

Beautiful Defectors, Part II: Everyday Fashion as Political: Blending into the South Korean Middle Class

By Brian Gleason and Darcie Draudt

Minjung and Kongsuni: Identities in History | During the initial stages of South Korea's economic growth in the 1960s-70s and the subsequent mass migration of rural workers to the cities, fashion was an important way to avoid being labeled as members of the lower class by projecting the image of a higher status. Many of these domestic migrants took part in the larger *minjung* movement ("people's movement") that gained steam during those years, signifying new class divisions and a new sense of class and worker consciousness in South Korea. The *minjung* movement can be understood as a broad social movement that incorporated several disgruntled sectors of society – especially the working class - who sought greater social cohesion and distributive justice. In *The State, Minjung and the Working Class*, Hagen Koo (Professor of Sociology, University of Hawaii) has described several of the neologisms that sprang up as a result of these new social divisions. One of those linguistic creations was the word "*kongsuni*," (factory girl), a pejorative term that evokes the image of a low-level female factory worker. Koo explains that "The label *kongsuni*, in particular, has been hurtful to young female workers, many of whom left their rural homes with high aspirations for upward social mobility."¹

One of the ways the *kongsuni* and the North Korean refugees have each grappled with assimilation is through their appearance. From a collection of essays written by workers during the *minjung* movement, we can observe the significance of how the female workers used fashion to avoid the *kongsuni* label. One worker writes: "But *kongsuni* cannot really hide their identity. They show it however hard they try to do makeup and dress nicely. They pay more attention to clothes, hairdo and makeup in order to hide it. People fault us for spending money on appearance without making enough money, but our reason is to take off the label of *kongsuni* they put on us."²

Refugee Parallels | Despite the obvious differences between the *kongsuni* and the North Korean refugees,³ we can draw some useful parallels between the two. Just as with the urban migration of the *kongsuni* in the 1960s and 1970s, the outflow of female refugees from North Korea since

¹ Hagen Koo, *The State, Minjung and the Working Class*, in Hagen Koo, ed., *State and Society in Contemporary Korea* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp.131-162.

² Dolbege editors, *Kurona urinun ocheui uriga anida* (But we are not who we were yesterday: Collection of workers' essays. Seoul: Dolbege, 1986, 111)

³ Although many of the North Korean refugees in South Korea had an (arguably) more difficult journey to reach their new environment, their treatment and living conditions can be considered an improvement compared to the sweatshop conditions and overt discrimination that many of the *kongsuni* faced. Despite their current struggles, many North Koreans also receive financial assistance and other opportunities that the *kongsuni* lacked, and South Koreans have not created any (widely used) pejorative terms for North Korean refugees.

the 1990s was largely driven by a need to improve their economic circumstances.⁴ Moreover, the *kongsuni* and the North Koreans have each encountered a situation where other Koreans viewed them as outsiders in their newfound environments. Thus, we can still draw a connection between the *kongsuni* and North Korean refugees as marginalized groups trying to fit into a new setting by using a variety of mechanisms, one significant and visible one being the treatment of their outward appearance. The female migrant workers of the 1960s-70s tried to hide their working-class identity, and in a similar vein, the vast majority of North Koreans living in the South do not want anyone to know that they are North Korean.⁵

In this regard, perhaps the most striking comparison to be made between the *kongsuni* and the North Korean refugees in South Korea is the difficult decision of how to dress. The female domestic migrant workers did not want to be stereotyped by their lower class occupational status, so they often spent money to adopt the “correct” clothes, hairdo and makeup to blend in and avoid labels. This proved to be a double-edged sword; despite efforts to regain control of their status they were criticized for spending their scarce money on ostensibly superficial considerations.

Similarly, for some North Koreans living in Seoul, choosing how to present themselves externally can be a delicate balancing act. On the one hand, North Koreans want to dress like their fashionable South Korean counterparts in order to assimilate and avoid attention or labels. On the other hand, some are hesitant to don the chic attire of their South Korean brethren not only because they need to use the money for myriad other purposes (living expenses, education, remittances) but also because most North Koreans here are welfare and scholarship recipients. Since this financial assistance is generally funded by South Korean taxpayers and donors, some North Koreans feel reluctant or awkward spending money on nice clothes, accessories or makeup. Ultimately, many North Koreans in the South - especially the females - opt to dress similarly to their fashionable South Korean counterparts.

⁴ Kyung-Ae Park, “People’s Exit, Regime Stability, and North Korean Diplomacy,” in Kyung-Ae Park, ed., *New Challenges of North Korean Foreign Policy* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 53-79.

⁵ This is true for a variety of reasons, mostly because they don’t want to be ostracized or to have their North Korean identity dominate the conversation or the perception of them. In essence, many North Koreans just want to live normal lives as Koreans instead of North Koreans.



Han Seo-hee, once a member of Kim Jong-il's private musical performance troupe, performs for the audience of "[Now on My Way to Meet You](#)" (*I-jae manara kamnida*; 이제 만나러 갑니다).

Women as Objects | The women's dress could certainly be analyzed for its subscription to South Korean norms: clean cut, a single trend, etc. However, the women's previous experiences as objects in the DPRK context complicates the issue. These are not South Korean women subscribing to the popular standards, but women trying to adapt into a new society. As [Professors of Sociology Kim Huisman \(U. of Maine\) and Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo \(USC\) explain](#), two camps address feminine dress of refugees. The first sees it as oppressive and forcing submission to hegemonic beauty standards. The other, one which just as Huisman and Hondagneu-Sotelo applied to the case of Bosnian women settling in Vermont, we apply here. This emerging view has roots in third-wave feminism and argues that hyperfeminine forms of dress are "fluid, ambiguous, and often empowering" (2006).



Members of the [Pyongyang Folk Art Group](#) (평양민속예술단) perform on the South Korean variety show, “Now on My Way to Meet You.”

For example, using the case of the female defectors who appear on the South Korean television show “Now on My Way to Meet You” (examined more deeply in Part I of this series on SinoNK), we see how these women are able to present themselves as subjectively entering a society in which they are able to be feminine, talented, and independent. Their dress is not a costume thrust upon them, but rather a sartorial signifier of their newfound agency, and it’s crucial that others understand it in this manner. In this sense, it seems somewhat peculiar that Nam Hee Seok [stated in a BBC interview](#) that one of the reasons he started the show was to create an image that would make people “want to meet them and marry them.” He also asked rhetorically, “If they looked like North Koreans, would you watch it?” People should want to engage North Koreans for more substantive reasons, not simply because of the way they dress. Nevertheless, the women interviewed for this piece stated that they embrace the vibrant clothing on stage and seek to overcome any social constructions on the way they dress. “We just want to be able to dress how we want without thinking too much about it,” one of the women added.

Conclusion | When it comes to dressing femininely, particularly in a highly developed consumer society, we could argue that either (1) the marginalized persons are empowering themselves through consumption, overcoming social barriers by employing mainstream dress decisions, or (2) trapped within a classed consumption rubric in which their very use of the feminine dress reveals their low placement in a system. In the case of *kongsuni*, who left the agricultural countryside for the big-city, and then now in the case of female defectors in Seoul, we see how aware the women are of the role dress plays in their status. Both sets of women are actively

redefining their status by adopting mainstream fashion tastes, shedding aspects of their status that instantly reveal them as marginal in an effort to be seen as more than a marginalized person. In this sense, even conventional dress in Korea offers a way for women to be creative in their identities and gain other sorts of agency outside the realm of appearance.

Keywords: *Now on My Way to Meet You*, minjung, kongsuni, migration, social mobility, Hagen Koo, migrant worker, fashion, Kim Huisman, Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, femininity, class consciousness, Hondagneu-Sotelo, Nam Hee Seok, welfare, urban migration.