporates insights from interviews with North Korean human rights experts based in South Korea and the United States, including both defectors and South Korean-born professionals who are actively engaged in the field. Professor Yong-hyun Kim of the Department of North Korean Studies at Dongguk University in Seoul provided particularly useful guidance.

III. Methodology

A. Interview Data and Research Process

This paper used snowball sampling to conduct in-depth interviews with 28 young (early 20s to early 30s) North Korean defectors. The research participants all defected from North Korea between 2010 and 2019. They are currently engaged in various life pursuits, including university study, homemaking, human rights research, and general office work. Most of these individuals consumed K-content in North Korea in their early teens and twenties, and their testimonies provide insights into the ways K-content has instigated psychological and ideological changes within a totalitarian society.

All interviews, which were held in Korean and lasted an average of one hour, were conducted in accordance with strict ethical standards approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB): voluntary consent, confidentiality, and anonymity were strictly maintained. The interview followed a semi-structured agenda, with the main topics centering on human rights awareness and K-content consumption, although participants were encouraged to freely express their feelings and experiences. Thematic and quantitative and quantitative analysis of the interview data produced love, freedom, individuality, and aspiration as recurrent themes, all of which originated in part from the interviewees' exposure to K-content. These themes illustrate the sharp contrast between the oppressive reality of life in North Korea and the alternative models of

existence depicted in K-content. Consequently, these experiences enabled participants to improve their capacity to define problems and obstacles regarding human rights. [25]

B. Limitations

This study has four main limitations that may affect its results. First, the sample size is limited. This study was conducted with 28 North Korean defectors, which cannot fully reflect the diverse experiences and perspectives of the entire MZ generation in North Korea. In addition, the socio-economic backgrounds, education levels, and personality types of the interviewees may not be generalizable to the larger population.

Second, there are many obstacles to recruiting interviewees from North Korea. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, North Korea has tightened its borders, increasing surveillance of prospective North Korean defectors and dramatically driving up the cost of defection brokerage due to the associated risks. As a result, the number of North Korean MZ youth who have defected has plummeted in recent years. This study focuses on people who defected from North Korea within the past ten years. Future studies may consider including a wider time period or a comparative analysis (e.g., a comparison of North Korean defectors from the 2000s and recent defectors).

Third, it is difficult to establish a precise causal relationship between K-content consumption and changes in personal awareness of human rights. There is no official data on media consumption in North Korea, and the interviewee data in the study is comprised of subjective memories and experiences. As such, there may be limitations to the full empirical validity of the conclusions drawn from the research.

[25] Merry, S. E. (2003). Rights talk and the experience of law: Implementing women's human rights to protection from violence. Human Rights Quarterly, 25(2), 343–381. https://doi.org/10.1353/hrq.2003.0020

Fourth, there are limitations due to translation. This study attempted to convey the experiences of North Korean defectors as accurately as possible, however there is a possibility that some of the distinct expressions, intonations, and emotional nuances of the North Korean study participants were slightly distorted or lost in translation from Korean to English. This study endeavored to maintain a consistent tone so that English speakers could clearly understand the content. Future research should reflect the specific linguistic features and cultural particularities common in North Korean society while maintaining clarity of style.

Despite these limitations, this qualitative analysis of the changes in young North Koreans' perceptions of human rights in response to K-content consumption is a meaningful addition to the literature on North Korea, defection, and human rights. Future studies should include a wider range of samples and combine quantitative methodologies to more effectively analyze the social impact of K-content.

IV. Findings and Analysis

A. K-dramas, Love, and Rights Awareness

Despite the Kim regime's tight ideological grip and strict control of emotional expression in North Korea, young North Koreans have begun to redefine the meaning of "love," no longer seeing it as a state-assigned sentiment, but as a personal and private emotion. This claim is based on the fact that romantic love was the most frequently cited emotional theme in the interviewee data, appearing 112 times. Such a high prevalence underscores love's central role in reshaping North Koreans' perceptions of the lives they have and the lives they deserve, with love serving as a symbolic gateway to individual freedom and emotional autonomy.

Under the North Korean regime, love is consistently propagandized as a handmaiden to state loyalty. Songs such as “Let’s Dedicate Our Youth to General Kim Jong-il” exemplify how love is distorted into a performance of sacrifice. One defector explained how the North Korean regime defines love: "In North Korea, we are only taught about love for the Supreme Leader and the Party. Even love for our family or friends has to be justified in terms of pleasing the Leader. There is no such thing as personal love, only political love." Another interviewee echoed this view, recalling: "The moment I felt genuine love from deep inside, I immediately felt fear—as if I had done something wrong. The state does not recognize my private emotions, and therefore, I had to suppress them." These testimonies attest to the North Korean regime’s systematic oppression of personal emotions, which is achieved through what Roland Barthes describes as the “naturalization” of myth.[26] In this framework, love is not an individual feeling but a naturalized ideology that reinforces devotion to the Kim family. Barthes wrote: “[Myth] abolishes the complexity of human acts… it organizes a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth… it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves.”[27] In North Korea, love is reduced to a monolithic act of ideological performance. However, exposure to Korean dramas and K-pop cracks this ideological edifice. These cultural artifacts reintroduce love as an organic, freely chosen emotion, creating what Barthes might identify as a collision of myth and counter-myth. For the MZ generation, discovering that love could be personal rather than performative, and convey freedom and opportunity rather than obedience and tradition, challenges the state's monopoly on human rights discourse.

[26] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1972), 130.
[27] Ibid., 143.

Several participants reported that hand-copying Korean love song lyrics was their favorite leisure activity. "Copying each word slowly and carefully became my moment of freedom and secret space where I could feel and connect deeply through the lyrics," one participant reflected. Another participant described how meaningful it was to express affection through the words of South Korean songs: “The lyrics captured what I couldn’t say directly.” These activities allowed participants to process feelings that were otherwise difficult to articulate. It has also become a popular practice among North Korean youth to conclude love letters with excerpts from South Korean song lyrics, allowing individuals to communicate emotional truths while maintaining a degree of indirectness and poetic distance. One interviewee shared: “I simply wanted to protect my mind from the suffocation of daily life under constant scrutiny and repression. It was my own quiet escape.” As such, the act of writing out love song lyrics, or reading or singing them aloud, can be thought of as a subtle form of advocacy for human rights freedom—a silent but significant stand against the statist policies of the Kim regime.

The emotional duality North Koreans frequently take on as an adaptive strategy is aptly explained by Erving Goffman’s conception of the front stage and backstage. On the front stage, individuals consciously perform specific roles, adhering to prescribed expectations to satisfy their audience. Conversely, the backstage is where individuals critically reflect upon their performances and express their unbridled feelings free from public scrutiny. Goffman describes how socialization between the stages involves recognizing and internalizing one's given role, understanding the associated script, identifying collaborators in the performance, and being aware of who constitutes the audience.[28] In North Korea, the socialization process is dictated by

[28] Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1959), 35.

the Kim regime, compelling North Korean citizens to adopt predetermined roles and behaviors. In this environment, the audience is omnipresent, as every individual simultaneously serves as both performer and observer, constantly monitoring each other's conformity to state-prescribed norms. This leads to the emergence of a distinctly clandestine backstage, where North Koreans listen to music, write love notes, and share forbidden media as acts of self affirmation and quiet resistance.

One North Korean television drama titled *Our Neighbors* (우리 이웃들) follows a separated couple who fail to reconcile despite intervention efforts by the community.[29] The plot twists following the successful launch of a missile by the North Korean government; then, the couple dramatically reunites. The deus ex machina at play is the state, implying that even the thorniest personal conflicts can be fixed by the might of the Kim regime. Another drama depicts the story of a young student striving to gain admission to Kim Il-sung University.[30] The show highlights values such as diligence, perseverance, and loyalty to the Party. According to Professor Jeon Young-seon of the Korea National University of Arts, scholars and critics of North Korea widely regard this show as a propagandistic work that embeds ideals of regime superiority and the image of an ideal North Korean citizen—from the perspective of the Kim regime—within a familial and educational framework.[31] Only one or two serial dramas of this kind are produced each year, leaving North Koreans few domestic options for media-based imaginative escape. K-dramas, by contrast, rarely emphasize the importance of allegiance to one's nation; rather, they exhort individuals to follow their hearts and desires. The notion of

[29] Tongil Jeonmangdae MBC, "No Open-Ended Endings? North Korea's First Drama in a Year," YouTube video, 7:04, April 9, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tl5NApOHLns.
[30] ibid.
[31] ibid.

following one's heart or one's desires is easily comprehensible by any person who grew up in a free country, but in North Korea, where these concepts are quashed from day one, K-content plays a major educative role, promoting concepts that, for free citizens from other countries, are often as common and unremarkable as the air they breathe.

More recent North Korean dramas have increased their focus on social cohesion. In these productions, prosecutors from the North Korean legal system appear as central characters, and the storyline emphasizes the importance of monitoring and guarding against "hostile forces."[32] This shift illustrates how under Kim Jong-un's leadership, cultural content has become increasingly subordinated to state ideology. Such dramas seem to be less about entertainment than political indoctrination. Professor Jeon notes: "While North Korean dramas may continue to develop technically or aesthetically, their fundamental function as vehicles of ideological education is likely to remain unchanged."[33]

Voice-over narration is a defining feature of North Korean serial dramas. Unlike in typical television dramas, where narration explains context or heightens emotion, narration in North Korean dramas functions as an instrument of propaganda. While it may appear to be objective third-person commentary, it represents "the voice of the Party," directing the viewer's emotional and moral responses. Such narration leaves little room for independent interpretation. In recent productions, the narration increasingly resembles a warning or command, directly addressing viewers with instructive or moralistic messages: "Let the entire army and people of the nation unite firmly, generation after generation, to become an eternal bulletproof wall for our revered Marshal Kim Jong-un."[34] Although from an aesthetic standpoint viewers may feel that

[32] ibid.
[33] ibid.
[34] ibid.

such explicit exhortations are heavy-handed and disrupt the narrative flow, it is a deliberate stylistic choice designed to embed the regime's ideology into the viewer's consciousness. K-content seems to have an influence on the minds of young North Koreans in part because it takes the opposite approach. Principally designed as artifacts of entertainment, K-dramas are not explicitly invested in shoring up an ideology. Ironically, this is part of the reason why they are successful as conveyors of human rights values—scenes of freedom are compelling enough in their own right; they sell themselves. As a result, they make North Koreans desirous of a more open lifestyle, one that is based on human rights principles and free from the many constraints of the North Korean regime.

Like all human beings, North Koreans inherently possess intricate, dynamic inner worlds, even under conditions of extreme oppression and regardless of media landscape. However, exposure to international narratives is validating and catalyzing for North Koreans, expanding their capacity to recognize and consciously reflect upon personal desires and freedoms.[35] When North Koreans encounter external media that reflect their internal experiences, they begin to recognize and consciously embrace the personal desires and freedoms previously forbidden to them. One interviewee stated:

> South Korean dramas helped me endure my frustrating and difficult life. They were an important form of escape. They were the only sanctuary where I could finally breathe. Especially when it comes to the emotion of love, my reality was poor. That was the main theme that healed me.

Recognition of a new kind of love can disrupt the regime's systematic efforts to impose totalitarian emotional conformity, because the moment love becomes "mine" rather than "the state's" marks a transition to a heightened awareness of what is possible from a human rights

[35] Youna Kim, ed., *South Korean Popular Culture and North Korea* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 3.

perspective, which in turn can trigger new social demands. In this context, the feeling of love can be thought of as a nascent political act—a subtle sprouting of individuality and authentic selfhood within a system deliberately designed to suppress precisely such forms of personhood.

Unlike the formulaic, loyalty-centric narratives North Koreans are accustomed to, K-dramas often depict nuanced portrayals of romantic relationships, including the complexities of heartbreak, compromise, familial opposition, and emotional growth.[36] North Korean youth, who have never before seen such displays of the emotional turbulence and pleasure of love and its pursuit, find this content eye-opening. One participant recounted feeling moved by a scene in which a couple chooses to part ways not due to betrayal, but because of life's inevitable complexities. The participant noted how dramas and films often weave multiple relatable circumstances—such as financial pressure, parental opposition, and differing life goals—into a single narrative, creating something that feels true and emotionally deep. Another interviewee stated: "It was very refreshing to hear people talk about love in their lives without mentioning the Kim regime. As a result, I realized that love need not always be connected to state loyalty. It is a real thing that is not exaggerated or perfect—like life itself." As such, K-content helps young people understand that love can coexist with vulnerability, imperfection, and choice. It does not have to be grand or sacrificial to be meaningful. Empathizing with the characters becomes synonymous with learning to interpret and articulate their own feelings, rendering these dramas a form of emotional education—one that teaches affection, heartbreak, forgiveness, and self-respect. As Kim suggests, illicit media culture fosters reflexivity as "an emotional and active mode of learning," prompting North Koreans to develop emotional and moral awareness in their critical assessment of self and society—possible precursors to a full-blown conception of human

[36] Shelby Ragan and Katy Lewis, "She Eats Well," in *Streaming and Screen Culture in Asia-Pacific*, ed. Melissa Samuel and Laura Mitchell (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 233–248.

rights.[37] This shift from state-scripted affection to independently chosen emotional experience represents an assertion of the UDHR principles of dignity and rights.[38] Perhaps if North Koreans crave these rights more and more by way of increased consumption of foreign media content, they may reach a point where they feel that their resistance can no longer be done individually and internally, but must be expressed collectively and publicly.

B. K-content and the Rewriting of State-Imposed Gender Roles

K-content has had a particularly strong impact on North Korean women, who are forced to adhere to rigid patriarchal expectations pertaining to devotion, restraint, and silence. One interviewee recalled watching the K-drama *My Name is Kim Sam-soon* and stated, "The story of a woman with a relatively ordinary appearance, age, and body shape who stands up for her self-esteem and walks her own path felt like my story." The interviewee went on to say that she had been raised to embody the role of a "model daughter and loyal party member," but through the show, she glimpsed a life apart from ideology and duty, one that was defined more by inner truth and personal choice. Other participants also pointed to the dramas *Misaeng* and *Descendants of the Sun*, in which female professionals—including doctors, writers, and business women—pursue careers and desires without subordinating themselves to others. These stories suggest that self-realization and dignity need not be sacrificed to power structures, and that women can be protagonists of their own narratives—highly threatening beliefs from the perspective of the ruling regime. Several female interviewees stated that they discussed the K-dramas they watched

[37] Youna Kim, "Illicit Media, Reflexivity and Sociocultural Change in North Korea," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 27, no. 2 (2024): 176, https://doi.org/10.1177/13678779231211919.
[38] United Nations. *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. United Nations. Accessed April 17, 2025. https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights.

"for a long time with friends." These conversations do not amount to explicit protests, but neither are they benign trifles. Circulation of ideas stemming from K-content builds pressure against the emotional order of the state. One interviewee quoted by Kim stated: "The forbidden images and sounds from South Korea are not simple entertainment but education for us, young people in particular. We continue to watch them to learn more, as these are the only passages to the outside world."[39] These viewing experiences subtly foster human rights awareness and reflexivity, allowing North Koreans to increasingly reimagine their lives beyond the confines of state control.

C. Classroom Indoctrination and Hidden Resistance

Ironically, schools, which are designed as institutions of socialist reinforcement, are fertile grounds for the clandestine exchange of K-content. They provide what Goffman might describe as a dual-stage environment: at one moment a rigorously controlled front stage under the teacher's watchful eye, and at other moments, a hidden backstage (e.g. during breaks or recess) for free conversation. During short, less-supervised periods, students swiftly shift to their backstage identities, exchanging stories about dramas. One interviewee described this backstage as follows:

> In North Korea, it was very common to greet friends by asking, 'Have you seen *Boys Over Flowers*?' or 'How far have you gotten in that drama?' It was so natural to gather during class breaks and discuss the plots, empathize with the characters, and cry and laugh together about what was happening in the K-dramas we were watching. If you couldn't join these conversations, you were completely excluded and labeled an 'outsider.' Watching the dramas was necessary if you wanted to be considered a 'good friend.'

[39] Youna Kim, "Illicit Media, Reflexivity and Sociocultural Change in North Korea," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 27, no. 2 (2024): 176, https://doi.org/10.1177/13678779231211919.

Many students explicitly emphasized the social necessity of participating in these backstage interactions, suggesting that involvement in K-drama discussions was closely tied to peer acceptance and symbolic elevation as a "social butterfly"—a term frequently repeated during interviews. This process reflects what Roland Barthes describes as the formation of modern myths: when cultural products transcend their literal function and become naturalized carriers of social ideology. As Barthes illustrates through his analysis of everyday items such as soap and detergent, even the most mundane commodities can be imbued with ideological meaning.[40] K-dramas operate as potent mythological systems that challenge the regime's performative ideals by presenting a vision of selfhood grounded in individuality, mobility, and expressiveness. In embracing these meanings, students are not merely consuming content but internalizing a counter-myth that reconfigures their social imagination and aspirations. One interviewee stated:

> When I used to watch Korean dramas in North Korea, I felt like I was being transported into another world—where people expressed their emotions freely, dressed beautifully, and made their own life choices. It made me feel as if I, too, could someday live like that and belong to that world, not just the one I grew up in.

Several interviewees also described how K-pop afforded them moments of emotional liberation and spontaneous enjoyment. One participant recounted:

> In our spare time after class, dancing was our favorite hobby. South Korean music was so fun and exciting that our bodies reacted instinctively. We didn't have blackout curtains, so we tightly stuffed blankets into the windows and locked all the doors. In that hidden space, we danced, clapped, and relieved our stress.

Another interviewee described a similar gathering: "My house had no furniture, so everyone sat on the floor, with two friends dancing in the middle while the rest cheered. Every weekend, about six friends would gather at my home. These meetups were very secretive, and they were

[40] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1972), 35–36.

the most liberating moments." These expressions of clandestine joy exemplify Scott's concept of "hidden transcripts"—private realms where oppressed groups quietly cultivate "solidarity," rehearse resistance, and reclaim authenticity behind the veil of outward compliance.[41] Interviewees consistently revealed that shared experiences, such as simultaneously hearing the same lyrics or lines from a drama, created powerful affective bonds, demonstrating that K-content could contribute to the formation and mediation of new identities.

Furthermore, language itself has been transformed through K-content consumption. North Korean youth have begun adopting colloquial expressions from South Korean dramas, such as "darling," to communicate with genuine intimacy and emotional freedom. Barthes' notion of myth illuminates this linguistic phenomenon: state-sanctioned language typically removes emotional nuance, repurposing everyday words as ideologically sanitized symbols. However, when young North Koreans appropriate terms like "darling," they reintroduce affective depth and playful intimacy, interrupting and subverting the regime's imposed emotional conformity. As one participant shared, "At first, the word 'darling' felt foreign and amusing, but gradually it became a sweet, personal way to express affection." This linguistic re-signification reflects Barthes' idea of counter-myth—wherein subordinate groups reclaim and re-embed emotional authenticity into words that have been stripped of their original meaning by dominant ideologies.[42] Through this process, K-content not only provides young North Koreans with new words, but empowers them to articulate alternative rights-based worlds, thereby challenging the regime's monopoly on personal expression.

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[41] James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 140.

[42] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1972)

D. Law, Strategic Compliance, and the Dual Performance of Youth Identity

In North Korea, the law does not protect citizens' lives or guarantee their rights. Rather, it maintains the order of the system, consolidates the power of the Kim family, and punishes deviant behavior.[43] For North Korean youth who have grown up under this repressive legal system, seeing 'the law' in K-dramas tends to elicit shock. In particular, scenes in courtroom dramas where judges and lawyers stand on the side of the underdog and defend the wronged present a completely new vision of the law; in North Korea, it is never a tool for individuals, but always a cudgel for the state. In K-content, the law is associated with a sense of just protection. As such, the idea that "I can be protected by something larger than myself or my family" becomes possible for the first time—a core notion of human rights that stands in stark contrast with the cautious, paranoid view commonly adopted by North Koreans toward their government.

Seeing legal possibilities in a new light results in the performance of two conflicting acts. On the outside, North Koreans continue to praise the law and uphold order, but on the inside, they recognize that the law will never protect them. Scott states: "With rare but significant exceptions, the public performance of the subordinate will, out of prudence, fear, and the desire to curry favor, be shaped to appeal to the expectations of the powerful."[44] This double performance of North Korean youth is not hypocrisy; it is a complex coordination between a public performance for survival and a secret emotional striving for humanity. In North Korea, bribery is the mediating practice between the two stages and the two selves.

In a well-functioning society, bribery is thought of as an act of corruption. In North Korea, it is a necessary social device that effectively replaces institutional justice in a space

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[43] Foreign Languages Publishing House. *Socialist Constitution of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.* Pyongyang, Korea: Foreign Languages Publishing House, Juche 103 (2014).
[44] James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 2.

where it is absent. The law exists, but no one trusts it, and people know that it is not there to protect them. However, an envelope of money or a good relationship with a high-ranking official can have great protective power. If caught watching Korean dramas or listening to K-pop, North Korean citizens know they can escape harsh punishment via bribery. One North Korean defector relayed how he had gotten away with K-content consumption because of his friendship with a high-ranking official. The official not only turned a blind eye to the illicit act, but also shared other confiscated drama files with the defector and others. In an interview, another defector shared a similar experience:

> My family was close to a high-ranking official. He already knew I was watching South Korean dramas and even helped retrieve a USB that had been confiscated by another officer. In reality, many officials end up collecting large amounts of banned drama files during monitoring, and they often enjoy watching them themselves, or share them with trusted friends and family. Our home was one of those cases.

These cases attest to Scott's contention that "the hidden transcript is produced for a different audience and under different constraints of power than the public transcript."[45] The act of privately watching banned media—by both ordinary citizens and powerful officials—reveals a hidden transcript that coexists with the regime's public performance of loyalty and control. This highlights how North Korean society is structured around unspoken rules and informal practices, where survival often depends on navigating both the front stage and the backstage simultaneously, giving rise to the presence of a hidden transcript. Scott elaborates on this point: "The hidden transcript is a social product and hence a result of power relations among subordinates... it exists only to the extent it is practiced, articulated, enacted, and disseminated within these offstage social sites."[46] Indeed, it is well known, for instance, that foreign journalists

[45] Ibid., 5.
[46] Ibid., 119.

visiting North Korea are only shown carefully curated scenes. They are prohibited from witnessing or documenting backstage realities, such as widespread poverty, starvation, and suffering. Their movements are strictly monitored, and their camera SD cards are regularly checked to ensure that only favorable images leave the country.[47] This is yet another example of the dual nature of representational reality in North Korea.

It is clear that Korean dramas have created new channels of human rights awareness for North Korean youth and women. However, some interviewees testified that K-dramas were structurally stratified cultural experiences, meaning that access to and the effects of K-dramas are situationally dependent. One participant said, "I think Korean dramas are more enjoyable for those who have a lot of money, are from a family that made a fortune through smuggling, or are connected to officials who can pay bribes. It is a risky activity if you don't have connections and money." This statement shows how socio-economics are at play in this dynamic, encapsulating Pierre Bourdieu's view that cultural experience is not a free choice of the individual, but a form of practice connected to the distribution of capital accumulated in the social structure.[48] However, another participant said, "Nowadays, almost everyone watches and shares dramas. The dangers are still there, but it's now a universal culture." These conflicting testimonies suggest that the impacts of dramas are not static but dependent on money, intensity of surveillance, and social connections. Also, some participants recalled that they did not detect any link between consuming K-content and experiencing any changes in perspective. One interviewee from Pyongyang said: "We were better off than other regions, so the drama was not a particular shock

[47] Australian Government. *North Korea (Democratic People's Republic of Korea) – Travel Advice*. Smartraveller. Accessed April 17, 2025. https://www.smartraveller.gov.au/destinations/asia/north-korea-democratic-peoples-republic-korea.
[48] Pierre Bourdieu, "The Habitus and the Space of Life-Styles (1984)," in *The People, Place, and Space Reader*, 1st ed. (New York: Routledge, 2014), 210.

to us, just something to entertain us." This suggests that among North Koreans with relatively higher life satisfaction, K-content is more likely to function merely as entertainment.

E. Personal Desires Versus the Regime's Demands

For most North Korean youth, watching characters in South Korean dramas effortlessly pass through airports with passports in hand, drive through bustling cities, and journey toward unfamiliar destinations occasions feelings of excitement and expansion. One interviewee said: "Just seeing it in the dramas—someone holding their passport at the airport, ready to leave—made my heart race." In North Korea, these awakening desires immediately collide with the ritualistic oppression that is embedded in daily life. The very next day, the same young person bends down with a mop in front of a statue of Kim Il-sung, performing mandatory acts of loyalty at a school or work site. One respondent expressed this inner conflict as follows: "When I'm cleaning the statue, I try not to think about anything. I just hope it will be over quickly. But I keep thinking about that scene from the drama—am I really doing what I want to do?" At this juncture, the individual's existence unfolds across two distinct planes: one is the repetitive, mechanical life dictated by the regime's rituals, and the other is the realm of personal desire and emotion ignited by exposure to dramas' depictions of freedom. This emotional duality hews closely to Goffman's theory of self-presentation on different stages. For young North Koreans, the public performance—involving acts such as bowing before statues of the Kim family or participating in collective rituals—serves as the compulsory front stage. The scenes of freedom drawn from K-dramas allow them to access a private emotional backstage.

F. Stigma and Silent Compliance in the Hidden Transcript

Unlike citizens who undergo a relatively free, safe socialization process—where individuals can choose from a variety of roles and engage in open-ended interactions—North Korean residents are subjected to compulsory participation in collective rituals known as "Life Review Sessions" (**생활총화**). In these regular, auto-critical gatherings, North Koreans publicly critique and denounce themselves and each other for being insufficiently loyal, failing in their assigned roles, or deviating from state-defined expectations. Here is how one North Korean described Life Review Sessions:

> Every Saturday, like clockwork, we had Life Review Sessions. It didn't matter how tired you were or how little you had to say—you had to show up, confess your ideological flaws, and criticize someone else. It was a performance we all hated but couldn't avoid. We had to prove our loyalty by pointing out even the smallest mistakes—both our own and others. If you stayed quiet, they'd think you were hiding something or were not loyal enough. Everyone is always tense the whole week worrying about what they'll say on Saturday.

One of the most devastating consequences within this punitive structure is the "stigma effect," as theorized by Goffman.[49] Goffman contends that once stigmatized, one is at dangerous risk of having a "spoiled identity."[50] In North Korean society, the power of stigma is particularly intense—it can jeopardize one's very social and political survival. Consequently, North Koreans live in constant tension, continually rehearsing their public roles, and ever vigilant that even the slightest misstep can lead to severe, possibly irreparable social damage. Crucially, K-content has no fixed script—there are numerous bright versions of a free life when it is protected by a government that honors the upholding of human rights.

[49] Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (London: Penguin Classics, 2022)
[50] Ibid.

G. Scripted Subjects and the Emergence of the Hidden Transcript

Hannah Arendt's insights in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* further illuminate the quasi-religious control exercised by the North Korean state. Arendt argues that totalitarian regimes deprive individuals of their ability to express opinions and undertake meaningful actions.[51] Such regimes reduce citizens' existence to mere compliance, arbitrarily bestowing privileges and punishments regardless of personal merit or action. Under the North Korean system, state authority infiltrates personal lives with inviolable religious authority, but without genuine spiritual fulfillment—transforming obedience into a mandated pseudo-sacred practice that sustains regime power and fosters systemic human rights violations. The closer one looks at the totalizing nature of control by the North Korean state, the more apparent the potential value of open scenes of living in K-content becomes. One respondent shared:

> After seeing people traveling freely in the drama, I started questioning the routines I had taken for granted. Before, bowing in front of the leader's portrait felt automatic—like brushing my teeth or tying my shoes. But after watching people live freely in the drama, I started to feel strange about it. Then, when I bowed, I caught myself wondering: Why am I doing this? Do I really feel respect, or am I just obeying? It no longer felt natural—it felt forced. My mind constantly drifts to those images of freedom I saw.

Such private soliloquies exemplify Scott's hidden transcripts—quiet, concealed expressions of dissent that seep into rights consciousness. Scott writes, "We cannot know how contrived or imposed the performance is unless we can speak, as it were, to the performer offstage…Without a privileged peek backstage or a rupture in the performance, we have no way of calling into question the status of what might be a convincing but feigned performance."[52] The interviewee's reflection on bowing offers precisely such a rupture—a moment where the inner self breaks

[51] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1951), 296.
[52] James C. Scott, Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 4

through the public mask. What had once been an unthinking gesture of loyalty now appears staged, artificial, even absurd. In line with Scott's framework, this shift is not overt rebellion but a nuanced reorientation of belief—an inner reclaiming of the self beneath authoritarian performance. Viewed through a human rights lens, this moment marks the emergence of cognitive and emotional autonomy under repression. The individual begins to assert their freedom of thought, destabilizing the ritualized obedience demanded by the state. In this sense, K-content becomes a site of ethical awakening, where suppressed desires for dignity, agency, and freedom take shape, challenging the regime's symbolic monopoly over reality.

H. Mandated Mourning, Masked Emotions

When Kim Jong-il died in 2011, all citizens were required to mourn publicly in accordance with state instructions. Some of the interviewees, who were elementary and middle school students at the time, noted that while their parents and grandparents seemed to sincerely mourn the deceased, they and their friends of the same age struggled to hold back laughter throughout the mourning period. "Everyone was crying, so I maintained a serious expression, but I felt like bursting into laughter just by making eye contact with my friends. It was even funnier because I wasn't supposed to laugh." Laughter is not a surprising psychological reaction of children who felt alienation and skepticism in the emotional performance that the system demanded of them. This generation grew up accessing external information and receiving far fewer benefits from the Kim family than previous generations. To them, Kim Jong-il was not someone with whom they could empathize, and the "sadness" required by the state was an awkward and ridiculous imposition. Those who had been exposed to K-content felt especially internally distanced from the emotional mandates of the state, and that distance briefly surfaced in the deadly temptation to laugh.

Several interviewees noted that early exposure to South Korean dramas was one of the factors that gave rise to their internal resistance to the regime's emotional mandates. One interviewee reflected:

> I think I was one of the few who didn't really internalize the socialist ideology. Even from a young age, I had a kind of resistance to the system. Our family lived near the border and we used to watch South Korean dramas. So I was quite familiar with what life outside North Korea looked like.

Such early and repeated contact with alternative ways of living fostered not only awareness of different lifestyles but also a distinct emotional grammar—one that conflicted with the affective scripts enforced by the state. These individuals became especially skilled at toggling between front stage compliance and backstage authenticity; they performed loyalty in public while privately nurturing a sense of critical distance and emotional independence. This did not manifest as direct defiance, but as a form of dissonance, where obedience no longer aligned with belief, and where K-content helped cultivate a space that nurtured ideological freedom.

It is possible that the appearance of sincerity some interviewees thought they observed on the faces of their seniors was not entirely genuine. The scenes of residents wailing, repeatedly broadcast on state media after Kim Jong-il's death, appear to an outside viewer to be exaggerated and choreographed—more like an emotional competition than genuine grief.[53] One interviewee noted, "At least in our generation, we don't cry like that. Maybe the older generation did, and we can't really judge their sincerity. But even with state brainwashing, it seemed overdone, and we, the younger ones, didn't really resonate with those tears." This comment reflects James C. Scott's theory that the more oppressive a regime, the more ritualized and performative the public transcript becomes. Scott describes this as follows: "the more menacing the power, the thicker

[53] Barbara Demick, *Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015).

the mask."[54] What is publicly expressed is not necessarily what is genuinely felt, but what must be performed to ensure safety and survival. These testimonies point to a generational shift: while older citizens may have to a certain extent internalized the regime's emotional scripts, younger North Koreans increasingly recognize them as performances. In this context, emotions function not as basic, true, personal expressions but as tools co-opted by the state to maintain ideological control. This state-directed manipulation represents not only psychological control but also a violation of basic human rights—particularly the rights to emotional integrity, freedom of thought, and freedom of expression.

Among the 28 defectors interviewed, a particular emotional residue emerged from some of those who had previously led what the regime deemed as "exemplary North Korean lives" in Pyongyang. When discussing the violence of the Kim family or the absurdities of North Korean society, they displayed noticeable discomfort or reluctance. This doubtfulness appeared to be less driven by direct fear than an instinctive impulse to protect a core part of their identity. This phenomenon aligns closely with the insights of Eun-joo Kim, one of the interviewees and co-author of the book "A Ten-Year-Old Will." Kim notes that even individuals who deeply resent North Korea and actively choose defection continue to hold some ambivalence towards the regime. She posits that this feeling is the result of an incomplete escape from the ideological framework ingrained in their upbringing. The discomfort that arises when defectors criticize what is patently an unjust system reveals the depth of their internalized ideological attachment, suggesting that freedom is not just physical separation from a situation, but also involves disentangling one's identity from state-imposed beliefs. This notion attests to the thoroughgoing

[54] James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 3.

efforts of the North Korean regime to bury any notion of free human rights consciousness among its citizens.

In such a context, K-content is a powerful resource for North Koreans to confront and rebel against their emotional and ideological constraints. One interviewee stated:

> I was watching South Korean dramas, while at the same time witnessing the regime's injustices—human rights violations, the forced child labor they imposed on us. We were forced to sacrifice, to accept lies, and to watch as the truth was constantly hidden. My distrust grew deeper, and I started to think more critically. I could feel that something was wrong, but my mind couldn't fully reach the logic to criticize it. Even though I sensed the problem emotionally, the Juche ideology that had been drilled into me since childhood blocked that final step of critical thought. It was emotionally exhausting.

Kim Il-hyuk, a researcher at the North Korean Human Rights Institute, and Eun-joo Kim both emphasize that K-content holds the potential to dismantle entrenched emotional frameworks, sparking new imaginative and ethical horizons among North Koreans. This perspective resonates with the arguments of Youna Kim and Ahlam Lee, who also highlight the transformative role of K-media. Youna Kim notes: "People appropriate the illicit media to reimagine their self, society and their place in the world, and rework on the project of the reflexive self with a desire to embrace a more open world."[55] In the North Korean context, this suggests that K-content offers a symbolic space through which individuals can begin to revise their moral understanding and social imagination beyond the regime's ideological boundaries – paving the way for the growth of human rights consciousness.

Among the influential elements of K-content, fashion was reported by several interviewees as being among the more important. Interviewees consistently articulated that the fashions exhibited in South Korean dramas and idol music videos—short skirts, vivid colors, and glamorous styles—conjured a sense of escape from the monotonous grayscale of socialist reality.

[55] Youna Kim, "Illicit Media, Reflexivity and Sociocultural Change in North Korea," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 27, no. 2 (2024): 177, https://doi.org/10.1177/13678779231211919.

This contrast becomes even more stark when considering how fashion operates in North Korea. Clothing is not merely practical or aesthetic—it is a medium through which state ideology is visibly enforced. Women in particular face stringent controls: trousers, short skirts, and sleeveless tops are forbidden, while state propaganda encourages clothing choices that reflect "national sentiment" and "refined cultural taste"—in other words, only outfits that are highly chaste are permitted. Women have some autonomy to dawn bright hanboks, but even this expression of lightness and beauty is limited to the canvas of traditional Korean garb. In contrast, the vibrant, trend-driven fashion seen in South Korean dramas introduces North Korean youth to a bright, visual language of individuality and modernity. One defector recounted:

> I could never wear short pants or skirts outside like in K-dramas, but at home with friends, we held our own private fashion shows. We would personally alter our clothes or buy Korean-style clothes that had been smuggled through China. When feeling too suffocated, I would sneak into an empty corner of the neighborhood—still wearing those clothes—and briefly savor my secret freedom.

Prompted by exposure to K-content, these clandestine acts of self-discovery stand in opposition to the North Korea regime's iron grip on almost all matters of daily life. One interviewee interestingly remarked: "As a woman, it feels natural to pursue beauty. That desire has nothing to do with the regime." This comment underscores the emerging distinction North Koreans are drawing between personal expression and imposed ideology, revealing how the pursuit of aesthetics becomes an assertion of individuality. Once the sacredness, richness, and beauty of an individual life can be felt in such a way, the chance of the emergence of human rights consciousness grows.

It is precisely this sensory rebellion that the regime fears most, prompting extreme measures such as publicly executing youth caught consuming South Korean content—a grim reality confirmed by interviewees and highlighted by figures such as First Lady Kim Gun-hee,

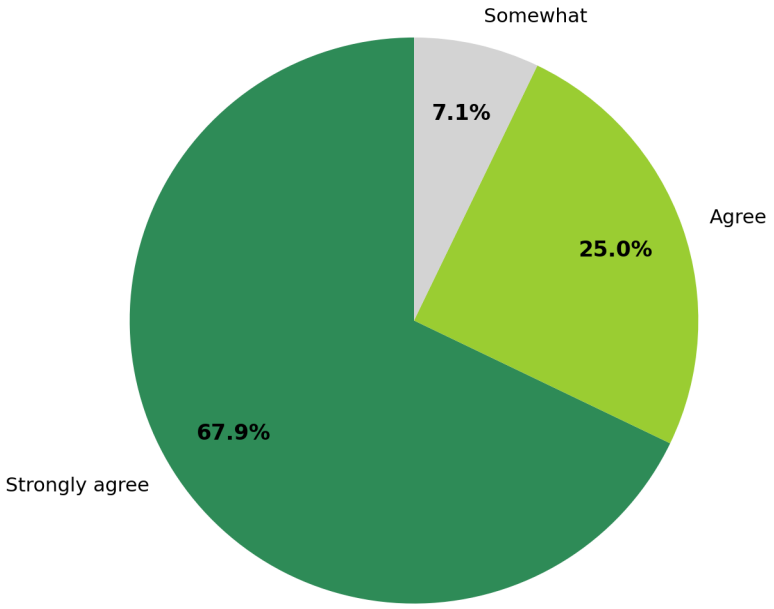
spouse of South Korean President Yoon Seok-yeol. During her visit to the United States for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) summit on July 11, 2024, Kim spoke strongly against North Korea based on reports that 30 middle school students had been sentenced to death for watching South Korean dramas, saying: "Recent reports claim that North Korea publicly executed about 30 middle school students for watching South Korean dramas. This highlights the cruel reality of North Korea."[56] The world is keenly aware that the freedom to safely watch dramas should be a given, but that watching dramas can actually create the initial conditions for freedom remains under-discussed, and is a major reason for the existence of this research paper.

The portrayal of emotional duality by North Koreans should not be understood merely as a survival tactic but as an emotional mechanism of self-preservation and identity defense amidst pervasive human rights violations. The bifurcated living described by the interviewees is emblematic of an internal struggle for authenticity and self-awareness, illustrating the complexity of discovering and tending to the expansion of human rights consciousness. Regardless of whether individuals eventually decide to individually defect or collectively protest, it is worth noting how important change related to rights consciousness is already occurring internally by way of K-content exposure before any observable action is taken.

[56] Korea Times. "First Lady Condemns NK Human Rights Abuses in Meeting with Defectors in US." *The Korea Times*, July 12, 2024. https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/foreignaffairs/northkorea/20240712/first-lady-condemns-nk-human-rights-abuses-in-meeting-with-defectors-in-us.

V. Discussion

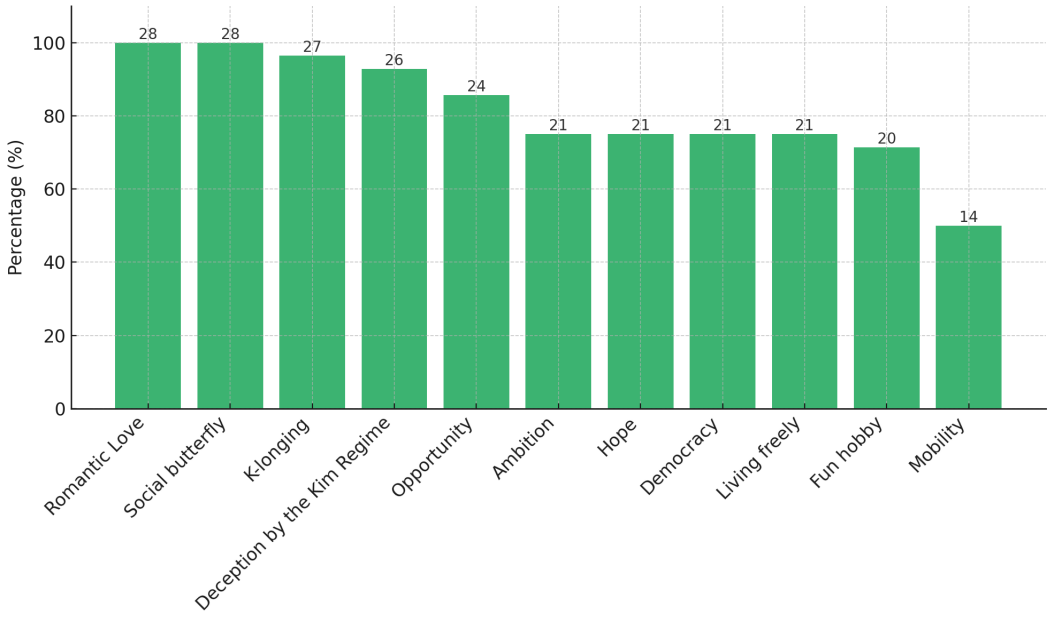
Exhibit B - Chart 1: "K-content inspired me to reflect on human rights." (N = 28)



The pie chart shows that among all interviewees, 67.9% strongly agreed, 25.0% agreed, and 7.1% somewhat agreed with the statement "K-content inspired me to reflect on human rights." Notably, there were no respondents who indicated disagreement. These results strongly suggest that K-content functions as a catalyst for existential questioning about the meaning and value of selfhood. For young North Koreans living under an authoritarian regime where strict limits are placed on all notions of individuality, this kind of reflection marks a significant internal shift in keeping with James C. Scott's concept of the hidden transcript. While public life in North Korea is tightly scripted, with individuals expected to comply and perform loyalty, private, inner life offers space for the dawning of rights consciousness. The ability of K-content to prompt reflections on dignity and purpose points to its role in activating hidden transcripts, creating affective space for human rights contemplation that challenges the regime's imposed meaning structures.

In North Korea, questions such as “What does it mean to be human?” or “What is the value of my life?” are typically subsumed under state narratives that define life’s meaning in terms of loyalty to and sacrifice for the nation. K-content, in contrast, presents characters who struggle, love, dream, and fail on their own terms—not in service to a state ideology, but as autonomous individuals. This exposure allows North Korean youth to engage with alternate models of what it means to live a meaningful, dignified, rights-based life. Watching others express autonomy, make mistakes, and experience emotional intimacy contributes to the emergence of awareness that one’s own life holds intrinsic worth. This is particularly relevant in societies where state ideology explicitly devalues the individual except as part of the collective machinery. Concepts such as dignity, autonomy, and purpose lie at the heart of human rights discourse. If K-content prompts young people to consider these ideas, even privately, then it is not merely transmitting cultural products—it is enabling the reimagination of the self in a context of enhanced human rights.

Exhibit C - Chart 2: "Mapping the Emotional Impact of K-Dramas on North Korean Youth Defectors" (N = 28)



The bar chart visualizes the frequency of key emotional and thematic categories drawn from the interviews, revealing how K-content functions as an emotionally and politically charged space in which young North Koreans begin to reimagine their inner worlds and develop new forms of rights awareness. The most frequently mentioned terms—Romantic Love (28), Social Butterfly (28), and K-longing (27)—indicate that K-content facilitates desires for affection, increased intimacy, and self-expression—emotions that are necessarily suppressed in their public lives. These acts of front stage performance, backstage concealment, and hidden emotional scripts are not merely the result of fear or repression. Rather, they are deeply rooted in what is referred to as K-longing—a profound yearning for the freedom, emotional richness, and individuality experienced through Korean dramas and other cultural content. The relationship between North and South Korea is shaped by a shared language, ethnicity, and even historical memory. For North Koreans, South Korea does not feel like a distant foreign land. It feels familiar, even intimate—like a life that could have been theirs if history had taken a different

path. One interviewee said: “The fact that we speak the same language made a huge difference,” Another interviewee stated: “I didn’t need subtitles. I could understand everything—not just the words, but the feelings, the humor, the tone. It made South Korean culture feel familiar, not foreign.” This tension between closeness and impossibility gives K-longing its emotional depth and enduring power. The majority of interviewee responses suggest that K-content opens a rare backstage space—what Goffman describes as the domain where individuals can safely rehearse feelings, identities, and expressions that would be unacceptable on the front stage of social life.

In most contexts, Goffman's backstage is a voluntarily entered space, a place where people can relax the rules of performance. But in North Korea, this backstage is not casual or optional—it becomes about survival. Under a regime that requires constant ideological performance, the ability to carve out a private realm where authentic emotion can be explored is significant. Through watching dramas or listening to music alone or in trusted circles, youth momentarily step out of their scripted public roles and imagine themselves otherwise. In the context of North Korea, then, Goffman’s backstage is not just a sociological metaphor—it becomes a lived, emotionally charged refuge born out of necessity, and often filled with longing, hope, and silent resistance. This type of media engagement reveals a deeper layer of the hidden transcript, suggesting that the new emotional scripts that K-content equips North Koreans with are subtle yet powerful means of challenging the dominant ideological framework of the North Korean leadership.

Of particular note from Chart 2 is the high frequency of the theme “Deception by the Kim Regime” (26). This reflects a turning point in political consciousness: the realization that the state has constructed and perpetuated a false narrative. With the activation of a cognitive and emotional separation between the self and the state, the seeds for future action are potentially

planted. Interestingly, Mobility (14), or the desire to move freely, was the least mentioned theme. This finding challenges the assumption that physical escape or border-crossing is the most urgent human rights aspiration of North Koreans. Rather, the data indicate that emotional freedom and interior autonomy represent more desired intermediate goals. Youth respondents were less focused on leaving the country physically than on experiencing unrestricted feelings—such as love, curiosity, or ambition—which are consistently monitored or punished in their public lives. These findings warrant the inclusion of added nuance to the concept of freedom. Rather than being solely construed as physical movement, freedom can be conceived of through the ability to feel, relate, and express oneself without fear. While the body may remain within North Korean borders, the mind, through K-content, begins to traverse new affective and ideological terrain.

Although Democracy (21) did not appear as frequently as more personal themes, its presence is nonetheless significant from a human rights standpoint. It points to a subtle socialization taking place via K-content exposure. Rather than learning democratic values through formal education or direct political discourse, young North Koreans are engaging with democracy as a felt sense—the right to feel, to choose, to speak, and to connect—as displayed in various K-content scenarios.

Taken together, these findings suggest that K-content operates as a covert yet powerful mode of identity formation, political learning, and human rights consciousness elevation, allowing North Korean youth to step into a backstage space where emotional rehearsal becomes a form of psychological resistance. Through laughter, longing, and love, they quietly write their own scripts—scripts that may never be spoken aloud but which challenge the ideological choreography imposed on them.

Exhibit D - Table 1: K-Content as Barthesian Counter-Myth

Table 1

Category	K-Content Scene/Tableau	Myth in North Korea	Counter Myth
Modern Lifestyle	Cities with skyscrapers, night lives, and bustling streets	Foreign cities are chaotic and impoverished	Urban life is modern, dynamic, and full of opportunities
Kim Dynasty Demythologization	Absence of supreme leaders, critique of authoritarianism	Upholds the Kim family as god-like figures in dramas/media	Leaders are not divine but rather are fallible and even ignorable
Electricity & Technology	Bright city lights, smartphones, smart homes, use of electricity at night	Claims that the outside world is technologically oppressive and surveillance-heavy	The abundance and convenience of a modernized country
Freedom of Movement	Traveling abroad, freely using public transport, personal cars, motorcycles	Free movement and foreign travel lead to moral corruption	The ability to move symbolizes personal autonomy and choice
Abundance & Comfort	24/7 convenience and comfort in hospitals, cafes, restaurants, internet cafes, movie theaters, etc.	South Korea is the poorest country, so North Korea should help it. "Save the Children of South Korea" (North Korean elementary school textbook)[57]	Korea has a very convenient, advanced,well-established infrastructure and culture.
Gender Equality & Expression	Women in professional roles, romantic freedom, diverse fashion styles	Women should be subservient to men	Gender is no longer a mitigating factor of agency
Career Aspirations & Success	People achieving goals and career growth and engaging in entrepreneurship	Only loyalty to the regime guarantees stability	Meritocracy and self-determination as key to success
Democratic Values	Protests, political debates, legal rights	Democracy is an ignoble and inferior system	Depicts freedom of speech and the power of civic engagement
Love & Relationships	Free romantic choices, public affection, diverse family structures	Love is all about obedience and loyalty to the Kim family.	Love is based on choice and emotion, not state control.
Human Rights Awareness	Narratives on justice, equality, and personal dignity	Individual rights do not exist; collective loyalty is all that matters	Emphasizes universal human rights and critiques authoritarian rule

[57] Hyanggeun Lee, "Analysis of Characteristics of Elementary School Textbooks of North Korean Kim Jong-un Regime," Educational Research 73 (2018): 23–41, https://doi.org/10.17253/swueri.2018.73..002.

Roland Barthes argues that myths transform historically contingent ideologies into seemingly natural and eternal truths.[58] The North Korean regime defends two main myths: the divinity of the leader, which frames the Kim family as sacred and infallible, and the supremacy of loyalty, which naturalizes total obedience to the regime as a moral duty. These myths are not named as such by Barthes, but they reflect precisely the mechanism he describes—ideologies that masquerade as facts of nature. K-content, by contrast, introduces symbolic systems that directly undermine these myths. As shown in the comparative table below, representations of life in Korean dramas and pop culture provide counter-myths: elected leaders who are flawed and accountable, romantic relationships based on freedom rather than duty, and characters who thrive through merit and autonomy. These depictions expose the subjectivity and artificiality of North Korea's ideological constructs. The above table presents a direct semiotic contrast between the dominant North Korean ideological narratives and their symbolic inversions found in K-content, highlighting how North Korean discourse renders obedience and reverence as moral absolutes, while K-content introduces radically different representations rooted in individual freedom, emotion, and agency. This comparison allows us to visualize how these alternative signs begin to fracture the mythological coherence of the regime's authority.

[58] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1972), 28.

Exhibit E - Table 2 : K-content's Subversion of North Korean Myths

Table 2

North Korean Myths	K-Content Depictions
Only the Kim family can run North Korea, and they are sacred.	The world thrives under a variety of freely elected leaders chosen for their competence, not their name or divinity.
South Korea is one of the most corrupt and dangerous countries in the world.	South Korea is a safe, economically developed, free democratic society.
In North Korea, everything is provided by the state, so people have no reason to go anywhere else or turn to any other entity for any reason.	The characters in K-content live open, affluent lives, and even those who are said to live poorly in South Korea seem to be better off than the upper class members of North Korea.
The Kims are irreproachable and infallible.	Leaders in K-content are criticized, and it's common for them to be held accountable for policy failures.

As the above comparison reveals, K-content does more than offer entertainment—it performs a counter-semiotic function. In direct opposition to the regime's attempt to naturalize the leader's divinity and moralize loyalty, K-content re-signifies these concepts through narratives of democratic leadership, emotional honesty, and personal autonomy – all of which are essential elements of any honest, discursive human right practice. These alternative signs challenge and destabilize the depoliticized language that Barthes identified as central to myth-making. In doing so, K-content enables North Korean youth to mentally distance themselves from the dominant ideological script, engaging in subtle forms of resistance through the performance of dual personas—a loyal "front stage" and a resistant "backstage." By introducing new semiotic resources, K-content not only undermines authoritarian myths but also fosters the interpretive freedom necessary for rights awareness to emerge, aligning with S.E. Merry's

definition of rights consciousness: “individuals’ capacity to define problems and obstacles regarding rights.”[59]

While the existing literature and defector testimonies posit that K-dramas and K-pop often act as catalysts for ideological change, not all K-content consumption experiences can be said to have such an effect. Some interviewees from this study indicated that K-dramas functioned merely as entertainment, describing their encounters with South Korean television programs as diversions rather than agents of change. As noted earlier in this paper, one defector from Pyongyang noted, "We were better off than other regions, so the drama wasn't a particular shock to us, just something to entertain us." This highlights the impact of socioeconomic status and region on K-content consumption outcomes, aligning with Pierre Bourdieu’s assertion that cultural experiences are mediated by socioeconomic context. According to Bourdieu, one’s social habits, or "habitus," are embedded in one’s socioeconomic position; they are not freely chosen. That is to say, they are largely conditioned by one’s degree of access to cultural, social, and economic capital.[60] Consequently, affluent residents of Pyongyang, who enjoy relative economic stability, might perceive external media primarily as entertainment or status symbols (e.g. having time and space for a “diversion” can be considered a form of status in North Korea) that reinforce rather than challenge their privileged positions.

In addition, the romantic narratives in popular K-content programs are laced with themes of wealth and luxury. As such, they can foster unrealistic fantasies in viewers, potentially creating cognitive dissonance between fictional portrayals and reality, or engendering feelings of

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[59] Sally Engle Merry, “Rights Talk and the Experience of Law: Implementing Women’s Human Rights to Protection from Violence,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 25, no. 2 (2003): 343–81, https://doi.org/10.1353/hrq.2003.0020.

[60] Pierre Bourdieu, “The Habitus and the Space of Life-Styles (1984),” in *The People, Place, and Space Reader*, 1st ed. (New York: Routledge, 2014), 208

inferiority. Thus, in some cases, exposure to media can impede rather than nourish individuals. Several North Korean defectors expressed their concern and disappointment about the presence of a gap between the splendor of the dramas and the hard reality of South Korea's competitive society, which was a struggle for them to adapt to. They shared a common feeling that they had to spend much more time and effort acclimating and struggled emotionally to handle this challenge. Despite these limitations, human rights experts continue to argue that South Korean dramas and films remain among the few viable means for North Koreans to access new perspectives and information beyond state propaganda. Consequently, supporting the distribution of K-content through human rights organizations can gradually cultivate rights awareness and foster ideological resistance within North Korea.

The biggest obstacle to K-content having a beneficial influence on North Koreans in terms of raising their human rights awareness is of course the strictness with which it is prohibited by North Korean law. The North Korean government has recently introduced laws called the "Reactionary Ideology and Culture Rejection Law" (2020), the "Pyongyang Cultural Language Protection Law" (2023), and the "State Secret Protection Law" (2023).[61] These legislative changes severely punish individuals who consume or disseminate foreign media, especially South Korean media—5 to 15 years of labor in a camp is a common sentence, and public execution is not unheard of. The laws explicitly criminalize the use of South Korean language expressions, singing styles, and printing materials in South Korean script, and since their enactment, multiple public executions have been reported, including one for the distribution of South Korean movies and music to around 500 people.[62] In another case, a student received a

[61] Ha, Seunghee. *Iron Curtain Ironies: Why DPRK's "Evil Laws" Risk Self-Destruction*. Global NK, November 2024. https://globalnk.org/publication/view.php?cd=COM000165&ctype=1.
[62] Han, Myung Sub. "A Study on North Korea's Reactionary Ideology and Culture Rejection Act." *North Korean Law Society 27* (June 2022): 115–156. https://doi.org/10.31999/SONKL.

five-year labor camp sentence for secretly viewing the series Squid Game, while others involved in its distribution were sentenced to execution.[63] As such, watching or sharing K-content has become extraordinarily risky, raising the proposition that despite its vital importance as a seed for the growth of rights consciousness, it may not be worth it.

It is important, nevertheless, to keep in mind the fundamental transformative power that K-content can offer, and to identify diverse and creative ways to deliver it safely to those who need it most. This research illustrates the contrasting aspects of K-content in North Korea, i.e. the awareness of human rights potential and the fear of consequences. Moving forward, it would be significant to explore more culturally relevant and safer ways to disseminate such content, ways in which human dignity can quietly be pursued in the world's most isolated population.

V. Conclusion

This study has explored how K-content consumption may trigger individuals living in a repressed context to grow in their human rights awareness, and in some cases, make an effort to attain improved human rights conditions. In doing so, it has found that the individuality, autonomy, and critical consciousness K-content fosters in North Korean youth erode trust in the Kim regime and enhance desire for other ways of living. Eun-joo Kim states: “It is especially encouraging that since 2022, some North Korean defectors have reported hearing the term ‘human rights violation’ being used inside North Korea.” This suggests an emerging awareness that has the eventual potential to catalyze political and social change. Viewed through an international human rights framework, the subtle act of resistance that is viewing and disseminating foreign media content represents an ignition point of rights consciousness.

[63] Ibid.

Recent years have seen a near-total shutdown of North Korea's borders, with all smuggling routes severed, exchanges with China blocked, and escape attempts via defection rendered virtually impossible. Surveillance, checkpoints, and public punishments have also intensified, and even minor acts of dissent are met with brutal state responses.[64] As James Heenan, UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in North Korea, remarked that "North Koreans who have experienced previous waves of repression say that the current situation is exceptionally severe—worse than anything they have endured before—and that it is now approaching the limits of what they can psychologically bear."[65] The testimonies shared by three North Koreans in a 2024 BBC documentary reflect an unprecedented level of fear and despair that may surpass even the famine-era repression of the 1990s.[66] In this context, the simple acts of watching, listening, and seeking information are not luxuries—they are, more than ever, fundamental rights. The denial of access to information and cultural content constitutes a violation of the right to information and freedom of thought as enshrined in international human rights law. North Koreans need help, and while the line connecting K-content consumption and freedom has many intermediate points, the evidence is clear that exposure to foreign content is having a transformative effect on the minds of young North Koreans.

Ultimately, human rights do not emerge from legal frameworks or formal declarations alone. They originate from intrinsic human experiences—feelings, imaginings, and desires for a life of greater dignity and freedom. One interviewee poignantly captured this notion: "Watching Korean dramas felt like creating a secret space inside myself. It was the one place even Kim Jong-un couldn't touch. It was my freedom." This intimate act, embodying both Scott's notion of

[64] BBC News Korea, "'I'm Trapped Here, Just Waiting to Die': Secret Interview with a North Korean Resident," YouTube video, 4:21, April 14, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R8BXubXr5qQ.
[65] Ibid.
[66] Ibid.

a hidden transcript and Erving Goffman's formulation of a front stage and backstage, speaks to K-content's significance as an important catalyst in the ongoing struggle for human rights within North Korea, making it deserving of continued scholarly attention and sustained advocacy support. Future research should draw on insights from multiple disciplines in an attempt to explore the circumstances under which the seeds of resistance planted by K-content can blossom into overt political activism and societal change. Also, as Eun-joo Kim advocates for, K-content should be created that reflects the everyday struggles, hidden aspirations, and suppressed emotions of North Koreans rather than relying mainly on glamorous celebrity imagery or hyperbolic narratives. Finally, securing the basic freedom of information access for North Korean citizens—recognized not only as a fundamental human right but also a precondition for autonomy and dignity—demands urgent, sustained, and coordinated engagement from the international community.

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