North Korea nurturing nerds

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North Korean students learn how to use computers at an elite school in Pyongyang. Photo: AFP

Chun In-hyo was just eight years old when North Korea's peerless leader Kim Jong-il declared the 21st century the era of the information technology revolution.

Now aged 12, Chun is at the tip of the spear in the Stalinist state's charge down the information superhighway. He is one of an elite group of students at the Kumsong school, a gleaming white structure in Pyongyang where North Korea is nurturing its first generation of computer nerds.

"I don't play computer games because I must study hard," said Chun, one of the lucky 100 students recruited to the school each year from more than 5000 applicants.

Choi is one of a small number of North Koreans who have a computer at home. "I use it for instant messaging with my friends," he told foreign journalists visiting the school last week.

But there is one hitch for Chun and his fellow geeks - no internet. North Korea is the world's most isolated country and works hard to remain so - keeping so-called spiritual pollution from subverting its socialist system.

TVs and radios are tuned to official channels only. The media is a propaganda tool and the leadership is aware of the internet's potential to stir up dissent against the dictatorial government.

So the internet must be shackled and Chun and his fellow students have never been let loose in cyber space. Instead he gets to look at North Korea's own version - a highly censored intranet that has its own messaging function. It is policed by the Korea Computer Centre, North Korea's window on the world wide web and its leading high technology research and development hub.

The center, set up in 1990, acts as the regime's gatekeeper, selecting only approved information and downloading it onto the intranet, the content of which is mostly limited to science and technology and available only to selected research institutes, universities, factories, and a few individuals.

South Korea's Unification Ministry estimated that only a tight circle of leaders, including dictator Kim and his military henchmen, would have direct access to the internet through a German portal that set up a joint venture with North Korea last year. Through the portal, North Korea has set up several dozen propaganda websites.

At the Kumsong school around 12 students were in each of the three classrooms shown to foreign journalists. Each desk had a computer made in Taiwan, running Microsoft operating systems. The boys - no girls were seen - study English for two hours each day and spend hours honing computer skills and developing their own programs.

School vice-president Pak Ryong-kil said the institute was set up in 1966 on the orders of Kim, then heir apparent to North Korea's founding father Kim Il Sung.

"General Marshall Kim Jong-il has already pronounced the 21st century the century of IT," he said. "We select the best students to study here."

Every province has these kinds of schools, although they are smaller. "Now we have the intranet. There is no internet yet. But we do have plans to introduce it."

The first hint that North Korea had entered cyber space came in 2000 when leader Kim offered visiting US secretary of state Madeleine Albright his email address. The following year he belatedly pronounced the new century the era of the IT revolution.
The importance of the "IT age" was again stressed during celebrations in Pyongyang this month to mark the 60th anniversary of the founding of the ruling Worker's Party.

Whether the government would ever risk allowing free access to the internet is debatable. Andrei Lankov, a Russian-born professor of Korean studies who grew up in the former Soviet Union and watched it disintegrate in the late 1980s, said such a step could prove fatal.

North Koreans are brought up to believe that the their country is superior to any other and that South Koreans, for example, are exploited, impoverished and starving.

"If people learned 50 per cent of the truth about South Korea, it (North Korea) would collapse," he said.

North Korea has no home-grown computer industry and computers have to be imported from abroad at a price beyond the reach of all but the most affluent North Koreans.

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