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North Korean Patriotism: Assessing the Successes and Failures of a Nation

Christopher GREEN* and Steven DENNEY

Abstract

This paper investigates North Korean patriotism. It seeks to establish whether a state that has overwhelmingly failed to provide basic public goods can nevertheless produce and sustain the devotion and support of some or all of the population—in other words, arouse patriotic sentiment—and if so, on what terms. The paper approaches the topic using a modified version of the International Social Survey Programme’s national identity survey, specifically those questions that deal with national pride. Using survey findings and selected follow-up interviews, we examine the presence or absence of patriotic sentiment among more than 650 former residents of North Korea. The paper also takes a comparative approach, comparing North Korean patriotism findings with those from former socialist countries to determine whether any patterns exist. We find evidence that, despite enormous state failures, the North Korean state has managed to generate a sense of patriotism and accomplishment for selected components of its state and society, notably in the cultural sphere (e.g., arts and sports). Data from other former socialist states produce similar findings.

Keywords: North Korea, South Korea, defector-migrants, patriotism, public opinion, comparative politics

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Introduction

Nationalism has been chided as, in the words of former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, “a reactionary philosophy masquerading as progressive” (Blair 2015).¹ Given political developments in Brazil, France, Hungary, the United States, United Kingdom, and several other countries where exclusionary nationalist politicians have either come to power or acquired considerable political influence in recent years, this understanding would appear to be accurate (Norris and Inglehart 2019).

However, it is also a view of nationalism colored in large part by relatively recent European history, and by no means shared universally. Not all types of national identification are seen as bad or dangerous.

Patriotism itself can be seen as a normative good, representing a “shared sense of national identity” around which people can claim common membership and belonging.² Not all national pride is the same, either; it is multidimensional and, as we propose here, contingent upon the success of a state to meet the demands of its citizens.³ On which note, there is little doubt that citizen demands are better met in representative political systems, but what about in non-democratic polities where the state has failed to meet the basic needs of its citizens? Can failed or failing authoritarian states produce feelings of pride in the nation?

The research presented in this paper investigates North Korean patriotism. Unusually, it does so in a way that can be measured, seeking empirically to establish whether DPR Korea,⁴ a state that has in recent decades overwhelmingly failed to provide basic public goods such as clean water, reliable electricity, or health care to its population, can nevertheless

1. We concur with Smith and Jarkko (1998) that national pride is a prerequisite of nationalism, but the latter is a stronger emotional force that places one's nation above all else, regardless of circumstances.

2. The case for patriotism as a normative good is made in Nussbaum (2010). The quote here is from Nussbaum as cited in Rorty (1994).

3. Smith and Kim (2006) cover this topic. There is an updated piece to Smith and Jarkko (1998).

4. The official title of the state in question is the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, and Pyongyang's preferred format in English is DPR Korea. Hereafter, we use only North Korea.

produce and sustain the devotion and support of some or all of its population—in other words, arouse patriotic sentiment—and if so, on what terms.⁵ This paper does so using a modified version of the International Social Survey Programme's national identity survey, specifically questions that deal with national pride. Following the literature on national identity, we use a battery of questions about national pride to measure levels of patriotism (Smith and Jarkko 1998; Smith and Kim 2006; Davidov 2011; Citrin et al. 2012). Using survey findings and selected follow-up interviews, we examine the presence or absence of patriotic sentiment among former residents of North Korea and use these findings to highlight those areas in which patriotism is generated. The paper then takes a comparative approach, comparing North Korean patriotism data with data from former socialist countries, to determine whether any patterns exist.

Overall, we find evidence of limited but enduring national pride among North Koreans, and also of citizens of former socialist countries. We note a cross-national pattern of relatively high pride scores for cultural attributes, such as art, literature, and sporting achievements, but relatively lower scores on other attributes such as economic or political achievements. Importantly, we present evidence that the defector-migrant attitudes that we explore are independent of experiences in South Korea and other pre-migration experiences, such as differing conditions in political socialization by historical periods, differences in educational attainment, and geography. Our findings, specific to the study of Korea but with comparative implications, suggest that even citizens of largely failed states nevertheless harbor feelings of identity and pride.

5. The most comprehensive articulation of the extent of North Korea's economic and social collapse in the 1990s and subsequent transition is provided in Kim (2017) and its precursors in Korean.

North Korea and Patriotism: A Role for Ideology?

In North Korea research, ideology is frequently posited as a driver of popular loyalty to the state as a political entity.⁶ Charles Armstrong⁷ (2013, 90) asserts that ideology touches “all areas of life, including economic development, diplomacy, military affairs, and cultural production.”⁸ Cheehyung Kim (2010, 171) describes North Korea’s ostensible guiding ideology (*Juche*⁹) as a “worldview” that functions not only to “justify existing forms of despotic and hegemonic power but also to make conditions of domination appear as independence, as a ‘spirit of self-reliance.’” Jae-jung Suh (2013, 8) proposes that ideology is the “dominant leitmotiv that shapes the ways in which the North’s political, social and economic activities are organized.”

But ideology, as it is studied by scholars of North Korea, extends beyond patriotism, and in none of the above instances do scholars operationalize *ideology* or show specifically how it creates patriotic sentiment. No doubt, this is partly because ideology is an overused and underdefined concept in general, frequently abused interchangeably with concepts like *culture*. Terry Eagleton (1991, 1) lists sixteen different and in some cases mutually incompatible definitions of the term in use. Giovanni Sartori (1991, 243–

6. This is most common in media, as in Beauchamp (2018), but it is also treated with scholarly rigor, as in Myers (2011, 116). Myers does not claim that North Korean ideology has no value, but rather that Western scholars in particular tend to obsess over state-produced propaganda (e.g., *Juche*) read as ideology, and fail to see North Korea for what it really is (Myers 2008, 161–182).

7. We are aware of the confirmed case of extensive academic plagiarism by Charles Armstrong. Our inclusion of Armstrong’s work should not be mistaken as an indication of support in that case. Rather, his is an example of a common, and in our view ill-advised, approach to the study of North Korea. We therefore include it here.

8. Armstrong (2009, 1) further claims that North Korea’s ultimate failure in the late 1960s and 1970s to export its state development model to what was then known as the Third World reflects a contradiction between North Korea’s ideology and “the necessary requirements for active engagement in the international system, particularly the global economy.” Further examples of this tendency to expand the role of ideology past all reasonable limits include Samuel Seongseop Kim, et al. (2007) and Burt (2013).

9. For a critical examination of *Juche*, see Myers (2014).

357, 249) writes that ideology has been “deprived of all heuristic validity, let alone testability, by having been stretched to a point of meaninglessness.” Eagleton and Sartori wrote their critiques in 1991, but they are as valid today as they were thirty years ago. In North Korea-related research, where a combination of Pyeongyang’s all-encompassing ideological rhetoric and a long-standing dearth of empirical data on the country makes it all the more tempting to invoke *ideology* as an explanatory variable, conceptual stretching, as described by Sartori (1970), is a significant hindrance to understanding the country and its people.

This paper does not dismiss the capacity of ideology to influence patriotic sentiment in North Korea. Clearly, ideology has a social function, and seventy years of ideological propaganda delivered through a web of state institutions and near daily ideological activities nationwide are bound to have an impact on public perceptions of state and society.¹⁰ However, we do believe it is problematic to invoke ideology as an explanatory variable. There is little reason to draw upon such a nebulous concept to explain the presence or absence of patriotic sentiment among the population of North Korea when more robust approaches exist to a similar end. In particular, the presence of more than 30,000 North Koreans in South Korea provides avenues for assessment of the North Korean state’s attempts to generate patriotic sentiment through surveys of the views of those who used to live there.

In this paper, then, we use surveys and selected interviews to interrogate the presence or absence of feelings of pride in various attributes of the North Korean state and society among respondents who were fully socialized into North Korea’s socialist system. These attributes represent aspects of the North Korean nation-building project, and levels of pride in these areas act as a way of gauging North Korean views about how the nation-building project has gone—what have been the successes, the failures, and finally, how the North Korean experience stacks up against the experiences of other socialist states from the former Eastern Bloc.

10. For more on the way ideology manifests in daily life in North Korea, see Suk Young Kim (2010) and Ryang (2012).

Data, Measurement, and Findings

The methodology employed in this paper involves analysis of surveys of members of the resettled defector-migrant North Korean community in South Korea. It is the belief of these authors that not only can survey methods be an effective route to understanding North Korea, but also that survey methods are the only credible means of researching North Korean patriotic sentiment at this time.

It is to all intents and purposes impossible to conduct social science research inside North Korea. To do so would, it is assumed, expose the North Korean people and society to unacceptable outside scrutiny.¹¹ In addition to harboring an extremely conservative stance on security, it is further assumed that the government in Pyongyang eschews such research because it does not wish to have confirmed what is already widely suspected and arguably a matter of common sense: that in North Korean society there is not, contrary to government claims, monolithic conformity among the populace.¹²

Alas, however, the prevailing security situation in Korea makes it difficult to empirically prove this assumption one way or the other. Analysis of official state publications and artifacts abroad is not relevant. There are archives, including most famously Record Group 242 held in the United States, but this only provides a snapshot of North Korea before the Korean

11. "Beyond Parallel," a research program run out of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, does attempt surveys within the country about a wide-range of issues, among other research goals. A commendable effort, but one would be hard-pressed to think that citizens interviewed or surveyed in North Korea are providing their true preferences or opinions. Opinions that run contrary to accepted discourse could lead to great harm to the individual, including imprisonment and possibly death. See Beyond Parallel at <https://beyondparallel.csis.org/> (last accessed May 24, 2019). Media organizations, such as *Daily NK* and *Rimjingang*, secretly operate within North Korea to collect data and stories on matters of everyday life, economics, politics, etc. Western media, such as the Associated Press, have attempted to establish a presence in North Korea, although their ability to operate as a free press is practically impossible. For a discussion on the AP's Pyongyang bureau and the information environment in North Korea, see Cathcart and Denney (2013).

12. The country's official position is the opposite. Visitors to the country can scarcely fail to notice propaganda promoting the "single-hearted unity" of the people.

War, offering limited insight to researchers interested in the present.¹³ One can get a certain distance in some fields using satellite imagery, but public opinion is not one of them.¹⁴ As of now, the only viable route for such subjects is through the resettled defector-migrant community.

Though the existence of a viable approach is broadly welcomed, there are several challenges to it. The first, and most obvious, regards selection bias. Defector-migrants are understood as people who self-selected into this group by virtue of having defected. Their opinion is thus seen as reflective of defectors' attitudes and not that of North Korean citizens more broadly. This hurdle is the most problematic for those doing research on North Korea via defector-migrants. Nevertheless, while we do not contest the challenging nature of our empirical strategy, we side with Byung-yeon Kim (2017) in approaching defector-migrants as a sample of the North Korean population from which one can make valid inferences.¹⁵

Second, one may doubt the appropriateness of using defector-migrant surveys to investigate politically sensitive topics at all. When asking people questions on sensitive topics, it is an ever-present risk that preference falsification may bias responses (Kuran 1987; Krumpal 2013; Denney et al. 2020). The problem of preference falsification confronts all observational studies of a potentially sensitive nature. In the South Korean case, the root cause is the country's relationship with North Korea and those who come

13. Though publications based on this archive are frequently fascinating, e.g., Suzy Kim (2016).

14. This area has seen spectacular growth since the resolution of commercial satellite imagery improved dramatically in the early 2010s. Some of this work is revelatory, whilst some is contentious or even tendentious, but there is no doubt that there is more and more of it. See Pollack (2018).

15. Denney (2018) reviews Kim's rationale (see B. Kim [2017, 41–217]), specifically his claim that because North Korean defectors do not come exclusively or even mainly from marginalized groups and are largely similar to the North Korean population, one can use this group to make inferences about the attitudes and behavior of the North Korean population. The pre-migration statistics on the sample used in this study also show that sample's diversity. Of course, the under-sampling of males or those from borderland regions are ever-present challenges and underscore the non-random process of selection into this group (as least by gender and origin). The alternative approach to using defector-migrants as a group is to look for in-group variation across key variables and draw inferences therein (see for example, Hur [2018]).

from it, which is schizophrenic in nature. Even setting aside methodological concerns surrounding the utilization of information from defector-migrants as a window into North Korea, the South's simultaneous pursuit of co-ethnic homogeneity ('We are one!') and statist nationalism ('We are different, and moreover you are dangerous.') leaves the community of resettled North Koreans in a vulnerable position (Chubb 2014; Green and Epstein 2015).¹⁶

These issues are amplified by an arguably outdated piece of anti-communist (anti-North Korea) legislation, the National Security Law (Shin and Lee 2018). Promulgated in 1948, the law forbids praise or overt support for the North Korean regime and has been repeatedly used to silence or combat political dissent (Kraft 2006). The environment that the law creates (even when infrequently enforced) restricts the freedom to speak positively about North Korea—for former residents and native-born South Koreans alike (Chubb 2014, 136–150).

Ever-mindful of the challenges faced by our choice of research design, this research uses a combination of random and purposive sampling methods to survey the defector-migrant population. Two samples were drawn. From June–August 2016, a total of 352 members of the North Korean migrant population in South Korea were sampled, using a mixed-method of face-to-face and online interviews in three distinct locations in and immediately outside of Seoul. Participants were recruited via religious and welfare institutions in Seoul, as well as from the researchers' private

16. South Korean society has long had a conflicted relationship with newcomers from North Korea. On the one hand, a long history of living together prior to 1945 produces a long-standing desire to emphasize ethnic homogeneity between the peoples of the two states. Stemming from an ethnically based conception of the nation, it treats persons of Korean blood as members of the ethnic nation irrespective of their citizenship and emphasizes unification of the ethnic Koreans of North and South Korea as the ultimate goal of Republic of Korea government policy. But on the other hand, South Korean society also evinces the desire to make Others out of arriving North Koreans—as either evil communists or destitute failures, often both at the same time—which Chubb (2014) explains as part and parcel of South Korean statist nationalism. This has the effect of placing the two peoples (as well as migrant ethnic Koreans from China, Japan, and the United States) in a hierarchical structure wherein South Koreans are regarded as superior to North Koreans. As Christopher Green and Stephen Epstein (2015) note, South Korean media participate fully in the structuring of similarity and difference along the vectors of homogeneity and Othering in this way.

networks. Then, between December–February 2018–2019, another 350 defector-migrants were sampled. The second sample was drawn from a South Korean Ministry of Unification database of defectors, managed by the state-run Hana Foundation. Participants were drawn at random from the database. It was confirmed that every participant only took part once. The two samples are pooled here, yielding a total sample size of 702.

Importantly, survey respondents were made aware that no personally identifiable information would be maintained and that survey responses would be stored anonymously.¹⁷ We firmly believe that respondents were provided a genuine feeling of anonymity such that they would be comfortable expressing their true preferences. Alternative measurement strategies, such as the item count technique (Krumpal 2013), can aide in overcoming biases in responses due to social desirability or related effects, but such experimental methods were beyond the scope of this project. It is for reasons such as these that we made every attempt possible to provide respondents with an appropriate environment for taking the surveys.

Since we are interested in using the defector-migrant population to make cautious inferences about North Korea, we removed respondents who did not spend through age 15 in North Korea.¹⁸ Those who did are counted as having been fully socialized or *come of age* in North Korea, otherwise they were removed from the dataset. The new sample yields 647 valid respondents. We hold that these respondents can be considered truly North

17. All survey respondents were compensated with a small amount in cash. Given the preference of many respondents for wire transfers, some personally identifiable information was temporarily maintained, but always de-linked from survey responses. Interviews, too, sometimes required the collection of personal information, but such information was not stored. These practices follow the norms and expectations of ethics protocols maintained by the ethics review boards of the University of Toronto, which approved and reviewed this project.

18. We consider 15 years the bare minimum amount of time that one needs to spend in North Korea to be considered a socialized North Korean. There is much debate regarding the minimum amount of time a migrant needs to have spent in their home country before they can be considered minimally socialized. Some argue for a minimum of 12 years, others 18 or higher (White, et al. 2008, 268–281). Our decision to use 15 years of age would also match the UN census in North Korea conducted in 2008, which counted those aged 15 and above.

Korean and their responses reflective of attitudes and opinions conditioned by socialization into the country’s political and social institutions.¹⁹ Table 1 reports descriptive statistics for the final sample.

Table 1. 2016 National Identity Survey of North Korean Migrants in South Korea

Number of respondents	647
Average years in North Korea	34
Average age	45
Female respondents	485 (75%)
<i>Origins</i>	
Pyeongyang and Pyeongan-do	8.04%
Hamgyeong-do	54.56%
Hwanghae-do	3.09%
Gangwon-do	3.09%
Jagang-do	0.62%
Yanggang-do	24.88%
Unspecified	5.72%
<i>Education</i>	
Less than high school	3.86%
High school	71.72%
College, university, or above	22.72%
Unspecified	1.7%
<i>Perceived living standard</i>	
High	11.75%
Middle-high	8.19%
Middle	26.58%
Middle-low	17.16%

19. The claim that formative or early life experiences (i.e., socialization) generate attitudes and predispositions resilient over the course of one’s lifecycle finds support in the social science literature. See, among others, Beck and Jennings (1991) and Niemi and Jennings (1991). For more recent research, see Cox (2014), which is based on Ghitza and Gelman (2014).

Low	34.78%
Unspecified	1.55%
<i>Resettlement Exposure</i>	
New arrivals (2 years or less in ROK)	14.53%
Newly Resettled (3–5 years)	21.48%
Fully resettled (6+ years)	61.97%
Unspecified	2.01%

While the surveys implemented in 2016 and 2018 were both long and diverse, taking 15 minutes to complete by most respondents, our area of inquiry here concerns only a battery of questions about subjective feelings of national pride towards various characteristics of North Korean state and society. Respondents were asked to state whether they feel: very proud, somewhat proud, not very proud, or not proud at all in each of nine different areas of North Korean national life, ranging from the social to the economic, the political and the cultural. “How proud are you of North Korea in terms of...”

- 1. The operation of its socialist system
- 2. The Baekdu bloodline
- 3. Its revolutionary (anti-Japanese) history
- 4. Its promotion/spread of the Juche idea
- 5. Its military power
- 6. Its political influence in the world
- 7. Its economic achievements
- 8. Its social welfare system
- 9. Its achievements in science and technology
- 10. Its fair and equal treatment of all groups in society
- 11. Its achievements in sports
- 12. Its achievements in art and culture

The items constitute a mixture of universal attributes of all states, such as political influence, military power—an area in which North Korea claims great strength—art and culture, and general economic achievements, and

other attributes chosen for their specific resonance in the North Korean case. This second group included the political achievements of the “Baekdu bloodline”—a term that to North Koreans means primarily Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il and Kim Jong-un—as well as the country’s legacy of anti-Japanese activities in the period before liberation from Japanese imperial rule and the promotion and spread of *Juche*.

It is our contention that responses to these questions act as markers of patriotic attachment, or the lack thereof, to elements of North Korea’s 70-year-old nation-building project. The pride items, which can be further subdivided into three categorical baskets—ideological (items 1 to 6), socioeconomic (items 7 to 10), and cultural (items 11 and 12)—represent de facto referenda on the North Korean state’s capacity to generate patriotic sentiment. Appendix Table A.2 provides the full questions in the original Korean.

For our empirical analysis, we report and analyze the adjusted mean scores derived from linear probability models for each of the twelve pride items, which adjusts averages based on relevant covariates included on the right-hand side of the models (see Appendix A for model specifications and further explanation). We use a model-based approach to adjusting our estimates in lieu of reporting non-weighted averages from the sample or applying our own post-stratification weights. This approach is best in our assessment, given the lack of updated and definitive data on North Korea’s population.

Figure 1 shows adjusted averages for the sample across all items, with “very proud” and “somewhat proud” reported as 1, else 0 (some item labels truncated for space).²⁰ Our findings show significant and interesting variation across items, with those considered cultural—art (and culture) (.49 or 49%) and sports (53%)—generating relatively more pride. Conversely, the Baekdu bloodline, which is synonymous with one’s support for Kimist leadership, scores significantly lower (21%), as do other ideological items, such as revolutionary history (17%) and *Juche* (19%).

20. Table A.1 in the Appendix reports regression model specification and output.

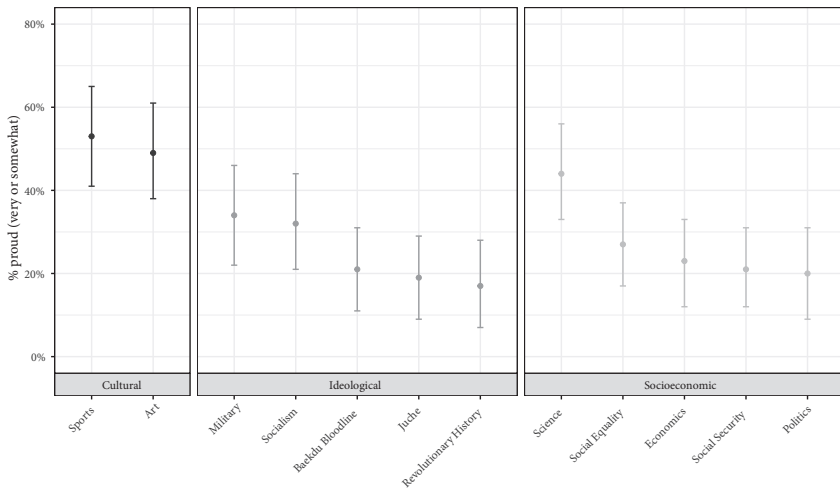


Figure 1. Levels of pride in components of North Korean state and society among defector-migrants

Notes: Data is 2016 and 2018/9 North Korean Defector-Migrant Surveys. Estimates are derived from regressions. Error bars are 90% confidence intervals.

The first thing to note is that responses are not uniform and vary as one ought to expect, suggesting that respondents paid proper attention to the survey and answered the questions sincerely. This is a non-trivial finding in itself, but beyond that, there are two larger takeaways.

First, the average respondent does not find ideological constructs *per se* to be sources of pride. And yet, pride in the North Korean arts and to a lesser extent sport is considerable, irrespective of the fact that much of the content of the North Korean arts is ideological in tone, being directly related to or connected with the Kim regime.

Among the 352 survey takers from the initial 2016 survey, several respondents participated in follow-up interviews. Given the importance of security for this sensitive population, the methodology for selecting follow-ups was *ad hoc*; all those who expressed a willingness to be interviewed via a specific question on the questionnaire, were interviewed. All interviews took place between July 12 and August 14, 2016 and each interview lasted approximately one hour. The interviews, which were sometimes

conducted in groups at the behest of the interviewees or via phone calls, were conducted by a native Korean interlocutor and qualified social worker. The researchers, acutely aware of the impact that the presence of Caucasian male academics might have on responses, remained as divorced from the data collection process as possible. Surveys were implemented by Hana Foundation staff or defector-migrant community interlocutors and the interviews analyzed here were conducted without any interference by the researchers. While the surveys were taken first, a significant amount of time transpired (several weeks, at least) between taking the survey and the interview; we do not anticipate the surveys had any significant influence on the interview answers. For this paper, we randomly selected six of the interviews for closer analysis. Table 2 provides selected demographic data of the interviewed and cited respondents.²¹

Table 2. Demographic Data of Interview Respondents Featured in This Paper

Respondent	Gender	Age (at interview)	Region of birth	Date of defection
A	M	75	Yanbian, PRC ^a	1996
B	F	44	Hamgyeongbuk-do province	2003
C	F	31	Hamgyeongbuk-do province	2007
D	F	43	Hamgyeongbuk-do province	2004
E	F	23	Hamgyeongbuk-do province	2008
F	F	69	Hamgyongnam-do province	1998

Notes: Detailed information on place of birth is omitted for security reasons.
^a This individual, while born in China, returned to North Korea with their native Korean parents at a very early (pre-adolescent) age.

Interviews with defector-migrants bear the survey findings out, offering hints to the question of why the findings should be so. Survey respondents

21. We regard the structured survey responses as constituting the main evidentiary basis for the claims in this paper. We provide a sample of responses from the interview component to color those claims.

explain that irrespective of ideological content, North Koreans have pride—and defector-migrants retain that pride—in those items at which the North Korean state has succeeded in whole or in part (or claims to have succeeded). That is: the arts, sports, and science and technology (even the military is awarded some pride). In these instances, vitally, lived reality is roughly in concordance with the content of government rhetoric.

However, where lived reality is grossly at odds with the content of ideological propaganda, respondents returned lower pride scores.²² And where a respondent from any age group has direct experience behind the scenes of ideological productions, memories of these experiences mean that their pride scores are further reduced.

One male (interviewee A) who departed North Korea in 1996 offered up a position representative of a considerable number of older respondents who find in North Korean cultural forms a wellspring of stories and ideas that contribute to their self-understanding. While harboring no greater respect for North Korea's ideological and socio-economic outcomes than anyone of any age, he showed high regard for the country's achievements in the arts, sports, and science and technology, ending the interview with a flourish: "North Korea does [culture] really well!"

When questioned on the link between North Korean cultural productions and the ideological structures that underpin them, the man was clear: "These are separate things." He continued:

There is the part that is idolization of the Kim family, and then there is the artistic and cultural [parts]... these should be seen as separate things. Not having pride in our arts because they laud the Kim household... it makes no sense.

At age 75, the man comes from the generation of North Korean defector-migrants who grew up in the heyday of the North Korean state; the 1960s and 1970s. The tendency of this cohort toward pride in the accomplishments

22. Naturally, individual responses are dependent in large part on direct experience vis-à-vis North Korea's economic and political fortunes, which have waxed and waned over the years.

of that state is arguably unsurprising. A state that delivers on its policies will tend to be judged favorably, and in that era North Korea emerged from the Korean War—a war that North Koreans are taught (1) they did not start; and more importantly, (2) won—in ruins and was rebuilt from the ground up via a system of mass mobilization that, whilst undeniably coercive, had a cohesive effect on society.²³

Yet it is not the case that North Korea is a country for old men (and women). Time after time, the young demonstrate equal or greater pride in the culture of North Korea than those in middle age. One young woman, born in 1994 and thus entirely divorced from the Kim Il-sung period (interviewee E), agreed that “of course you can like North Korea art and culture without feeling pride in the Kim family.” At just 23, the woman didn’t even find it troubling to quote Kim Il-sung, although she got the quotation wrong and had to correct herself.

Kim Il-sung said that a great item of art can move the hearts of millions...
no, he said it can carry the hearts of millions [...].

Direct experience can be a problematic factor, however. On one occasion, a focus group interview was conducted with a 31-year-old female who left North Korea in 2007 at the age of 20 (interviewee C), and a 44-year-old who lived there until 2003, leaving at the age of 31 (interviewee D). Both women were from towns on the Duman (Tumen) River in Hamgyeongbuk-do province, on North Korea’s border with China.

The younger woman showed greater pride in North Korea than her older co-interviewee, with an emphasis placed on cultural items. The image of a people moving as one looks visually exceptional, the younger woman explained with noticeable enthusiasm after raising the example of the Arirang Mass Games. It looks like “people acting as one.”

Pride appears to be partially dependent on having avoided the hardships of direct experience. Propaganda narratives do not manifest in reality without the effort—often coerced, rarely entirely voluntary—

23. Although the regime’s ideology was, naturally, subverted. See for example, Mironenko (2014).

of the population. In middle school, the older interviewee had formed part of the card section of a regional variant of the Arirang Mass Games. Drawing on this experience, she highlighted the hardships of preparation for ideologically centered performances, suggesting in a moment of shared humor between the two women that the younger woman had pride in such things precisely because the rigors of preparation for public ideological events were alien to her, whereas she herself had experienced the dark side of ideological propaganda.

But whereas pride, or otherwise, in North Korean culture may be linked to direct experience, it seemingly is not linked closely to one's views of the ruling political system. This runs contrary to conventional wisdom about the pernicious impact of ideology in support of the Kim family on the thought processes of North Korean residents (i.e., brainwashing). Pride, wherever it exists, may simply be down to the quality of the products themselves. According to the 75-year-old male, responses (*baneung*) to and emotions (*gamdong*) engendered by North Korean cultural productions reflect the inherent qualities of those productions, which in his estimation are very natural and convincing expressions of feelings that ordinary North Koreans share.

Naturally, this last finding may not be universally popular with the North Korean defector-migrant community. Whereas many defector-migrants are comfortable with the fact that their cultural identities as North Koreans are revealed to be unexpectedly sticky—they don't radically alter post-escape—others suffer from cognitive dissonance as a result. One 43-year-old woman who left North Korea in 2003 (interviewee E) commented on a feeling of being "slightly unsettled" by the reality that her emotional attachment for the culture of North Korea lingers:

It is not as if I am thrown deep into doubt by this, but I do think to myself, "What is this feeling?" We defectors don't think about it in depth as we are not by and large political, but nevertheless that is our confused feeling.

One question that critical readers of these insights may raise is whether there is any significant difference between those newly arrived in South Korea and those having resettled some years ago. Scholars who use defector-

migrant surveys to make inferences about public opinion or behavior of North Korean people tend to imply that there is. They say this method ought to be limited to those who are newly arrived, so that answers are not confounded (or are less confounded), by the process of resettlement.²⁴ Otherwise, it is presumed that an exposure effect will skew data, perhaps due to the development of a diasporic nationalism.

In Figure 2, we interrogate this assumption, exploring average scores across three groups: (1) newly arrived (those having spent two years or less in South Korea); (2) newly resettled (two to five years in South Korea); and (3) fully resettled (six or more years in South Korea). The findings indicate that opinions remain basically similar across groups, with some notable variation. The differences, although noticeable (especially for the military, social quality, and social security), are limited.

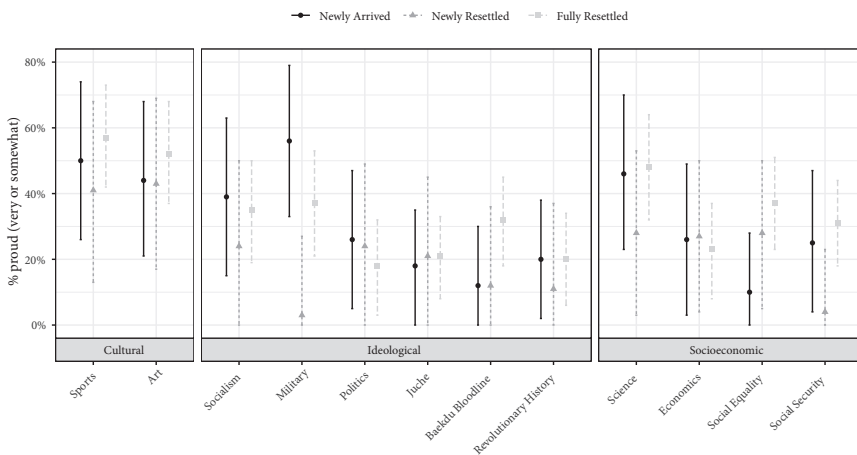


Figure 2. Levels of pride in components of North Korean state and society by time spent in South Korea

Notes: Data is 2016 and 2018/9 North Korean Defector–Migrant Surveys. ‘Newly Arrived’ (n=101); ‘Newly Resettled’ (n=143); ‘Fully Resettled’ (n=403). Estimates derived from replicating baseline regression models. Due to sample size, the gender and borderlands variables are excluded for ‘Newly Arrived.’ Error bars are 90% confidence intervals.

24. On this, see B. Kim (2017), especially chapter 3.

The takeaway from the data findings is that attitudes towards certain qualities of life and experience in North Korea are not strongly impacted by the length of time one has spent in South Korea. This is not always the case; political attitudes towards democratic participation change over the length of resettlement (see for instance, Hur [2018]). However, in the case of the pride responses, resettlement/exposure does not have a significant impact. At the very least, this supports our preferred method of analyzing all respondents' views, regardless of when they arrived. This finding also supports our claim that these attitudes are resilient opinions of people who came of age in North Korea (i.e., support for the socialization hypothesis). Similarly, we do not find any significant group differences by political generation, geographical location (borderland residents vs. interior), prior education, or gender (see Appendix for further analysis). In short, we can conclude based on the data presented here that the opinions expressed are both independent of pre- and post-migration experiences.

North Korea in Comparative Perspective

In order to place the survey findings for the North Korean case in comparative perspective, we consider responses from a nearly identical battery of questions from a national identity survey in former socialist-authoritarian countries. The International Social Survey Programme's (ISSP) national identity questionnaire was first implemented in 1995, shortly after the Soviet Union had collapsed and, along with it, many of the socialist regimes constituting its member states. Three countries are considered—Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, and Russia—at a time when they were making transitions to new, seemingly democratic regimes.²⁵ The transitions were just underway, and the realities of former socialist life were anything but a distant memory. The focus on the individual attitudes of socialist citizens,

25. These four countries represent all relevant cases among those surveyed in 1995. Other countries surveyed (e.g., Slovenia) contain respondents from the former Soviet Bloc, but the questions ask about their opinion regarding their newfound country (not about the country that existed during communist rule, which, in the case of Slovenia, would be Yugoslavia).

rather than institutions, is a surprisingly open and somewhat unexplored area of inquiry (for recent work focused on institutions, see Dolenec [2013]; Carter et al. [2016]). Of those investigating individual attitudes in former socialist societies, Anja Neundorf (2010) finds strong empirical support that socialist socialization generates distinct and enduring attitudes about political systems. More recently, Grigore Pop-Eleches and Joshua Tucker (2017) come to a similar conclusion but across a wide range of political, economic, and social attitudes among those who lived through communism. None of these authors have considered North Korea.

Of course, this comparative design is not ideal. It would be preferable to consider the opinions of citizens currently residing in regimes identical to North Korea's—just as it would be preferable to consider the opinions of North Koreans rather than defector-migrants—but given data and real-world limitations, such a design is not possible. In accordance with our methodology for the North Korean case, we consider only those citizens who were fully socialized (i.e., spent years 1–15) under communist party rule. This selection strategy is appropriate as we are not interested in those having come of age post-Soviet transition; it also permits us to control for the possible confounding effects of regime change, given the assumption that socialization experiences generate enduring political attitudes. We chose the 1995 survey instead of a more recent survey wave in order to limit the effects of exposure to a new regime type and increase the total sample size of socialist citizens. Of course, the collapse and transition itself may have had significant effects on opinions—just as the act of escape from North Korea may also—but we cannot take that into account. In many ways, the comparison with North Korea is more appropriate than not given that North Korea at the time of the survey had also entered a period after the collapse of its own socialist system—albeit with the important caveat that the regime did not transition. Table 3 shows the period of communist rule and the number of respondents who came of age under that system of governance across the four comparative cases.

Table 3. Selected Former Socialist Countries Surveyed by ISSP

Country	Historical Period Considered	N
Bulgaria	1946–1989	583
Hungary	1949–1989	501
Poland	1952–1990	744
Russia	1923–1991	1,445

The full battery of questions about pride in various aspects of state and society are measured. Most questions are identical to the ones asked to North Korean defector-migrants, but not all. There is no question about the *socialist system*, nor were citizens of former East European countries asked about North Korea-specific items (Baekdu bloodline, revolutionary/anti-Japanese history, *Juche*). Figure 3 shows the weighted averages²⁶ for pride items in all four countries under consideration.

What do we find? Like in North Korea, art (and culture) and sports are items in which socialist citizens maintain relatively high levels of pride, whereas politics, economics, and social security are not favorably assessed. Items such as social equality, the military, and for some countries, science (and technology), garner low or modest levels of pride (much like in North Korea). There are some differences in opinion. In Hungary and Russia, for instance, socialist citizens retain relatively high pride in science. For Russia, that is likely a consequence of the country’s advancement in this field during the Cold War and possibly Hungary, too. Given the scope conditions of this paper, we are not in a position to fully consider why responses vary across former socialist countries and North Korea, only that they are largely similar. Citizens also show high levels of pride in their country’s history, although it’s important to note that we modified the history item for the North Korean survey from the generic, original question to one specific to North Korea’s revolutionary (anti-Japanese) history. One should thus be careful in comparing history scores.

26. ISSP weights are used throughout.

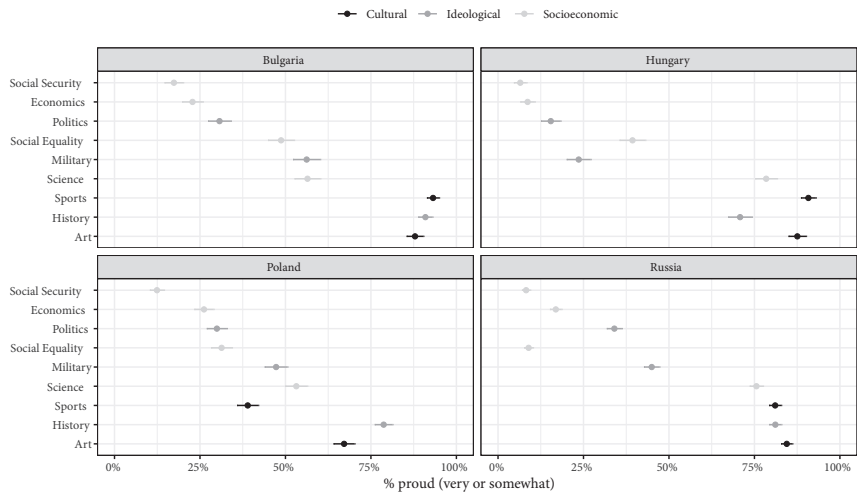


Figure 3. Levels of pride in components of state and society for selected former socialist countries

Notes: Data is ISSP 1995. Error bars are 90% confidence intervals. Missing variables excluded.

What do the comparative findings then tell us about what North Koreans think about their country? First, the results are noticeably similar. Is this a predictable result? Perhaps, but given the abject failures of the North Korean state, it is notable that the country's leadership has not completely failed to generate pride and support among the population. This finding suggests that the state does not exercise totalitarian control and influence, but neither does its oppression generate total rejection of its flawed nation-building efforts.

Given these findings, one may be moved to wonder whether all citizens of countries, successful and not, answer similarly to the socialist citizens considered here. From the same ISSP survey in 1995, we also selected three democracies (Japan, Netherlands, and the United States).²⁷ The results, provided in the Appendix (see Figure A.1), are significantly different than

27. All respondents are counted in the Netherlands and the United States. In Japan, only those citizens who came of age after 1945 are counted.

those of North Korea or former socialist countries. Democratic citizens show higher levels of pride across a greater number of items. In other words, the findings we have presented for North Korea and similar countries are unique to the experience of citizens in these countries. That respondents from North Korea align most closely with citizens from former socialist countries but not with those from democratic countries is instructive to how we view national pride and nation-building in the modern era.

Conclusions and Discussion

This paper set out to interrogate the capacity of the North Korean state to generate patriotic sentiment in its population. It sought to establish whether Pyongyang, which has in recent decades overwhelmingly failed to provide basic public goods to its population, can nevertheless produce and sustain the devotion and support of some or all of the population, and if so, how.

Examining levels of pride in various attributes of North Korea's state and society, we find that North Korea's ideology, politics, and economics are all sources of very little patriotic devotion. However, there is more than a residual amount of support for items such as culture, art, and sport. Scientific achievements, too, enjoys more than a modicum of pride among those who grew up in North Korea. Our interviews corroborate the survey findings, painting a more detailed and nuanced picture of (North) Korean patriotism than is customarily the case. The findings are found to be consistent with socialist citizens from the former Soviet Bloc.

We find also that attitudes vary little to none across different cuts of our sample. Notably, there is little to no exposure or resettlement effects—length of time spent in South Korea does not matter. What people thought when they arrived in South Korea is more or less indistinguishable from what they still think. We do not find significant variation between other social groups either. In the Appendix, we show that there is no significant difference in opinions between political generations (Kim Il-sung and post-Kim Il-sung). We also find that hailing from borderland provinces or one's level of education yields no notable differences in responses. In short, feelings of

pride in achievements of North Korea's state and society are independent of life experiences in South Korea. Also, the levels of pride observed for the overall sample remains consistent (i.e., there are no significant interactions with background characteristics); there is, in other words, a consensus. Our findings have implications for future research, which may tentatively embark from the presumption that defector-migrants can, under certain circumstances, be treated as a proxy for the North Korean population inside North Korea.

Unfortunately, the research method involved here leaves behind some unanswerable questions. Would we get approximately similar results if we surveyed a random sample of the North Korean population, or is the very moment of departure from North Korea decisive in setting the tone for a migrant's attitudes and opinions? This cannot be definitely answered, because the peninsula milieu does not allow for it. North Korea does not allow social science research and its Central Bureau of Statistics does not publish credible information. South Korea continues to have a schizophrenic relationship with its northern neighbor. But our comparative cases from the former Soviet Bloc fill in some of the gaps, suggesting that we would get approximately similar results if it were possible, and, siding with other Korean scholars such as Kim Byung-yeon (2017, 98), we therefore cautiously suggest that answers would not differ significantly.²⁸

Overall, the evidence provided in this paper shows where the North Korean state succeeds, perhaps in spite of itself, in cultivating an enduring sense of pride in certain qualities of state and society. North Koreans, even after resettlement in the South, harbor positive views of a country where so many things have gone so horribly wrong.

28. Kim asserts that we can treat defectors *as if* they are a random sample of the North Korean population. Kim's view, of course, requires one to ignore a huge geographical imbalance (the majority of defectors hail from Hamgyeongbuk-do and Yanggang-do provinces; the sample presented here is no different). Our sample is a varied and diverse as any other sample being used to infer about North Koreans' opinions or activities. A critical review of Kim's book and this perspective can be read in Denney (2018). A more thorough overview of defector-migrants as sources of information for researchers can be read in Song and Denney (2019).

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Appendix:

Table A.1 reports the linear probability model summaries used to find adjusted averages for the two samples used in this paper. The models regress the outcome variables (pride items) by relevant covariates, which include: a dummy variable for whether the respondent came of age under Kim Il-sung’s rule (a correction for both age and generation); a dummy variable for whether the respondent identifies as female; a dummy indicating whether someone was educated at a technical or university level or above in the DPRK; a categorical variable for class derived from perceived living standards, with high class defined as those *middle-high* and above and low class as those *middle-low* and below (*middle* is the reference category); a dummy variable for whether one originates from the Sino-North Korea borderland provinces (Pyeonganbuk-do, Yanggang-do, Hamgyeongbuk-do, or Jagang-do); and a dummy variable indicating whether the respondent grew up in the capital city (Pyeongyang).

Missing variables (NAs) and unsure responses (Don't know) are imputed using predictive mean matching. Exclusion of unsure responses does not significantly impact findings. Appendix Table A.3 provides a breakdown of the NA/Don't know for the outcome variables.

Table A.1. Regression Results for Pride Scores (robust SEs)

	Socialism	Politics	Economics	Science	Sports	Art	Backdo	Military	Rev. History	Social Equality	Juche	Social Security
KIS gen.	0.03 (0.04)	0.02 (0.04)	0.03 (0.04)	-0.004 (0.04)	-0.002 (0.04)	0.05 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.04)	0.04 (0.04)	0.01 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.04)	0.01 (0.04)
Female	0.10** (0.04)	0.05 (0.04)	0.06 (0.04)	0.01 (0.05)	0.04 (0.05)	0.07 (0.05)	0.09** (0.04)	0.10** (0.04)	0.14*** (0.04)	0.10** (0.04)	0.05 (0.04)	0.07* (0.04)
University+	0.02 (0.05)	0.02 (0.05)	0.001 (0.05)	0.05 (0.05)	0.08* (0.05)	0.09* (0.05)	-0.02 (0.04)	-0.05 (0.05)	-0.08* (0.04)	-0.04 (0.04)	0.005 (0.04)	0.02 (0.04)
High class	0.12** (0.06)	0.21*** (0.06)	0.18*** (0.06)	0.12** (0.06)	-0.03 (0.06)	0.03 (0.06)	0.08 (0.05)	0.01 (0.06)	0.13** (0.06)	0.14*** (0.05)	0.04 (0.05)	0.08 (0.05)
Low class	-0.03 (0.05)	0.09* (0.04)	0.01 (0.04)	-0.03 (0.05)	-0.05 (0.05)	-0.01 (0.05)	-0.01 (0.04)	-0.04 (0.05)	-0.03 (0.04)	0.01 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.04)	0.04 (0.04)
Borderlands	0.03 (0.05)	0.01 (0.05)	-0.06 (0.05)	-0.01 (0.05)	0.01 (0.05)	0.05 (0.05)	-0.02 (0.05)	0.09* (0.05)	0.03 (0.05)	-0.03 (0.05)	0.05 (0.04)	-0.01 (0.05)
Capital	-0.05 (0.10)	-0.02 (0.11)	-0.07 (0.10)	-0.25** (0.10)	0.07 (0.11)	-0.06 (0.11)	-0.15** (0.07)	-0.02 (0.11)	0.0002 (0.09)	-0.04 (0.09)	0.002 (0.09)	-0.05 (0.10)
Survey year	-0.04 (0.04)	0.03 (0.04)	0.004 (0.04)	0.003 (0.04)	0.02 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.04)	-0.01 (0.03)	-0.06 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.04)	-0.11*** (0.04)	0.002 (0.04)	-0.12*** (0.04)
Constant	0.32*** (0.07)	0.20*** (0.07)	0.23*** (0.07)	0.44*** (0.07)	0.53*** (0.07)	0.49*** (0.07)	0.21*** (0.06)	0.34*** (0.07)	0.17*** (0.06)	0.27*** (0.06)	0.19*** (0.06)	0.21*** (0.06)
N	647	647	647	647	647	647	647	647	647	647	647	647

Notes: “KIS gen” = Kim Il-sung generation; and reference category for “Survey year” is 2016.
***p < .01; **p < .05; *p < .1

Figure A.1 shows pride scores in selected democracies for the 1995 ISSP national identity survey; this figure is relevant to the section “North Korea in Comparative Perspective” and its relevance explained therein. Sample sizes are as follows: Japan (n=737); Netherlands (n=1,992); and USA (n=1,261).

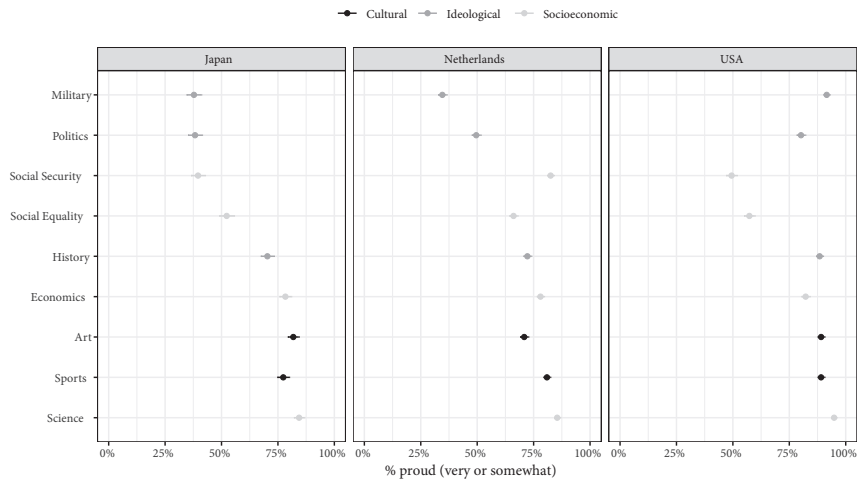


Figure A.1. Levels of pride in components of state and society for selected democracies

Notes: Data is ISSP 1995. Error bars are 90% confidence intervals. Missing variables excluded.

Table A.2: Questions Related to Pride in Aspects of North Korean State and Society (in Korean)

Table A.2. Original Survey Questionnaire

다음 각각에 대해서 귀하는 북한을 얼마나 자랑스럽게 여기는지 당신의 생각을 각각의 질문에 표시해 주시기 바랍니다. (각 줄마다 한 개 이상의 답은 선택하지 마십시오.)

	매우 자랑스럽다	약한 자랑스럽다	별로 자랑스럽지 않다	전혀 자랑스럽지 않다	선택할 수 없다
사회주의가 작동하는 방식	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
세계에서의 정치적 영향력	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
경제적 성취	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
과학기술의 성취	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
스포츠에서 의 성취	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
예술과 문학 에서의 성취	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
백두 혈통의 정치적 지도의 성취	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
군사력	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
항일 혁명 역사	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
사회의 모든 집단들에 대한 공정하고 평등 한 대우	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
주체사상의 성취	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
사회 보장 제도	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Note: The order in which the questions originally appeared differs from the order presented in the paper. The question on pride in the Korean War (or, as it's referred to in North Korea, "The Great Fatherland Liberation War" [Joguk haebang jeonjaeng]) was only administered in the 2019 survey. Results are not reported here.

Table A.2 reports missing variables and unsure responses²⁹ for outcome variables used in this study.

29. For the unsure response option, the original Korean text reads "seontaek-hal su eopda" or "can't choose." We refer to these respondents as those who "don't know."

Table A.3. Excluded Variables Report

	NA	Don't Know	% Total (NA + Don't Know)
Military	14	59	11%
Art	5	64	11%
Sports	8	44	8%
Science	6	39	7%
Revolutionary history	6	25	5%
Economics	6	23	4%
Social equality	5	18	4%
Social security	4	22	4%
Politics	2	25	4%
Socialism	1	23	4%
Juche	3	18	3%
Baekdu bloodline	2	20	3%