

Sengun joshi look beyond Pyongyang’s saber-rattling

Seeking to separate the regime from its people, some young women drawn to North’s culture

TOMOHIRO OSAKI
STAFF WRITER

Japanese internet celebrity Chunhun starts her day by listening to a band whose songs few other 20-something women in the nation are likely to have on their playlists: North Korea’s all-female ensemble Moranbong Band.

“I listen to their songs for the same reason many Japanese women listen to K-pop or Taylor Swift,” said freelance illustrator Chunhun, who does not publicly reveal her real name.

When her mornings feel particularly depressing, she opts for more bellicose music from north of the 38th parallel.

“Even if I have a really tough day coming up, I can easily switch into a very aggressive mood when these songs encourage me to ‘annihilate enemies’ or assure me that I have the ‘Great Marshal’ on my side.”

Chunhun’s fascination with North Korea makes her stand out among most Japanese, who have developed an aversion to the reclusive regime due to long-standing bad blood over its abductions of Japanese citizens decades ago and its defiant efforts to become a nuclear power.

Today the Kanagawa native spearheads a little-known community of *sengun joshi* (military-first girls), a group of mostly young adult women who are fascinated by the peculiar culture of their Asian neighbor.

Although their name gives the impression that they adore North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, they claim their interest in the country is purely cultural, saying they despise the regime’s atrocities and military provocations as much as their fellow Japanese do.

What makes them different, however, is that they are aware of the simplest truth: There is more to North Korea than Kim’s saber-rattling.

“By introducing North Korea’s culture, like its fashion, music and arts, I want the Japanese public to realize there are good people living there and that they can’t be blamed for what the government does,” Chunhun said in an interview with The Japan Times.

In 2013, Chunhun, then a student intern for a news website specializing in coverage of North Korea, began marketing herself as a sengun joshi and has since attracted a following on social media.

She said she and her like-minded Pyongyang aficionados now periodically get together for a *joshikai* (women-only party), where they talk about their love lives or other topics over snacks — with the conversation inevitably veering toward North Korea from time to time.

Having majored in arts at a university, Chunhun said her infatuation with the regime originated from its propaganda posters — and their artistic beauty.

The posters, Chunhun said, are mostly created by skilled illustrators hired by North Korea’s state-run Mansudae Art Studio, one of the world’s largest centers of art production. Their expressiveness — most evident in the meticulous way they portray small

details such as flowers and foliage — is especially noteworthy, she said.

But today, her interest in the country goes far beyond the arts.

She wears makeup using North Korean cosmetics she said she bought at souvenir shops in the Chinese city of Dandong, located on the border with the North. She goes online every day and peruses articles from the Rodong Sinmun, the official newspaper of the Workers’ Party of Korea and North Korea’s main national daily.

But her pro-North Korea tweets and online images of her donning “chima jeogori,” the traditional Korean attire, have antagonized some people, leading to constant stress that is taking its toll.

A day hardly goes by, she said, without a slew of hate messages from online right-wingers telling her to “drop dead” or calling her a “cockroach.” Her internet persona has alarmed prospective employers in the past as well, even preventing her from getting a job, she said.

“I know what the regime does is unforgivable, but I think it’s wrong to become allergic to it ‘just because it’s North Korea,’”

CHUNHUN

The woman, who asked to remain anonymous due to fears of a backlash, said her perception of the North completely changed after she took a trip there last year.

Like most Japanese, she used to think of the North as a somewhat scary and unstable place, but when she stumbled upon an online ad promoting an affordable tour of the country, her curiosity piqued.

Little did she know the four-day trip would turn out to be an eye-opening experience.

“I know we were only allowed to see what the regime wanted foreign tourists to see,” she said. “But still I was amazed to know that



Online celebrity Chunhun, a leading voice among young women fascinated with North Korean culture, flips through a photo album featuring North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, at the home of a like-minded friend in Tokyo on July 27. TOMOHIRO OSAKI

Pyongyang was much more prosperous and cleaner than I had thought.”

She added that the North Korean soldiers who accompanied the group on the trip were very kind.

“Having watched them on TV, I’d always thought they were kind of cold and emotionless,” she said. “But when one of them,

as part of their security check, searched my smartphone to make sure I had no anti-Pyongyang images on it, he came across some lovey-dovey pictures of me and my husband. ... And then he cracked a very cute grin. It was at that moment that I realized they were human, too.”

Like Chunhun, the woman says she is

troubled by Pyongyang’s recent military provocations.

“North Korea is seriously wrong where it’s wrong and I really hope everything will come to a peaceful end,” she said. “My hope is that one day, Japan will become a society where you won’t be frowned upon or discriminated against by saying you like North Korea.”



Parents participate in a February gathering to exchange information about day care options in the city of Musashino in Tokyo. The meeting was held after the results of day care applications were announced. HOIKUEN FUYASHITAI @ MUSASHINO / VIA KYODO

With government target to tackle problem pushed back, cities struggle to keep pace with demand Day care crunch worsens as populations cluster

KYODO

For a young mother expecting her second child, concern over whether she can find a day care facility is causing extra stress.

“I’m worried about whether I’ll be able to find a slot by the time I return to work,” the 34-year-old said as she played with her 6-year-old son in a park in the city of Oita.

There were 350 children on the waiting list for day care facilities in Oita as of April 2016, the eighth-largest figure in the nation. The number rose to 463 this spring.

In total, the nation’s waiting list stood at 23,700 as of April.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe once pledged to cut the waiting list to zero by the end of next March as part of a strategy to get more women to enter the workforce. But in May, he postponed the target by three years, citing an increase in the number of working mothers resulting in higher demand for child care.

Critics and some lawmakers, including from the ruling camp, are skeptical about the feasibility of the goal — even with the extension.

In Oita, a city official attributed the local day care shortage to a population increase. “People are coming in from other municipi-

palities in Oita Prefecture and the population has been concentrated in one area,” the official said, citing areas around Oita Station where many apartments are being built. “Demand for day care is rising.”

The problem of population concentration is shared by many other prefectural capitals.

The Oita Municipal Government plans to add 941 day care slots this fiscal year, more than double the previous year.

“The central government has postponed the target (of reducing children on day care waiting lists to zero) to the end of fiscal 2020, but our city aims to attain the target next April,” Oita Mayor Kiichiro Sato said.

Sato said Oita needs to enhance child care services to maintain its population, even if doing involves a huge financial burden.

Government efforts to tackle the shortage began in 2001 after then-Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi pledged during his inaugural policy speech to address the issue.

“Raising the issue during his first Diet speech reflected Mr. Koizumi’s political savvy,” said Mariko Bando, chancellor of Showa Women’s University.

Bando, who was then director of the Cabinet Office’s Gender Equality Bureau, said that

at the time, many Japanese believed mothers should stay at home until their children turn 3.

“Day care was thus considered a necessary evil,” she said.

Several years after Koizumi raised the issue, day care spots increased by 25,000 to 30,000 annually. The number of children on waiting lists fell from 25,000 in fiscal 2002 to 18,000 in five years. But in fiscal 2007, capacity growth began to slow and waiting lists got longer.

Bando attributed the slowdown to conservative forces in the ruling Liberal Democratic Party gaining strength again. Many of these conservatives advocate women staying home.

The trend was prominent after Abe replaced Koizumi in 2006 in his first term as prime minister, she said. After returning to power in 2012, Abe changed his stance and began to advocate adding more women to the workforce as part of his growth strategy.

But a major obstacle to increasing day care capacity is a shortage of day care workers.

“We have to know that it takes time to develop human resources,” said Konan University professor Masako Maeda, who served as Yokohama’s deputy mayor from 2003 to 2007. The city is known for ambitious efforts to overhaul its child care system.

Maeda said building day care centers at a rapid pace has caused a vicious cycle. A lack of staff leads to increased overtime and quitting due to exhaustion, and the tough working conditions put off potential recruits.

“When we built the centers, we should have trained a sufficient number of workers, too,” Maeda said.

The slow improvement has generated frustration and outrage among working mothers. In February 2016, an anonymous blog post titled “I couldn’t get day care — die Japan!” went viral. It prompted a protest over the shortage among working parents in front of the Diet building in Tokyo. The opposition camp also called for action.

Some veteran lawmakers in the ruling camp, however, appeared to be taken by surprise. “It used to be only natural that a mother would quit her job to deliver her baby, and would never get so furious about day care,” said an LDP lawmaker who served in a ministerial post.

Konan University’s Maeda said tax revenue must be used to increase wages for day care workers.

“Taxpayers should also brace for a burden,” Maeda said.

Medical researchers tap AI for help with dialects, diagnoses

A Matter of Health

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People in Aomori Prefecture, especially in the western Tsugaru area, are known for their strong dialect, often leading outsiders to joke about needing a translator.

But for health care professionals, the issue is no laughing matter. Misunderstanding patients could lead to incorrect medical decisions, and the longer it takes for doctors and nurses unfamiliar with the dialect to deal with patients, the longer the wait will be for others.

In an effort to tackle the problem, Hiro-saki University in Aomori and Tohoku Electric Power Co. this month started analyzing voice data from 6,700 phone calls, covering 900 hours of calls the utility’s customer center has fielded from across the Tohoku region. They have also started collecting conversation data from 12 residents in their 20s through 70s in the town of Ajigasawa located in the southwestern part of the prefecture.

Using AI-powered computers, the

researchers will convert the voice data into standard Japanese text and then create a database, hoping to utilize it in medical practice and for research, said Ryo Suzuki, a senior administrator at the university’s school of health sciences.

“The town of Ajigasawa is known as an area where the so-called Tsugaru dialect — which is hard enough for people from outside the prefecture to understand — is particularly strong,” he said. “That’s partly why we thought the town is an ideal community to partner with.”

Suzuki cited the dialect’s *koe-katta* as an example of a confusing phrase used by patients. The phrase sounds similar to *kowakatta* (it was scary) in standard Japanese, but *koe-katta* indicates a feeling of tiredness. Such expressions could be misunderstood by doctors and other medical workers hailing from outside the prefecture, he said.

Suzuki added that medical students at the university currently take a course in Tsugaru dialect, using an original textbook that lists Japanese translations of Tsugaru words.

Through the project, researchers want

to create a database of abridged standard-Japanese patient speech so that hospital workers can share patient information more efficiently, he said.

Separately, at the Nara Institute of Science and Technology, a team led by associate professor Eiji Aramaki is developing software to detect the earliest signs of dementia by analyzing daily conversation.

Japan has nearly 5 million people with dementia, and 4 million more have mild cognitive impairment (MCI), which causes a slight but noticeable decline in cognitive abilities like memory and thinking skills. The number of people with dementia is expected to rise further as the nation’s population ages.

This month, Aramaki started a pilot study with a major IT company to test the software among elderly patients with MCI, eyeing commercialization of the technology in two years.

The test participants will be given an iPad and asked to talk with out-of-town family members on a regular basis. The software will automatically pick up words and analyze vocabulary levels, he said.

Aramaki said healthy people use 7,000 words or more in daily conversation, whereas people with Alzheimer’s use far fewer words.

“It’s been known that people with Alzheimer’s have problems remembering words... so their vocabulary shrinks,” he said. “But there was no way of measuring such declines in vocabulary. We are trying to create a device that measures that and combines it with voice recognition software.”

In an earlier project with Kyoto University’s medical school involving 20 people with Alzheimer’s and 20 people without, the software identified those with the degenerative disease with an accuracy rate of 70 percent, he said.

The service is intended to motivate people in the earliest stages to learn about their dementia risks and seek medical help, Aramaki said. He said he hopes to get the software installed on service robots in the future so users’ daily, natural conversation will be picked up and analyzed.

But advances in such technology, which could expedite dementia diagnoses, have



Researchers are analyzing conversation data using AI to help doctors in various ways, including communicating with patients who speak with a strong dialect or detecting dementia. ISTOCK

huge implications ethically, socially and legally. Aramaki said he is working with ethics researchers at Kyoto University to come up with ways to best pursue his technology.

“Early diagnoses have ethical issues, as there’s currently no cure for dementia,” he said. “There are people who don’t want to get diagnosed early, because wills written

by people with dementia can be considered invalid. We have to think carefully about what social implications there are about early diagnoses.”

A Matter of Health covers current research, technology or policy issues relating to health in Japan.