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The Sacred Revolution: The Art of Propaganda in North Korea

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The Sacred Revolution:  
The Art of Propaganda in North Korea

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**ABSTRACT**

Thirty years have passed since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and while most former and current communist states have integrated themselves into the global economy, North Korea is still largely, and fiercely, resistant to it. It is one of the poorest countries in the world, with millions living without electricity and suffering from malnutrition. It is also one of the most repressive regimes in contemporary times, with hundreds of thousands imprisoned and tortured without probable cause, compelled to perform forced labor in a vast network of concentration camps. Typically, widespread destitution and oppression inspire liberal reforms or democratic revolutions, but neither have happened in North Korea. This raises the question of how the regime has maintained internal control so effectively for so long. One explanation for its survival is the pervasive security apparatus, but mass surveillance and state-sanctioned violence cannot be the exclusive explanations. One of the key ways cultures maintain stability without coercion is religion, which can be defined as a belief system adhered to by a community and supported through behaviors that result in a desired psychological state. This article argues that the ruling-Kim dynasty's personality cult functions as a state religion that regulates the daily lives of North Koreans and contributes to the regime's survival. Using Émile Durkheim's religious framework, Clifford Geertz's thick description, and Erving Goffman's dramaturgical analysis, I will examine propaganda works, social institutions, and defector testimonies to understand and explain the efficacy of the myths and rituals of the state.

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## INTRODUCTION

*“Only when we educate our people in the history of their own struggle and traditions can we stimulate their national pride and arouse the broad masses to revolutionary struggle.”*

— *Kim Il Sung*, “On Eliminating Dogmatism and Formalism and Establishing Juche in Ideological Work” (1955)

Thirty years have passed since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and while current and former communist states have integrated themselves into the global financial order, North Korea remains largely, and fiercely, resistant to it. Why have liberal reforms or a democratic revolution not taken place, despite the widespread repression and destitution? How has the state existed for so long, against incredible odds? One explanation for the regime's longevity is its security apparatus, which elicits conformity and obedience from the populace through surveillance, intimidation, and coercion. As the historian Charles Armstrong has pointed out, however, “coercive methods can only go so far before they create hostile reactions,” forcing the North Korean regime to “rely on moral exhortation to mobilize the masses.”<sup>1</sup> This “moral exhortation” is primarily accomplished through the dissemination of propaganda, or deliberately manipulated information based on selected facts, assumptions, and falsehoods, designed not to pursue objectivity, but to persuade an audience of a particular worldview or narrative. As Armstrong has suggested, when analyzing the nature of state power in any given regime, it is necessary to consider how customs influence the thoughts and actions of people in a society, and maintain the political status quo without violence. What, then, is the North Korean state ideology that the nation’s people are inculcated in? How are its tenants transmitted to the citizens? To what extent has the ideology’s propaganda secured the political establishment of the country, for the past 73 years? A closer examination of the East Asian pariah will require delving into its past.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles K. Armstrong, *The North Korean Revolution, 1945-1950* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2003), 170.

### ***Colonial Period and Foundation***

Long before the division of the peninsula, the Chosŏn Dynasty ruled over Korea for approximately 500 years, beginning in 1392. After a series of devastating invasions by the Japanese in 1592-1598, and the Manchus in 1636 and 1654, Korea maintained strict contact with foreigners. The notable exception to this near-isolation was imperial China, who granted Korea protection and autonomy in exchange for tributes and recognition of its supremacy, a relationship known as suzerainty. In the late 19th century, the United States, France, Britain, Russia, and once again Japan began vying for influence over the peninsula. Korea's suzerainty with China ended in 1894, when a westernized imperial Japan waged war with the Middle Kingdom, forcing it to renounce its influence over Korea. Imperial Russia briefly exerted its protection and hegemony over Korea, but was pushed off the peninsula in 1905, after being invaded by Japan. Korea forcibly became a Japanese protectorate soon after, then formally annexed as a colony in 1910.

Japan's occupation of Korea remains a contested history to this day, with Japanese nationalists emphasizing the rapid urbanization and industrialization of Korean society, and South Korean nationalists highlighting the exploitative and oppressive nature of the colonial regime. During the first nine years of colonial rule, Koreans were denied freedom of expression and association, and subjugated to mass surveillance, arbitrary detention, and torture for political dissent. These repressive measures eventually culminated in the March 1st Movement of 1919, when Koreans from all backgrounds began peacefully protesting for their rights and independence. The independence activists were significantly inspired by US President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points for the reconstruction of Europe after World War I (1914-1918), which promoted international peace, free trade, and the self-determination of nations. As the number of participants in the movement grew into the millions, Japanese colonial police responded by



burning villages and conducting mass searches; arresting, killing, and disappearing demonstrators and civilians alike. The nationwide peaceful protest broke down into riots, and was ultimately suppressed. Despite the failure of the March 1st Movement to achieve independence, it did cause the Japanese government to change their colonial policy from one of military coercion to cultural rule; effectively replacing overt force for more covert forms of repression. Koreans were granted some freedom of expression to celebrate their heritage, criticize the colonial regime, own businesses, attain higher education, and own land. This apparent loosening of restrictions, however, only benefited a narrow minority of Koreans, most of whom collaborated with the regime, and may have seduced even more of the population to accept or at least tolerate colonial rule.

After Japan invaded China in 1937, starting World War II in East Asia, Korea entered a period of rapid wartime mobilization. Hundreds of thousands of Korean men were conscripted into the imperial military, and hundreds of thousands of men and women were sent to Japan to do forced labor for large conglomerates (*zaibatsu*). As the war escalated, Koreans were compelled to adopt the most intense assimilationist policies of the colonial period. They were prohibited from using their native language and required to speak and write only in Japanese. Worship of Emperor Hirohito and attendance to Shinto shrines (the state religion of imperial Japan) became compulsory in public life. Tragically, thousands of young, often poor women from Korea, but also China, Taiwan, the Philippines, and Indonesia, were deceived into a horrific system of sexual slavery, causing most of these women to end their own lives.

On August 15, 1945, nine days after the Americans dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, and after approximately eight agonizing years of conflict, Japan surrendered to the Allied Powers of World War II, liberating Korea from almost half a century of Japanese

domination. Immediately after the war, the Soviet Union and the United States divided Korea at the 38th parallel and occupied the northern and southern halves without consulting the Koreans. In 1948, the Republic of Korea in the south was founded on August 15 and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in the north was established weeks later on September 9. Despite their names, both governments were highly authoritarian. The former *yangban* (aristocrat) Syngman Rhee (1875-1965), became South Korea's inaugural president through a UN-sponsored election, while the former anti-Japanese guerilla commander Kim Il Sung (1912-1994) rose through the ranks of the Workers' Party of Korea and became North Korea's premiere leader. Tensions rose between the states due to their ideological differences, with violent skirmishes near the border eventually culminating into a war in June 1950. After the war, North Korea wasted no time working towards its economic recovery. With help from fraternal socialist countries, it returned to and exceeded pre-war industrial and agricultural levels quicker than the South.

### ***Consolidating Power***

During the reconstruction period, Kim Il Sung elucidated his vision for the future of North Korea. In 1955, he delivered a speech to the Party's Propaganda and Agitation Department titled, "On Eliminating Dogmatism and Formalism and Establishing *Juche* in Ideological Work." Although *juche* is often translated as "self-reliance" in English, its *Hanja* (Chinese) characters are *ju* meaning "master" [主] and *che* meaning "body" [體], roughly meaning "master of one's own body."<sup>2</sup> In his speech, Kim discouraged propagandists from vacuously absorbing Soviet Marxism-Leninism and applying it in Korea, instead calling for a more idiosyncratic implementation of socialism through indigenous traditions. "To make revolution in Korea," Kim instructed, "we must know Korean history and geography as well as the customs of the Korean

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<sup>2</sup> Jae-Cheon Lim, *Leader Symbols and Personality Cult in North Korea: The Leader State* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 43.

people. Only then is it possible to educate our people in a way that suits them and to inspire in them an ardent love for their native place and their motherland.”<sup>3</sup> Economically, the *juche* speech signaled Kim’s desire for North Korea to stop relying on aid from other communist states for its development and to become a fully self-sufficient nation, or autarky. Politically, the speech was a nationalistic reaction to decades of subservience to and dependence on foreign powers, and a desire for complete national sovereignty.<sup>4</sup>

Domestically, adherence to *juche* meant greater ideological conformity with the Party and Leader. In 1956, the Party’s politburo began to investigate the background of all its members who lived during the Japanese colonial period, resulting in the creation of a hierarchy reminiscent of the Chosŏn Dynasty’s feudal class system known as *songbun*, which divides all North Koreans into three classes: core, wavering, and hostile. In August 1957, Party members who criticized Kim Il Sung, and had ties with the Soviet Union and China, were classified as hostile and then arrested, exiled, or executed. Two years after the incident, “more than 100,000 people fell victim to arrests,” and about 2,500 were executed.<sup>5</sup> In the mid-1960s, an opposing faction within the Party began touting the vice-premier as a potential successor to Kim Il Sung, even building a small personality cult around him. Feeling threatened, Kim gave public warnings against “individual heroism,” and requested the Party’s Organization and Guidance Department (OGD) to investigate the faction’s members. At the Fifteenth Plenum of the Fourth Central Committee of the Party on April 15, 1967 (Kim Il Sung’s 55th birthday) the faction members were expelled from the WPK, imprisoned, then executed. It was the last major challenge to Kim Il Sung’s power, permanently solidifying his rule over North Korea.

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<sup>3</sup> Yŏngho Ch’oe, Peter Lee, and Wm. Theodore de Bary, “Kim Il Sung and Juche Thought in North Korea” in *Sources of Korean Tradition*, Vol. 2 (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 421.

<sup>4</sup> Andrei Schmidt, *Korea Between Empires, 1895–1919* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 171–198.

<sup>5</sup> Seth, 75.

### *Establishing a Monolithic Ideological System*

The April 15, 1967 Plenum is significant for three reasons. First, it replaced Marxism-Leninism with *juche* as the Party's ideology and made Kim Il Sung's anti-Japanese guerilla history the only legitimate history and official state discourse in all North Korean media.<sup>6</sup> Secondly, it established the Monolithic Ideological System, which asserts Kim Il Sung to be the only true leader of Korea and requires unfailing loyalty to him. Thirdly, it resulted in the creation of the Ten Principles of the Monolithic Ideological System by Kim Il Sung's younger brother Kim Yong Ju (1920-2021), to make Party members more thoroughly comply with his brother's dictatorship. They read as follows:

1. We must give our all in the struggle to unify the entire society with the revolutionary ideology of Great Leader Kim Il Sung.
2. We must honor Great Leader comrade Kim Il Sung with all our loyalty.
3. We must make absolute the authority of Great Leader comrade Kim Il Sung.
4. We must make Great Leader comrade Kim Il Sung's revolutionary ideology our faith and make his instructions our creed.
5. We must adhere strictly to the principle of unconditional obedience in carrying out the Great Leader comrade Kim Il Sung's instructions.
6. We must strengthen the entire Party's ideology and willpower and revolutionary unity, centering on Great Leader comrade Kim Il Sung.
7. We must learn from Great Leader comrade Kim Il Sung and adopt the communist look, revolutionary work methods and people-oriented work style.
8. We must value the political life we were given by Great Leader comrade Kim Il Sung, and loyally repay his great political trust and thoughtfulness with heightened political awareness and skill.
9. We must establish strong organizational regulations so that the entire Party, nation and military move as one under the one and only leadership of Great Leader comrade Kim Il Sung.
10. We must pass down the great achievement of the revolution by Great Leader comrade Kim Il Sung from generation to generation, inheriting and completing it to the end.<sup>7</sup>

In essence, the Ten Principles require North Koreans to learn and memorize “the Great Leader's Revolutionary thought, implementing his instructions and party policies, and struggling against hostile ideological elements.”<sup>8</sup> Since their publication in 1974, they, along with their 65 clauses, have served as “the main legal source for rule-setting and monitoring the cult activities of [all]

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<sup>6</sup> Immanuel Kim, *Rewriting Revolution: Women, Sexuality, and Memory in North Korean Fiction* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2018), 5.

<sup>7</sup> Daily NK, “What Are the ‘Ten Principles’?,” *The Daily NK*, August 9, 2013, [dailynk.com/english/what-are-the-ten-principles/](http://dailynk.com/english/what-are-the-ten-principles/).

<sup>8</sup> Jae-Cheon Lim, *Kim Jong-il's Leadership of North Korea* (New York, Routledge, 2009), 71.

North Koreans,” being more powerful than even the constitution itself. The Ten Principles have been compared to the Ten Commandments of Christianity by many North Korean defectors, since “they display similar language patterns and have the same purpose of regulating the daily lives of their adherents.”<sup>9</sup> Thae Yong-ho, who served as North Korea’s ambassador to the United Kingdom before defecting to South Korea in 2016, asserts that North Korea copied directly from the Judeo-Christian decalogue for its political structure.<sup>10</sup>

Slowly with time, North Korea became less about communism and more about Kim Il Sung himself, evolving into a fanatical cult that appeared bizarre and eccentric even to other communists leaders.<sup>11</sup> Kim’s name began to be printed in bold font in all texts; he was officially referred to as the *suryōng* (“Great Leader”), a title originally reserved for Stalin; his portraits began to be displayed more prominently in both public *and* private spaces; and all Party members and eventually citizens were required to wear red flag lapels containing Kim’s visage. To this day, these must be worn on the left side of a person’s chest, close to their heart. The discursive shift in North Korean culture away from communism towards Kimilsungism was not only a product of Kim Il Sung’s desire to consolidate power, but also of internal political rivalries occurring within the state. In the 1960s, Kim Yong Ju appeared to be a prospective successor to Kim Il Sung, since he was educated at Moscow State University and held several high positions in the WPK. However, Yong Ju had no record of contributing to national liberation like his older brother or other members of the Party, so was perceived by many as unqualified.

Ultimately, a member of the Organizational and Guidance Department, who helped Kim Il Sung remove his rivals, would succeed him. That member was none other than Kim Jong Il

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<sup>9</sup> Lim, 2015, 24.

<sup>10</sup> Tae Yong-ho, “Rep Tae Yong-ho explains essentials of North Korea,” *The Korea Times*, November 27, 2021, [koreatimes.co.kr/www/opinion/2021/12/728\\_320290.html](http://koreatimes.co.kr/www/opinion/2021/12/728_320290.html).

<sup>11</sup> Jacco Zwetsloot and Andrei Lankov, “NK News launches new weekly podcast,” *NK News Podcast*, February 12, 2018, Podcast, web., 62:26, [nknews.org/category/north-korea-news-podcast/older-podcasts/nknewspodcast-episode1-andreilankov/827469](http://nknews.org/category/north-korea-news-podcast/older-podcasts/nknewspodcast-episode1-andreilankov/827469).

(1941-2011), the Great Leader's son. As a member of the OGD, Jong Il was tasked with directly controlling the Party Central Committee, "all party branches of the administration, the military, and the mass organizations," as well as the secret police, making the OGD one of the most powerful bureaus in North Korea.<sup>12</sup> After fulfilling his father's wish to purge the dissenting faction, Kim Jong Il was appointed to the Propaganda and Agitation Department in 1967 by the Great Leader (replacing a purged official) and became its director. As minister of propaganda, he oversaw the creation of numerous art and cultural organizations that produced new hagiographies, hymns, and icons of and for Kim Il Sung. They also created an orthodoxy that attempted to shape the language and thoughts of the North Korean populace. Despite being the first-born son, Kim Jong Il's prospects of becoming leader initially appeared uncertain. However, he recognized his father's narcissism and insecurities, and flattered him immensely. After a year-long propaganda extravaganza in 1972 to celebrate "President" Kim Il Sung's *hwan'gap* (a traditional milestone for seniors who reach age 60), the *suryŏng* had come to a decision. Kim Jong Il had proven himself to be the supreme sycophant and was elected to the Party's politburo in 1974, signaling that he was his father's successor. Although Kim Jong Il did not create his father's personality cult, he certainly intensified it into what it is today through the arts.

### ***Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism***

To answer the original question – what is the North Korean ideology? – communism cannot be the answer because of the regime's deviation from it as described above. *Juche* cannot be the answer either because, despite the government's claims, North Korea has never been an economic or politically self-reliant nation. As Brian Myers, an expert on North Korean literature, wittingly puts it, *juche* is no more than a "stogy jumble of banalities."<sup>10</sup> The texts are awkwardly vague and repetitive so as to be utterly vacuous or tantamount to nationalism at best. *Juche* is

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<sup>12</sup> Lim, 2009, 65-6.

best understood as a prop of Kim Il Sung's personality cult, to give him the appearance of a great theoretician.

South Korean political scientist Jae-cheon Lim proposes that the personality cult is the truly defining characteristic of North Korea's culture. For Lim, however, it is not a mere political entity, as he argues that it can be interpreted as a religion because of the nature of its leadership, beliefs, and practices.<sup>13</sup> He invokes the French sociologist Émile Durkheim, who defined religion as a system of intensely held beliefs that are protected and adhered to by a community through rituals.<sup>14</sup> Lim also builds on the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who defined religion as a network of symbols that presents a lifestyle and interpretation of reality in such an authoritative and persuasive manner, that the believer accepts the symbolic representations as true unto themselves.<sup>15</sup> By no means is Jae-cheon Lim's argument an isolated view. Tatiana Gabroussenko, another expert on North Korean literature, also argues that "The ideological practices of North Korea are constructed according to the patterns of conventional monotheistic religion, with their own holy scripts and festivals, priests and disciples, catechisms and homilies."<sup>16</sup> The lived experiences of numerous North Korean defectors, such as Ji-Min Kang, corroborate with Lim and Gabroussenko, since defectors often draw similarities between the personality cult and Christianity in particular.<sup>17</sup>

The religious framework that Lim proposes is helpful in understanding the nature of the North Korean ideology and the longevity of its regime, the former of which I will from here on call the state religion. What makes it unique is the fact that it demands a level of intensity well

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<sup>13</sup> Lim, 2015, 20.

<sup>14</sup> Émile Durkheim, *Durkheim on Religion*, edited by W. S. F. Pickering, (Boston: Routledge & K. Paul, 1975), 123.

<sup>15</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1973), 90, 112.

<sup>16</sup> Tatiana Gabroussenko, "No god but the supreme leader: North Korea's crusade against Christian boogeymen," *NK News*, January 24, 2022,

[nknews.org/2022/01/no-god-but-the-supreme-leader-north-koreas-crusade-against-christian-boogeymen/](https://nknews.org/2022/01/no-god-but-the-supreme-leader-north-koreas-crusade-against-christian-boogeymen/).

<sup>17</sup> Ji-Min Kang, "From Kim to Christ: Why religion works for North Koreans," *NK News*, September 25, 2013, [nknews.org/2013/09/from-kim-to-christ-how-religion-works-for-north-koreans/](https://nknews.org/2013/09/from-kim-to-christ-how-religion-works-for-north-koreans/).

beyond a normal political ideology, evoking a degree of emotional investment that is unrivaled by other authoritarian or totalitarian cults. The state religion is also predicated on a grand, teleological narrative that resembles the world's religious and mythological stories. That narrative can be summarized as follows:

*The Kim family and Workers' Party are destined to liberate and reunify Korea, and establish an independent, Juche-oriented socialist republic by leading the peasantry, proletariat, and intelligentsia in a revolutionary struggle against feudalists, capitalists, and imperialists.*

This narrative — what I call “The Sacred Revolution” — is a map of meaning for North Koreans. It is a story that prescribes for the individual an ethical model for how to act in the world, as well as a sense of purpose or direction in life towards an idealized destination. That purpose is loyalty to the state, to the Kim family and their aforementioned holy war.

According to Karen Armstrong, modern novels, operas, ballet, and other works of art are the spiritual successors of myth and religion from antiquity. They deal with the same questions about existence, draw from the same source material, profoundly elevate our lives, and offer guidance for them.<sup>18</sup> Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il were, in the words of Lim, both “aware that art and literature were powerful instruments in educating people through a dramatic recreation of reality and emotional evocation.”<sup>19</sup> Thus, recognizing the power of faith – the need to believe and the need to belong – and the power of art and emotive storytelling, the North Korean regime harnessed the country's talent and creativity to construct a new indigenous value system that would permanently propagate party policy, the dictators' doctrines, and mobilize the masses into political action.

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<sup>18</sup> Karen Armstrong, *A Short History of Myth* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books Ltd., 2005), 8-9, 142.

<sup>19</sup> Lim, 2009, 77.



In Chapter 1 of this thesis, I will detail the Sacred Revolution metanarrative and examine its myths through literature. Chapter 2 will show how the Sacred Revolution is propagated and reinforced through music. Chapter 3 will analyze how political meetings and festivals act as rituals of the state. Taken together, these chapters will reveal how the state “manufactures consent” – to borrow a term by Noam Chomsky – from the North Korean people and constructs the illusion of a heaven on earth. For our purposes, a myth is not necessarily a falsehood, but a nonempirical, didactic belief or story that may or may not be true. My primary concern is not whether they are true or false, but how they function in a society. Throughout the thesis, I will use Durkheim’s religious framework and Geertz’s thick description to interpret North Korean symbols and their cultural vehicles. I will also use Erving Goffman’s dramaturgical analysis in the final chapter to interpret symbolic behaviors in the culture. Since it is impossible to conduct genuine public opinion surveys in North Korea, and access the state’s jealously-guarded archives, this thesis is mostly a work of qualitative, rather than quantitative, research. Even though it is empirically unverifiable to determine the actual beliefs of the North Korean populace, defectors have testified to the powerful effects propaganda can have on them. Their present-day impact, and the result of the North Korean regime’s myth-making and practices, will be addressed in the conclusion.

## CHAPTER 1: Myths

*“As soon as absolute truth is supposed to be contained in the sayings of a certain man, there is a body of experts to interpret his sayings, and these experts infallibly acquire power, since they hold the key to truth. Like any other privileged caste, they use their power for their own advantage. They are, however, in one respect worse than any other privileged caste, since it is their business to expound an unchanging truth, revealed once for all in utter perfection, so that they become necessarily opponents of all intellectual and moral progress.”*  
 — Bertrand Russell, “Has Religion Made Useful Contributions to Civilization?” (1930)

Virtually every religion contains a narrative around its central figure, whose life serves as a model for its followers to emulate, or who propagated a dogma that was meant to be believed and practiced. In the North Korean state religion, this figure is Kim Il Sung, and his dogma is *juche*. The Korean Independence Movement was composed of a diverse array of actors from across the political spectrum. The North Korean regime, however, constructed a national mythology to make Kim Il Sung’s guerilla career appear to be the only anti-Japanese struggle, and the origin of the nation. As the historian Bruce Cumings wittingly put it, there is a kernel of truth to almost every North Korean myth, but the “mountains of propaganda” that they are often originate from molehills.<sup>20</sup> Many details in the official history have been distorted or even fabricated beyond proportion, making them rather unreliable. The most authoritative source of these myths is Kim Il Sung’s alleged autobiography *With the Century*, which deals with the first half of his life. Published between 1992-98, it immediately became a bestseller, and has since become a staple of the national curriculum. Its authenticity has been doubted by some experts, such as former propagandist and defector Jang Jin-sung, who claims that the eight-volume-long memoirs were actually written by the April 15th Literary Production Unit, a group of elite writers tasked with writing hagiographies about the Kim family.<sup>21</sup> Regardless of its true authorship, *With the Century* is a prime example in understanding what the Sacred Revolution is and how it functions.

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<sup>20</sup> Bruce Cumings, *North Korea: Another Country* (New York: The New Press, 2004), 107.

<sup>21</sup> Jang Jin-sung, *Dear Leader: Poet, Spy, Escapee - A Look Inside North Korea*, trans. by Shirley Lee (New York: 37 INK/Atria Paperback 2015), 6.



Figure 1.1: Kim Il Sung in later life.

### *With the Century*

Kim Il Sung was born on April 15th 1912, in Man'gyŏngdae district of Pyongyang. The city was the largest Protestant Christian community in Korea at the beginning of the 20th century, earning it the nickname “Jerusalem of the East” among American missionaries.<sup>22</sup> Song Ju (Kim Il Sung’s birth name) and his two younger brothers, including Yong Ju, were born into a Presbyterian family themselves. Their father Kim Hyŏng-jik (1894-1926) attended the Sungsil Academy built by American missionaries, later taught there, and participated in an underground Christian nationalist organization to oppose Japanese rule. Their mother Kang Pan-sŏk (1892-1932), a daughter of a minister, was a devout Presbyterian who served as a deaconess at a local church.<sup>23</sup> Although Kim Il Sung denies being influenced by his Christian upbringing, it more than likely impacted his ideological development. Christian missionary schools and churches were the first exporters of Western philosophy, political theory, economics, and medicine into Korea, having arrived in the region between the 18th and 19th centuries. While

<sup>22</sup> Robert Kim, “Jerusalem of the East: The American Christians of Pyongyang, 1895-1942, Providence, July 13, 2016, [providencemag.com/2016/07/jerusalem-east-american-christians-pyongyang/](http://providencemag.com/2016/07/jerusalem-east-american-christians-pyongyang/).

<sup>23</sup> Charles Armstrong, “Familism, Socialism and Political Religion in North Korea,” *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, 6, no. 3, (2005): 383-394, [doi.org/10.1080/14690760500317743](https://doi.org/10.1080/14690760500317743).

Christianity in Europe was increasingly seen as antiquated and even harmful among intellectuals, it was viewed as progressive among Koreans from all walks of life, especially the lower classes. During the Independence Movement, Protestant churches and schools often served as hubs of organized resistance and modern intellectual discourse.<sup>24</sup> The Japanese colonial regime recognized the subversive qualities of this tradition, and attempted to suppress it.<sup>25</sup> Although Kim Il Sung became an atheist in his teenage years and concluded religion to be a source of superstition, passivity, and a distraction to genuine revolution, he nonetheless recognized its power in uniting people towards a larger cause.<sup>26</sup>

Kim Il Sung's family eventually migrated to Manchuria, China in 1919, after his father was arrested for modest independence activism. Kim attended various elementary schools in the region, but eventually returned to Korea in 1923 to go to an elementary school near Pyongyang. He left Korea for Manchuria again in 1925, when he supposedly had a damascene moment. According to the official history, Kim recognized the oppression of his people during the journey, and was inspired to devote himself to national liberation. After arriving in Manchuria, Kim attended the Korean Hwasŏng Middle School, where he converted to communism and allegedly founded the Down-With-Imperialism Union in 1926, at the age of 14.<sup>27</sup> Although the DIU is considered the spiritual progenitor of the communist movement in North Korea, the first Korean communist party was in fact founded in 1925, but disbanded by the Japanese soon after. Kim eventually dropped out of Hwasŏng for its anti-communism leanings and attended the Chinese Yuwen Middle School in 1927.<sup>28</sup> There Kim Il Sung studied under a Chinese teacher

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<sup>24</sup> Yong-ho Choe, "Christian Background in the Early Life of Kim Il Sung," *Asian Survey* 26 (October 1986), 1091.

<sup>25</sup> Kyung Moon Hwang. *A History of Korea: An Episodic Narrative*. (New York: Palgrave, 2017), 146.

<sup>26</sup> Kim Il Sung, *With the Century* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1992), 37, 102-3, 238, 351.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 156-64.

<sup>28</sup> In East Asian cultures, "middle school" is the equivalent of American middle *and* high school, and is divided into two three-year tracks. Thus, in this case, Kim Il Sung was in upper middle school or high school.

named Shang Yue, who greatly expanded Kim's communist education.<sup>29</sup> Kim joined the South Manchurian Communist Youth Association in 1929, his earliest documented participation in a radical leftist organization.<sup>30</sup> He and its other members were arrested in May that year by Japanese police, subsequently expelled from school, and imprisoned for several months.

After his release, Kim Il Sung apparently convened a historic youth meeting in 1930, where he elucidated his *Juche* revelation to the world for the first time at the age of 18. This is almost certainly a fabrication, for the event was never mentioned in official history until 1978.<sup>31</sup> Early biographies of the Great Leader claim the expelled student taught first through fourth graders *Das Kapital*, dialectical materialism, and Soviet history during this period. Whatever Kim may have done with his time after prison, he eventually joined the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1931, convinced that the fate of national liberation rested upon the ability of Chinese and Korean forces to cooperate. Kim claims to have begun his guerilla career on April 25, 1932, forming a small unit that would grow into the Korean People's Revolutionary Army (KPRA). Supposedly, this was the army that vanquished the Japanese. Traveling by foot, conducting hit-and-run tactics, they established secret bases in northern Korea, the most famous of them being Mount Paektu, the mythical origin of the Korean race. In actuality, Kim's 1932 partisan group was only a *division* within an independent Chinese guerilla army, which by 1934 would be absorbed and reorganized by the CCP into the Northeast Anti-Japanese United Army (NEAJUA).<sup>32</sup> Kim's guerilla career in the 1930s was essentially under the leadership of the CCP, and *entirely* in Manchuria. He rose through the ranks of the NEAJUA, eventually commanding his own divisions of between 100-300 partisans. During this time, Kim adopted the name Il

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<sup>29</sup> Kim, 220.

<sup>30</sup> Dae Sook-Suh, *Kim Il Sung: The North Korean Leader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 7.

<sup>31</sup> Suh, 305.

<sup>32</sup> Armstrong, 28.

Sung, meaning “become the sun.” His most nostalgic battle was the raid on Poch'ŏnbo (1937), killing Japanese police and occupying the town for a day before evacuating. Even though the raid was no more than a nuisance, Kim became substantially well-known in the Korean press, and the Japanese began to consider him “one of the most effective and dangerous of guerrillas.”<sup>33</sup> In North Korean mythology, it is considered the turning point of the anti-Japanese struggle.

Kim Il Sung and his guerilla army faced the “bitterest time of trial in the entire history of the anti-Japanese armed struggle”<sup>34</sup> between 1938-39, a period referred to as the Arduous March. Regardless of whether the event was fictitious or not, Kim and his army were indeed subjected to hunger, defection, lack of clothing and shelter, and winter. Kim’s solution to these impediments was to raid trains, farms, villages, and turn hostages into partisans.<sup>35</sup> North Koreans learn that the “Ever-Victorious General” and his comrades took shelter at Mount Paektu in 1942, where on February 16th, the General’s wife Kim Jong Suk bore a son named Jong Il. After a period of recovery, the hero’s journey culminates into one final battle. Brian Myers summarizes the official history succinctly:

“On August 9, 1945, the General led his army in a final concerted push through the enemy’s border strongholds, at the same time ordering secret fighting units to rise up across the peninsula. The Japanese held out for six days before falling to their knees on August 15.”<sup>36</sup>

After years of “miraculous tests and ordeals,” and enduring a “journey of darkness, horror, disgust, and phantasmagoric fears,”<sup>37</sup> the redeemed hero attained the “Ultimate Boon.” Korea was liberated, and the General made his triumphant Return to Pyongyang to ecstatic crowds.

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<sup>33</sup> Bruce Cumings, *Korea’s Place in the Sun: A Modern History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005), 160.

<sup>34</sup> Kim, Vol 7, 124.

<sup>35</sup> Suh, 38-9.

<sup>36</sup> Brian Myers, *The Cleanest Race: How North Koreans See Themselves — And Why It Matters* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2011), 97.

<sup>37</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (Novato: New World Library, 2008.), 81, 101.

The actual history is not so rosy. Kim's guerilla career with the CCP came to an end in 1941, when Japanese forces successfully wiped out the NEAJUA, causing him to retreat to the Soviet Union. That same year, Kim Jong Il was born in the Russian Maritime province, not Korea, and Kim Il Sung joined the Soviet Red Army, never to see action again. In the end, Korea's liberation rested upon the success of the Allied Powers, and as Myers' summary reveals, their role is completely ignored in the official history. As a member of the Red Army, Kim returned to Korea only after the Soviets began occupying the northern half of the peninsula.

The propaganda apparatus' rather extreme contempt for facts or historical evidence may seem disturbing, but we must bear in mind that the groups such as the April 15th Literary Production Unit are not primarily interested in creating a positivist chronology of Kim Il Sung's life. The goal of texts such as *With the Century* is to captivate the reader with a compelling narrative, by making strong appeals to pathos and sacrificing factual accuracy, so that they will support the regime. One North Korean defector attested to the successful effects of Kim Il Sung's alleged memoirs:

“It might sound strange to you, but these kind of books [sic] were very popular and hard to borrow without a long wait at the library. Despite them being distinctly political works, I guess that ultimately, they were good reading. ... Some might say we were being brainwashed, but at least it was done entertainingly.”<sup>38</sup>

Since North Koreans are quite isolated from world literature, it is understandable why so many would enjoy propaganda literature. Another reason, however, why *With the Century* was so popular at its release is because of Kim Il Sung himself. As *New York Times* journalists Harrison Salisbury and John Lee affirmed after their interview with the Great Leader in May 1972, Kim Il Sung “was shown to be ‘an extroverted, even charismatic man,’ someone who wielded ‘absolute

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<sup>38</sup> Jae Young Kim, “The Surprising Truth About Propaganda Texts: They’re Actually Fun To Read,” *NK News*, October 12, 2012, [nknews.org/2012/10/the-shocking-truth-about-propaganda-texts-theyre-actually-fun-to-read-2/](http://nknews.org/2012/10/the-shocking-truth-about-propaganda-texts-theyre-actually-fun-to-read-2/).

authority’ and ‘exudes bonhomie’ — someone truly ‘extraordinary.’”<sup>39</sup> Concealing his grandiosity and brutality, Kim skillfully used his superficial charm and down-to-earth persona to win the hearts and minds of his people, thereby improving their perception of him in propaganda and vice versa. His mask was quite revolutionary, populist perhaps, compared to the centuries of distance between Korean kings and their subjects.

Another reason for the memoirs’ popularity may be due to the structure of the literature itself. Jae-cheon Lim has argued that the myth of Kim Il Sung “appears consistent with Joseph Campbell’s development cycle of the hero myth.”<sup>40</sup> An eminent scholar of mythology, Campbell argued that underlying the particularities of humanity’s most sacred stories is a universal narrative structure which he called the hero’s journey. Religious stories that use the hero’s journey are among the most popular, because elements of the structure resonate with the desires and moral intuitions of many people across cultures. In his analysis, religious or mythological narratives contain a hero (usually a male protagonist) who is first separated from his home, either of his own volition or against his will. This phase, known as the “Departure,” can be compared to Kim Il Sung’s call to adventure for Manchuria in Korea. After his separation, the hero is forced to endure a series of trials that test his resolve and strength; tempted at times to deviate from his destiny, but aided towards his goal other times. This phase, known as the “Initiation,” can be compared to Kim Il Sung’s entry into guerilla life through his alleged creation of the Korean People’s Revolutionary Army.<sup>41</sup> After enduring many adversities, the hero’s journey culminates

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<sup>39</sup> James Fetwell, “An American in Pyongyang: Kim Il Sung’s 1972 interview with the New York Times,” *NK News*, February 26, 2020, [nknews.org/2020/02/an-american-in-pyongyang-kim-il-sungs-1972-interview-with-the-new-york-times/](http://nknews.org/2020/02/an-american-in-pyongyang-kim-il-sungs-1972-interview-with-the-new-york-times/).

<sup>40</sup> Lim, 56.

<sup>41</sup> Lim argues that Kim Il Sung’s alleged creation of the Down-With-Imperialism Union begins the Initiation, but there is no evidence this organization ever existed, and it is rather incredible that an entire country’s communist movement was initiated by a 14-year-old.



in a final battle that leads to the attainment of his goal. Kim and his comrades achieve the ultimate boon of liberating Korea before reaching the final phase of the hero arch: the “Return.”

To call Kim Il Sung’s myth a religious story simply because it looks like one would be premature. By this logic, movies, anime, and video games can be considered religious. What makes it resemble a religious narrative is not only its structure, but also its *functionality*. The myth is passed down from generation to generation in homes and classrooms as an incontrovertible dogma, with no tolerance for doubt, dissent, nuance, or competing narratives. It portrays the nation’s founding patriarch as a messianic figure, who performed miraculous deeds, survived incredible odds, and brought national salvation and socialist redemption to his people and the holy Motherland. Most importantly, the words and actions of Kim Il Sung and his guerilla comrades serve as models for the rest of society to emulate in all aspects of life, from studying, musical performance, to infrastructure construction. This is similar to how many religious people, perhaps all people, comprehend and organize their own lives in terms of storytelling and try to live in accordance with a narrative, such as the Buddhist Noble Eightfold Path or the Passion of the Christ.

### ***Wolf***

Even though Kim Il Sung liberates Korea from the Japanese in the state discourse, the North Korean Revolution does not end with this brief period of emancipation. According to the official mythology, upon the General's return to the Motherland, the “US imperialists” had already colonized “south Korea” and established a puppet regime there. On June 25, 1950, the Americans invaded Korea to enslave her people, create a military base there, and conduct war against the Soviet Union and China. However, thanks to the Korean People’s Army and “valiant” Chinese People’s Volunteers, Socialist Korea “won a great victory in the three-year long severe

war by displaying mass heroism, patriotic devotion and unbending fighting spirit...[resulting in] a military, political and moral defeat” for the United States.<sup>42</sup>

It is this conflict – the Korean War, or “Fatherland Liberation War” in North Korea – that perpetuates the Sacred Revolution. It was actually the North Koreans who crossed the line in the summer of 1950. Just weeks after invading the South, they absorbed almost the entire peninsula, surrounding the southwest province of Busan. The United Nations intervened soon after, with the Americans constituting the overwhelming majority of UN forces. They conducted an amphibian landing at the city of Incheon, cutting off the North’s supply chain and isolating its southern troops. As the American forces led the reverse sweep, the Truman administration decided that containing communism in North Korea was not enough, but that a complete “roll back” of the Pyongyang regime was necessary.<sup>43</sup> Seeing the North Koreans retreating to the Amnok River, Chairman Mao decided to bring the newly-founded People’s Republic of China into its first international conflict in October 1950, to prevent the spread of American hegemony in East Asia. The Chinese proved to be an insurmountable foe, pushing UN troops back to the 38th parallel and provoking US General Douglas MacArthur to consider dropping the atomic bomb on them. This suggestion resulted in his dismissal by President Harry Truman in April 1951.<sup>44</sup> The war regressed into a stalemate for about two years, with no significant gains from either side. Talks for an armistice were initiated by the Soviets as early as 1951, but were not finalized until July 27, 1953. After approximately 4 million casualties, the Koreas returned roughly to their pre-war borders. North Korea is still technically at war with South Korea and the US.

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<sup>42</sup> The Research Institute of History, Academy of Sciences of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, *History of the Just Fatherland Liberation War of the Korean People*, (Pyongyang, DPRK, Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1981), i.

<sup>43</sup> Bruce Cumings, *The Korean War: A History* (New York: Modern Library, 2010), 21-23.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 203.



Figure 1.2: A photo of Pyongyang after American bombing, circa 1951.

Although the Korean War is sometimes referred to as the Forgotten War in the US, it is far from forgotten in North Korea. “The United States dropped more bombs on North Korea than it had during the entire Pacific campaign in World War II,” North Korean defector Yeonmi Park writes, “[they] bombed every city and village, and they kept bombing until there were no major buildings left to destroy.”<sup>45</sup> Villages were set ablaze at night with napalm to force out guerillas. Irrigation dams were destroyed, inundating villages, cities, railways, highways, bridges, and rice paddies.<sup>46</sup> These bombing targets left North Koreans on the brink of mass starvation, until Soviet aid arrived. In total, the North suffered 2 million casualties, a majority in the conflict, which constituted 15-20% of its population.<sup>47</sup>

It is exactly these atrocities that North Korean writer Han Sŏrya (1900-76) attempted to capture in his novella “Wolf,” published in 1951 during the Korean War. Han was a founding

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<sup>45</sup> Yeonmi Park, Maryanne Vollers, *In Order to Live: A North Korean Girl's Journey to Freedom*, (New York, Penguin Press, 2015), 31.

<sup>46</sup> Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun*, 296.

<sup>47</sup> Cumings, *The Korean War*, 78.

member of the Korean Federation of Literature and Arts<sup>48</sup> and Kim Il Sung's first hagiographer. Although "Wolf" makes no mention of Kim Il Sung, it is the most enduring and influential novella in North Korean literature, because of its allegorization of the post-liberation portion of the Sacred Revolution metanarrative.

Set in a poor village during the colonial period, the story is centered on a boy named Sugil and his single mother, who works as a maid for the missionary so her son may someday attend the local Christian school. Sugil finds a ball near the cowshed, then gathers the other children in the village to pass it to one another. The next day, the missionary's fifteen-year-old son Simon discovers the children playing with the ball, then punches Sugil for "stealing" it from him, completely knocking him out. The missionary witnesses the event and lectures his son that "We Americans must not touch filthy people with our sacred hands, is that understood?"<sup>49</sup> Simon then asks, "But father, we Americans have the right to beat blacks to death, don't we? God forgives us for doing that."<sup>50</sup> Eventually, a friend of Sugil's mother discovers the boy unconscious. Petrified, she instantly takes Sugil home, tends to his wounds, then delivers him to his mother.

Enraged by the incident, Sugil's mother confronts the missionary and demands to see his son Simon, but acts ignorant and bewildered upon hearing the accusations. Mary, the missionary's wife, arrives at the door and gently persuades Sugil's mother to leave. Sugil is then transported to the nearby Christian hospital, where American doctors, at the request of the missionary, inject him with bacillae. Sugil's mother visits the hospital after hearing rumors of the doctors' actions, only to be told that her son is in quarantine. When she returns later in the day to

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<sup>48</sup> This is the umbrella organization for all kinds of literary, fine, and performing artists in North Korea. Its subsidiaries will be explored further throughout the thesis.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Han, 165.

check up on him, she is bequeathed a cremation box with her son's name on it. Sugil's mother storms out of the hospital, goes to the missionary's house during supper, and grabs Simon. As Mary "the vixen" attempts to grab back her "wolf cub," the "jackal" missionary performs an exorcism, yelling "Out, devil!". Sugil's mother retorts:

"Devil? You son of a bitch, you kill someone for taking a ball you've thrown away. *You* bastards get out! Who gave you the right to come to another country and kill innocent people? This is our Korean land... do you think all Koreans have died?"<sup>51</sup>

In the midst of the commotion, Japanese police arrive and apprehend Sugil's mother. As she is dragged away through the village, she exclaims "Just you wait, not all Koreans have died!"<sup>52</sup>

This short but compelling story is evidence of several key doctrines in the North Korean state religion. Firstly, Sugil's murder is an allusion to allegations of biological warfare committed by the United States, specifically by spreading disease-carrying insects. Most American scholarship deems these allegations as entirely fabricated by the USSR, PRC and DPRK, but continue to be taught as fact in China and North Korea. Allegations of biological warfare are among the most enduring myths about the Korean War.<sup>53</sup>

Secondly, the depictions of Americans in "Wolf" represent not just the United States during the Korean War, but of all Americans across time. "In a standard North Korean narration," Tatiana Gabroussenko writes, "'American beasts' emerge as an evil monolithic entity stripped of any complexity, and associated exclusively with an aggressive US international policy and supposed war crimes committed on Korean soil."<sup>54</sup> As Myers has argued, North Korea's racial essentialism of Americans — as irredeemably racist, treacherous, and predatory

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<sup>51</sup> Han, 185

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

<sup>53</sup> Anonymous, "US troops' biochemical warfare plan exposed," *Pyongyang Times*, March 28, 2019, [kcnawatch.org/newstream/1553763709-928320382/us-troops%E2%80%99-biochemical-warfare-plan-exposed/](http://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1553763709-928320382/us-troops%E2%80%99-biochemical-warfare-plan-exposed/).

<sup>54</sup> Tatiana Gabroussenko, "Americans in North Korean fiction: questioning racism in North Korean propaganda," *Korean Studies in Shift-Proceedings of the Pacific Asian Conference on Korean Studies*, New Zealand Asia Institute, 2011.

savages — is rooted not only in the collective trauma of war, but also imperial Japan’s own anti-American propaganda from World War II.<sup>55</sup> Many of the DPRK’s earliest writers, including Han Sörya himself, served under the imperial Japanese propaganda apparatus, so it was only natural for them to recycle certain troupes that the populace would have been familiar with.

The origins of North Korea’s race-conscious worldview, however, pre-date the Japanese colonial period. Korean racial nationalism, or *Minjok* (meaning family, nation, race), has its origins in the Korean Enlightenment movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. At the turn of the century, debates about the Korean heritage, the ideal society, and modern imperialism were at the heart of public discourse, shaping a national identity. After World War II, *minjok* became intensified and sanctified by the North Korean government, partly as a reaction to the trauma of Japanese colonialism, but also due to the influence of *kokutai* (“national essence”), a “vague, mystical and racial-nationalist ideology” that defined the Japanese as the superior Asian race.<sup>56</sup> This concept, according to historian Michael Seth, was conveniently appropriated by North Korean propagandists to make Koreans wholly distinct from all other peoples, with a resplendent history and unique traditions.

The portrayals of Americans in “Wolf” are in stark contrast to how Koreans are portrayed throughout the novella, who are in essence empathetic, resilient, and faithful comrades fighting together against the evils of capitalism, imperialism, and foreignness, which the United States embodies. Taken together, these two contrasting presentations exemplify a cardinal doctrine in the North Korean state religion: moral dualism. The Manichean worldview in “Wolf” is shared across almost all North Korean propaganda, and assigns moral purity, innocence, and victimization to the oppressed Korean race, while attributing depravity, culpability, and sadism to

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<sup>55</sup> Myers, 2011, 26-7.

<sup>56</sup> Michael Seth, *North Korea: A History* (London: Palgrave, 2018), 4.

the American oppressors. This rather simplistic and dehumanizing dichotomy is a powerful source of persuasion for the regime, for “a majority” of North Koreans believe in the anti-American propaganda, according to Andrei Lankov.<sup>57</sup> Many defectors themselves, including Yeonmi Park, found the propaganda very compelling as children. The victim consciousness is routinely reinforced in North Korean culture through the retelling of stories such as “Wolf,” but also in school classrooms, which display graphic images of North Koreans killing Americans. Memories of family members and of Korean People’s Army veterans reinforce the sense of victimhood as well, as does the infamous Museum of American War Atrocities in Sinchon. There, US and South Korean troops allegedly massacred some 30,000 North Korean civilians during the Korean War, and although there is no evidence for this event, this myth is taught as fact in North Korea. The harrowing tales and vivid representations from all these propagandistic sources of myth elicit from North Koreans fear and disgust towards Americans, while inspiring ethnic solidarity and trust towards each other. By extension, this motivates North Koreans to either rally around the regime, or at the very least acquiesce to it, despite its brutality.

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<sup>57</sup> James Jones, *Secret State of North Korea*, PBS Frontline, 2014.



Figure 1.3: A painting from the Sinchon Museum of American War Atrocities. This illustration, of Americans brutalizing Korean women and children, is relatively modest compared to the other exhibits in the museum.

### ***Conclusion***

Born two years after Japanese colonization, Kim Il Sung entered the world at a time of great national sorrow and humiliation. He devoted himself to national liberation from an early age, converted to communism soon after, and spent his formative years as a guerilla fighter and commander for the Chinese Communist Party, although he hid this fact for most of his life to uphold the *juche* ideal of a self-reliant, authentic Korean leader. He and his comrades endured many hardships, such as defection, hunger, winter, trekking across mountains, and the sacrifices of many martyrs. Although they did not liberate Korea, and one may question their ideology and methods, no one can doubt their patriotism and perseverance. As the most sacrosanct story in the country, Kim's anti-Japanese struggle serves as a source of national identity for North Koreans, and as an ethical framework for them to follow into the present.

The Sacred Revolution, however, does not end with the conclusion of Japanese rule. It is perpetuated into the present because of North Korea's on-going conflict with South Korea and



the United States. Kim Il Sung's planned invasion of South Korea was no doubt an act of aggression and betrayal that needlessly ended the lives of millions of his compatriots. However, we cannot deny the many atrocities committed by the Americans during the war, which have left a profound mistrust and resentment on the North Korean people. Combining *With the Century* and "Wolf" into one narrative, we see the Korean people portrayed as passive victims, the Korean communists as active heroes, and the Americans, Japanese, and South Koreans as diabolical, monolithic others. This unambiguous, moral dichotomy in North Korean mythology has been an effective literary tool to persuade the masses to accept or acquiesce to the political establishment. In the next chapter, we will explore the ways in which the Sacred Revolution is communicated, and engaged with, through the artistic manipulation of silence and sound.

## CHAPTER 2: Hymns

*“Our music must exalt the great leader’s glorious revolutionary history, the greatness of his revolutionary achievement, and the sagacity of his leadership and his noble virtues. It must also resound with warm reverence for and unfailing loyalty to the leader, and unshakable faith and will to follow him to the end. This is the way to produce masterpieces that can play a great role in uniting our people solidly behind the Party and the leader, and in accomplishing his revolutionary cause.” – Kim Jong Il, The Art of Music (1991)*

As with literature, music is one of the most important mediums through which the regime transmits its messages to the populace. Only works commissioned and approved by the Party’s Propaganda and Agitation Department and the Ministry of Culture are performed or published, having met specific ideological demands and compositional requirements. The restrictions are so intense, lyricists are not even allowed to add new words to the state-sanctioned lexicon established by previous compositions, contributing to the control of the North Korean language and the listener’s/performer’s perception of the world. For these reasons, North Korean music can sound quite repetitive and static to the uninitiated. Even so, there are occasional glimpses of genuine talent and creativity in the country’s music.

### *Songs for Great Leaders*

One of the most recognizable examples of genuine talent in North Korea is Kim Won Gyun (1917-2002). Born in a peasant family, Kim was unable to receive a formal music education during his youth, but learned how to play a few instruments through friends. He struggled finding work as a musician so instead became a day laborer during the colonial period. The day after Emperor Hirohito announced Japan’s surrender, Kim supposedly composed the North’s first song, “March of Korea.”<sup>58</sup> In an interview with ethno-musicologist Keith Howard, Kim stated that he composed “Song of General Kim Il Sung,” to celebrate the first anniversary of national liberation. The following year, Kim Won Gyun was commissioned by the Great Leader

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<sup>58</sup> Korean Central News Agency, “Kim Won Gyun, Famous Composer of DPRK,” DPRK Today, October 16, 2021, [dprktoday.com/abroad/news/31166](http://dprktoday.com/abroad/news/31166).

himself, whose favoritism he had earned, to compose his most famous work: “Patriotic Song,” the country’s national anthem.<sup>59</sup>

“Song of General Kim Il Sung” is the *de facto* second national anthem of North Korea, played daily on Korean Central Television (the country’s only channel) during the start-up sequence right after “Patriotic Song.” The first and second verses and chorus read as follows:

Bright traces of blood on the crags of Jangbaek still gleam,  
 Still the Amnok carries along songs of blood in its flow,  
 Still do those hallowed trees shine splendidly  
 Over Korea ever flourishing and free.  
 [Chorus] So dear to all our hearts is our General’s glorious name,  
 Our own beloved Kim Il Sung of undying fame.

Tell blizzards that rage in the wild Manchurian plains,  
 Tell, you nights in forests deep where the silence reigns,  
 Who is the partisan whose deeds are unsurpassed?  
 Who is the patriot whose fame shall ever last?<sup>60</sup>  
 [Chorus]

As Howard explains, the march combines musical simplicity and ideological lyrics to tell a tale about Kim Il Sung’s guerrilla hideouts and battles against the Japanese in the 1930s. As the first work of propaganda ever about Kim Il Sung, it established the official discourse and served as a model for how future composers would write hymns dedicated to the Great Leader.<sup>61</sup> One prime example of this emulation is the frequently played “We Have Nothing to Envy in the World,” a “singsongy tune as familiar to North Korean children as ‘Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star,’” writes Barbara Demick.<sup>62</sup> Officially translated as “We Are the Happiest in the World,” the music was composed by Kim Hyok and published in 1961, remaining a staple of the national soundtrack ever since. It is a simple composition that targets the most vulnerable members of society by teaching them to love the dictatorship, take pride in their nation, accept their condition, and never

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<sup>59</sup> Keith Howard, *Songs for “Great Leaders”: Ideology & Creativity in North Korean Music & Dance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 16-7.

<sup>60</sup> Anonymous, “SONG OF GENERAL KIM IL SUNG,” Naenara, n.d., [naenara.com.kp/main/hymn\\_music/a/1/en](http://naenara.com.kp/main/hymn_music/a/1/en).

<sup>61</sup> Howard, 14.

<sup>62</sup> Barbara Demick, *Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea* (New York: Spiegel and Grau Trade Paperbacks, 2009), 119.

question society. “Nothing to Envy” is deliberately intended for an audience that has not learned how to think independently and are expected to obey elders. This is how many North Korean children are able to believe that they live in the greatest country in the world, yet experience frequent power shortages, not be unfamiliar with malnutrition, and live in constant terror from the regime.

**세상에 부림 없어라**

작사 집 체  
작곡 김 혁

빠르지 않게 깊은 정서를 가지고

*mp* C G C Dm G7

1. 하늘은 푸르고 내마음 즐겁다 손풍금 소리 울려 하

사람들 화목하게 사 - 는 내 조국 한없이 좋 네

(후렴)

*mf* C G C F

우리의 아버지인 김일성 원수님 우리의 집은당의 품

F Dm G7 C

우리는 모두다 - 친 형제 세상에 부림없어 라

First Verse: The sky is blue, My mind is joyful,  
The sound of the accordion rings,  
The people live harmoniously,  
How wonderful my country is.

Chorus: Our Father is Marshal Kim Il Sung,  
Our home is in the bosom of the Party,  
We are all brothers,  
We have nothing to envy in the world.

Figure 2.1: Score and first stanza of “We Have Nothing to Envy in the World.”

Although the official history portrays the development of music in North Korea as entirely indigenous, it owes much of its heritage to the socialist realism of the Soviet Union, and to a lesser extent the fascist policies of imperial Japan. Socialist realism is a rather fraught term because the Soviet Communist Party was prone to contradicting itself and redefining the concept based on political expediency. Nonetheless, it can be distilled to five components:

“reflection (in which true reality is framed by ideology), typicality (concentrating on the historical dialectic), revolutionary romanticism (having a tendency towards hyperbole), popular spirit (clearly and unambiguously of the people and for the people), and subjectness (reflecting both the people and the party).”<sup>63</sup>

<sup>63</sup> Howard, 145.

Socialist realism started to evolve in the arts after Kim Jong Il became in charge of the Party's Propaganda Department in 1967. To solidify his father's rule, flatter him, and become his successor, Kim Jong Il directed the apparatus to place greater emphasis on the Monolithic Ideological System, which meant adherence to Kim Il Sung's personality cult, the *juche* idea, and the Ten Principles and its 65 clauses. This discursive shift was particularly noticeable in cinema, a passion of Kim Jong Il's, and one such film that was produced during this transformative period was *The Flower Girl*. It was released in 1972 and produced by Kim Jong Il for his father's *hwangap*, or 60th birthday. An operatic version of the story was released at the same time as the film, part of a larger canon of classical-like compositions called *revolutionary operas*. These operas are denoted as "revolutionary" because they were allegedly written as plays by the partisans of the anti-Japanese struggle in the 1930s, with *The Flower Girl* specifically attributed to Kim Il Sung. This is almost certainly a myth meant to bolster the personality cult, but also an invented tradition meant to portray the history of North Korean music as an independent development that originates in the nation's revolutionary history and leadership.<sup>64</sup> For our purposes, we will focus on the film version of the opera.

### ***The Flower Girl***

Set in the 1930s during Japanese colonial rule of Korea, the story centers on a young girl named Kkotpun who sells flowers to care for her family. Prior to the events of the film, Kkotpun's father accrued a massive debt after borrowing a loan from a landlord named Pae. Her father was forced into bonded labor, but died before paying off his debt. Kkotpun's brother Ch'oryŏng attempts to pay off the debt after working for several years, but is unable to when the landlord charges him interest. This effectively keeps the family in permanent indentured

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<sup>64</sup> Suk-young Kim, *Illusive Utopia: Theater, Film, and Everyday Performance in North Korea* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 139-40.

servitude. One day, a cooking accident by the landlady causes Kkotpun's younger sister Sŏnhŭi to go blind. In retaliation, Ch'ŏryŏng burns the landlord's house at night and attempts to flee in the darkness, but is arrested by Japanese police and sent to prison.



Figure 2.2: Hong Yong-hŭi as Kkotpun, in *The Flower Girl*.

By the events of the film, Kkotpun's mother has taken her son's place in repaying their debts to landlord Pae, but becomes sick in the process. In an act of filial piety, Kkotpun sells flowers in the village marketplace to buy medicine for her ill mother and feed her blind sister. In the market, Kkotpun approaches a fortune-teller and is told that a "noble man" will visit her imminently. After her daughter returns home and shares the news, Kkotpun's Mother explains that a noble man is like a hero of old tales; a man who helps poor people like them become happy. This kind of "biblical yearning for a Messianic redeemer," as Howard puts it, is common across all North Korean revolutionary operas, and finds their resolutions in the climax.<sup>65</sup>

One day while the two sisters sell flowers in the market, tragedy occurs at home. After many years of sacrificing for her children, and stoic endurance against the landlord's abuse and harassment, Kkotpun's mother collapses, exhausted from overwork, and dies. Upon hearing this,

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<sup>65</sup> Howard, 118.

Kkotpun and her sister rush home to say farewell to their mother one last time, but not without a dramatic and uncontrollable breakdown. Realizing she is unable to pay off the debts and might be sold as a prostitute, Kkotpun sets out on a quest in search of her long-lost brother for help, while Sŏnhŭi stays home with a family friend. Along the way, she makes new comrades who are also the victims of Japanese colonialism and the landowning class. Upon arriving at the prison he is held at, Kkotpun is told by a guard that he is already dead. Filled with despair, Kkotpun begins her long journey home.

During her absence, the landlady has a nightmare which she deliriously blames on a demon possessing Sŏnhŭi. She orders the land steward to get rid of Sŏnhŭi, who takes her out and leaves her stranded in the cold, snowy forest. When Kkotpun eventually returns to the village, exhausted from her trek, she learns from a fellow indentured servant what happened to her sister. Impassioned with fury and resolve, Kkotpun confronts her landlord and demands Sŏnhŭi, but her efforts are not enough. She is knocked out by the steward, chained, and locked in a shed, to be dumped in the river the next day.

In a warm log cabin in the mountains, Sŏnhŭi sleeps soundly. Serendipitously, she was rescued by a group of revolutionary partisans led by none other than her brother Ch'ŏryŏng, who managed to escape from prison years ago. Once the circumstances are explained to him by the villagers, he leads his partisans and the villagers in a raid against the cruel landlords who have immiserated his family. As the coalition marches down to landlord Pae's house, Pae shares dinner with his wife, the steward, and the local Japanese police chief. The people take their revenge against the four and free Kkotpun, who enjoys a sentimental reunion with her family. Kkotpun's brother then delivers a grand speech, inviting the villagers to join the Korean Revolutionary Army to end the country's poverty and exploitation caused by capitalism,

feudalism, and imperialism. In the finale that follows, Kkotun walks through the village market, passing out flowers for free to everyone. In the final shot, she walks towards the sun, with a basket full of lavender azaleas, white magnolias (the national flower), and red flowers.



Figure 2.3: A statue of Kim Il Sung with the cast of *The Flower Girl* at the Korean Art Film Studio in Pyongyang.

Even as the film and opera approach their 50th anniversary, *The Flower Girl* still holds a special place in North Korean culture because it is an effective allegory of the official history. The absence of Kkotpun's father is an allusion to Korea's own loss of a father figure who was unable to protect the nation from oppression; namely, the abdication of King Kojong, the last Korean monarch, after the Japanese takeover of the peninsula. The central conflict of the story depicts the historical disparity between the land owners and landless tenants that plagued feudal Korea well into the colonial period. Landlord Pae himself is a representation of the collaborators, Koreans who cooperated with or facilitated the colonial regime, such as businessmen, landlords, and administrative clerks. Kkotpun's brief revolt against landlord Pae is partially a reference to the many peasant uprisings that spot Korean history (such as the 1894 Tonghak Rebellion). At its core, however, it is an allusion to the March 1st Movement of 1919, when Koreans first began resisting colonial rule. Given that the movement ended in failure, Kkotpun's inability to fend for



herself parallels the event to support the official history. Just as Kkotpun needed Ch'ŏryŏng to emancipate her, so too did Korea need Kim Il Sung to liberate the masses and become the new father figure.<sup>66</sup>

The ideological and historical undertones can be found not only in the narrative, but in the songs themselves. In the opening, for example, Kkotpun walks through a mountain pasture, pausing to pick lavender azaleas to sell. While doing so, she sings one of the most iconic arias of the film “Please Buy My Flowers,” accompanied by an orchestra mixed with Western and Korean instruments. She asks for people, out of the kindness of their hearts, to buy her red flowers, picked at the foot of the mountain, so she can take care of her sick, widowed mother. The song evokes the traditional Korean folk style with its use of the East Asian pentatonic scale (which uses six tones as opposed to eight in Western music). Despite the song being in a major key, which usually signals positive emotions or events, “Please Buy My Flowers” is a song of sorrow and longing for relief. Its slow, adagio tempo and overall gentleness reflects the film’s nostalgia for the simple, bucolic life of the pre-modern era; before the entanglements and tribulations of the tumultuous 20th century. In the finale, Kkotpun sings a variation of her opening aria, “I Sow the Seeds of Revolution.” This song is optimistic, and is about the arrival of spring and the garden that is to come:

Icy is the wind, fierce are the frost and snow,  
But the cold cannot stop the blooming flowers of spring.  
Under the benevolent sun shining so brightly,  
I sow the seeds of revolution.  
In our villages and the hearts of the people,  
Lovely flowers bloom everywhere.  
In my beautiful land of 3,000 ri,  
The red flowers of revolution now bloom everywhere.

The “benevolent sun” in this stanza is none other than the Eternal Sun of the Nation himself; the center of the system that all other bodies revolve around; the giver of life which all crops depend

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<sup>66</sup> Howard, 128, 132.

on; the hero whose warmth and enlightenment radiates all around the world. The arrival of spring is a metaphor for the revolution that ended the bitter and trying winter of feudal and colonial oppression. The passing out of flowers by Kkotpun is a metaphor for the Party's role in propagating and planting the ideological seeds of the Revolution and Great Leader into the masses; cultivating and nurturing the people, like a mother, into proper revolutionaries.

The embedding of Kim Il Sung's myth into the film's plot is a prime example of an ideological formula known in North Korea as the seed theory. The concept originates from a 1973 treatise attributed to Kim Jong Il titled *On the Art of Cinema*. The seed (*chongja*) functions as the "guiding criterion which provides the principles for the organization of content and the unification of all formal elements of the work in conformity with the content."<sup>67</sup> In other words, it is "the most vital element in the artist's creative work, ... which determines the finished work's aesthetic value and creative quality" by starting with the politically correct consciousness.<sup>68</sup> The seeds, in their essence, are the personal teachings of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il that permeate throughout North Korean music and media. The orthodoxy, disguised through revolutionary language, inculcates the North Korean populace in the Monolithic Ideological System, supports the Sacred Revolution narrative, and unifies the culture. As Suk-young Kim allegorically describes it, "Kim Il Sung disseminated the seed of the revolutionary operas, while his son cultivated and harvested the productions."<sup>69</sup>

Although Kim Il Sung's myth via Ch'öryöng heroism might be the seed, he is pushed mostly to the periphery in *The Flower Girl*, and focus is placed primarily on Kkotpun herself. Symbolically, she represents the Korean people and Motherland: pure, virtuous, innocent, and

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<sup>67</sup> Kim Jong Il, *On the Art of the Cinema* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1989), 84-85.

<sup>68</sup> Heonik Kwon, Byung-Ho Chung, *North Korea: Beyond Charismatic Politics* (Plymouth, United Kingdom: Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2012), 52.

<sup>69</sup> S. K. Kim, 141.

beautiful. But she is also a polysemic character, representing multiple groups and discourses. Firstly, she is an idyllic representation of the peasantry. The Sacred Revolution seed is interwoven in “a lyrical portrayal of the Korean countryside, . . . designed to canonize the simple way of life of peasants, who were projected as the embodiment of the Korean national essence.”<sup>70</sup> The valorization of bucolic life also intends to excite the nationalist impulse of the viewer, an archetypal narrative pioneered by early films produced under the Soviet occupation.

Secondly, Kkotpun is an allegory of the peasant’s exploitation. Although many North Korean revolutionary operas tend to portray an ethno-nationalist discourse, the external enemies, the Japanese, are quite latent in *The Flower Girl*. Instead, more focus is placed on the internal enemies of the Motherland, namely, the treacherous feudal landlords and collaborators. The relationship between Kkotpun’s family and Pae’s estate is an indigenized version of Marx’s dialectical materialism, where the tension is between the peasantry and landlords rather than the bourgeois and proletariat. Similar to “Wolf” from chapter one, it attempts to instill in the viewer a binary morality of good versus evil, oppressor versus oppressed. The end result is a melodramatic narrative that contains “flat and crude archetypes lacking emotional depth.”<sup>71</sup> Considering the fact that most Koreans after Liberation were landless, sustenance farmers with no formal education, the tensions exhibited in the film and the *resentiment* it plays off of almost certainly would have resonated with the audience to some extent.

Thirdly, and more immediately, Kkotpun is a model of the state-sanctioned gender performance for women, which is partially influenced by heroines in Chinese revolutionary operas produced during Mao’s Cultural Revolution (1966-76). In these propaganda productions, women had the opportunity to become heroes for the nation. Female protagonists were no longer

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 35.

<sup>71</sup> Howard, 147.

passive victims, but active fighters on equal terms with men; ones who choose to protect others rather than be protected.<sup>72</sup> Gender differences are virtually eliminated in these operas, with men and women wearing identical guerilla uniforms. North Korean heroines on the other hand, such as Kkotpun, are feminine hybrids of revolutionary socialist and traditional values. Through these characters, North Korean women are expected to see themselves as members of an imagined community that Wada Haruki calls the *guerilla state*, where North Koreans are comrades-in-arms under the leadership of the General, dedicating their lives to the sacred cause of Revolution.<sup>73</sup>

Not only are women expected to be fighters of the guerilla state, they are expected to be daughters and mothers of the *family state*, an official imagined community where the supreme leader is the father of the nation, the Workers' Party is the mother, and the people are the children.<sup>74</sup> Heonik Kwon and Byung-Ho Chung eloquently describe the intersection of these discourses in *The Flower Girl*:

“[*The Flower Girl* is] anchored in the revelatory power of adoptive kinship: the young patriot becomes a lonesome soul in the world, having lost her dearest blood relations to colonial violence [and feudal exploitation]. She finds substitute filial ties and a moral sense of belonging in the partisan leader [Ch'ōryōng/ Kim Il Sung], becomes enlightened, and finds the meaning of life thanks to the revolutionary family, which is the partisan group.”<sup>75</sup>

The presence of family values in North Korean propaganda, according to Kwon and Chung, is evidence of the reinvention of Confucianism, used by the North Korean state to maintain cultural discipline of its population. These customs entail *in* (benevolence), *tōk* (virtue), *ch'ung* (loyalty), and *hyo* (filial piety). “In pre-modern Confucian Korea,” Jae-cheon Lim explains, “benevolence and virtue were the values the king displayed toward his subjects, whereas loyalty was the value that subjects displayed toward the king, and filial piety was for children to show toward their

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 137.

<sup>73</sup> Cumings, 420.

<sup>74</sup> S. K. Kim, 154.

<sup>75</sup> Kwon, Chung, 18, 57.

parents.”<sup>76</sup> Thus, while the “parental leader” Kim Il Sung [*ǒbǒi suryǒng*] displays benevolence and virtue towards his subjects, the subjects themselves display loyalty and filial piety towards him. In *The Flower Girl*, Kkotpun exemplifies these Confucian customs when she expresses filial piety towards her mother and submissive loyalty to her older brother. Ch’ōryǒng demonstrates benevolence and virtue towards his siblings, his partisans, and the villagers.

Traditional femininity is enforced in *The Flower Girl* not only through exhibition of Confucian virtues, but also through physical appearance. Perhaps the most obvious marker of traditional femininity in the film is the *chosǒn-ot*, the national dress of both Koreas. In scenes of public life in North Korean state media, it is the norm for women to wear it, just as Kkotpun does (although hers is quite plain and worn-out, almost like that of a religious ascetic). The beautiful, but modest dress is promoted in state media not only for ethnic-nationalist reasons, but as a means to desexualize women. As Immanuel Kim puts it, “Just as sexual freedom was seen as a threat in the Soviet Union under Stalin’s dictatorship,” sexual repression became an instrument through which the North Korean state controlled its people, by transforming women “from images of desire to functionality.”<sup>77</sup> In liberal capitalist societies, the exercise of one’s own sexuality can be an avenue for self-empowerment, leading to social and material success. From the North Korean point of view, however, it is dangerous because it can lead to – not only licentiousness or vanity – but individualism. It draws the subject away from the collective mentality, shifting focus on the self rather than the political. Thus, sexual expression must be suppressed by promoting familial, traditional gender norms in film and music.

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<sup>76</sup> Lim, 84.

<sup>77</sup> Immanuel Kim, 26.

## ***Conclusion***

The modern music of North Korea has its roots in the Japanese colonial period and Soviet occupation, inheriting the formula of socialist realism and attempting to make it its own. Today, songs in the country “rehearse ideology, announce state policy, and memorialize” the official history, forming “much of the soundtrack to the theater of daily life.” To be more specific, they promote the Sacred Revolution metanarrative that begins with Kim Il Sung’s liberation of Korea from Japanese rule, which continues due to American colonization of South Korea. Hymns, such as “Song of General Kim Il Sung” by Kim Won Gyun and “We Have Nothing to Envy in the World” by Kim Hyuk (not related), are among the most recognizable examples of how music functions in the country. These songs are simple, memorable, and politicized pieces that promote the worship of the leadership, and can be easily internalized by children and performed off stage in multiple settings. The drawback to these models, however, is a relative lack of viewpoint diversity and compositional complexity in North Korean vocal music, a consequence of Kim Jong Il’s instructions as director of propaganda. Despite having a strong appreciation for Western classical music, Kim regarded it as oftentimes overly formal and complicated, and suspicious for its historical relationship with the aristocracy and bourgeoisie. All music in North Korea, according to him, needed to be political and “people-oriented,” to spur the masses into juche-oriented socialist revolution and inform them with “correct understanding.” If music did not strive towards political ends – if it was “art for art’s sake,” – then it was deemed useless or bourgeois.

*The Flower Girl*, which became a huge success in China and won a prize at the 1972 Karlovy Vary film festival in Czechoslovakia, also promoted the worship and leadership of Kim Il Sung, albeit in more implicit and diverse ways. It attempts to valorize the bucolic life of the

peasantry to excite ethnic-nationalist sentiments in the viewer, but also expose their historical suffering, thereby suggesting the need for a messianic redeemer to rescue them. *The Flower Girl*, as the title gives away, displays the state-desired gender performance for women, who are expected to be desexualized and attentive mothers who raise proper revolutionaries, and sisters contributing to the construction of a socialist state by working outside the home. The film, through the family dynamics in Kkotpun's family, also promotes Confucian values such as filial piety and loyalty, as virtues for the North Korean masses to show towards their leaders. The benevolence and virtue displayed by Ch'oryŏng, his partisans, and Kkotpun herself towards her Sŏnhŭi and the villagers is analogous to the relationship between the state and the people in the official "family state" discourse, where the leader is the father, the party is the mother, and the people are the children. Through the infantilization and indoctrination of the people, North Korean music acts as a support mechanism for the regime by disseminating and reinforcing myths and doctrines of the state religion. Music, however, is also a performative activity that can function as a rite. In the next chapter, we will see how the regime uses ceremonies and routinized behaviors to reinforce state orthodoxy and a sense of community in the populace.

### CHAPTER 3: Rituals

*“There is then something eternal in religion which is destined to survive all the particular symbols which have successively veiled religious thought. There can be no society which does not feel the need at regular intervals to maintain and strengthen collective sentiments and ideas which constitute its unity and personality.”*  
 – Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912)

In the previous chapters, we have explored the official myths of the Kim dynasty. We have also explored how stories about the nation and its leadership are supported through musical acts of worship and devotion. Building off the theme of performance, this chapter will examine North Korean life through its political organizations and meetings, as well as festivals and customs. These activities function as religious rituals in North Korea – symbolic actions that routinely reinforce myths and doctrines, and immerse participants in a collective experience. Their goals are to strengthen the people’s loyalty and belief in the national religion and state itself, although they need not produce sincere belief to be effective. So long as they elicit obedience from the populace – or “manufacture consent” as Noam Chomsky might have it – they are contributing to the maintenance of the political status quo.

#### ***Organizational Life***

As mentioned in the introduction, many rituals of the North Korean state religion are prescribed by the Ten Principles of the Monolithic Ideological System and the 65 clauses that accompany them. Some of the most important rituals in the country are performed through a set of institutions and practices collectively known as Organizational Life (OL), which regulates the behaviors and emotions of its populace. Between the ages of 6 and 14, all North Koreans must join the Korean Children’s Union, which is similar to the Young Pioneers in China but is not part of OL. Then in their teenage years, North Koreans are required to be a member of one of five organizations: the Workers’ Party of Korea, the Youth Union, the Trade Union, the Farmers’ Union, or the Women’s Union. The most important of these organizations is the Party itself,



which is for adults who demonstrate promising ideological conviction, or have made the right connections. Even though a higher percentage of citizens are members of the ruling communist party than other socialist republics, Workers' Party membership is still fairly prestigious in North Korea, granting a person greater social mobility and leverage in employment, education, and politics. (Party members, however, are subjected to the strictest surveillance.) The Youth Union, which is for those between the ages of 14 and 30, is the second most important organization because it is where prospective Workers' Party members are selected from, and indicates to the regime, to some extent, its stability, since the degree of young people's loyalty or subservience towards the state hints at its future survival. The Trade Union is for adults, overwhelmingly men, over the age of 30 who do generic office or factory work. The Women's Union is for both state-employed and unemployed women, including housewives and stay-at-home mothers. The rural Farmers' Union, perhaps the least significant of these organizations, serves essentially the same purpose as the urban Trade Union.

Membership to one of these organizations is compulsory and determined by the Party, with symbolically important fees requiring up to a tithe of a person's income, although usually less. Each organization divides their members into cells of five to thirty people, usually drawing members from the same neighborhood or *inminban* ("people's unit"), classroom, or workplace. Members convene at least three times a week, with each session lasting between one and a half to two hours. The first two sessions are indoctrination sessions consisting of either *kangyon* (lectures) or *haksup* (political study sessions), where selected members deliver sermons on the greatness of the Kim family, economic development, the evils of American foreign policy, among other things. These sessions are not always passive top-down experiences, as "every adult is occasionally expected to manufacture propaganda – or at least assemble utterances in

accordance with the rules of authoritative discourse.”<sup>78</sup> This “coproduction” of propaganda often takes the form of reading and reciting literature (e.g. Kim Il Sung’s *With the Century*), watching and analyzing films (e.g. *The Flower Girl*), memorizing and performing songs (e.g. “We Have Nothing to Envy in the World”), and studying and memorizing verbatim texts about the *juche* idea or speeches attributed to the supreme leaders.

In addition to long and frequent hours of indoctrination, organization cells require members to participate in *saenghwal chonghwa*, or as Lankov et al. prefer to call, “mutual and self-criticism sessions.” They suggest that this ritual can be seen as “an exercise in self-policing taken to the extreme,” where members are required to watch their peers and themselves for any deviations in thought or behavior in a formalized manner.<sup>79</sup> Sonia Ryang, an anthropologist from Chongryon – a controversial and marginalized community of Koreans in Japan who receive financial support from the DPRK – offers a nuanced interpretation of *chonghwa*. She suggests that the self-criticism sessions in North Korea are analogous to the practice of confession in Christianity, which enables the believer to achieve spiritual development (as in the Eastern Orthodox tradition), or allows their sins to be purified through absolution by a priest (as in Catholicism).<sup>80</sup> Ryang argues that, just as St. Augustine in his *Confessions* testified to renewing his piety and feeling the presence of God through spiritual introspection and sensual abstention, the self-criticism sessions intend to motivate North Koreans to seriously reflect on their weaknesses and eliminate their impurities. This process ideally “reduces and eventually eliminates one’s distance from the great being, in order finally to be fully accepted by this being:” the supreme leader himself.<sup>81</sup> Although it is difficult to corroborate whether or not North

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<sup>78</sup> Lankov, In-ok Kwak, and Choong-Bin Cho, “The Organizational Life: Daily Surveillance and Daily Resistance in North Korea,” *Journal of East Asian Studies* 12, no. 2 (2012): 204. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23418807>.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 208.

<sup>80</sup> Sonia Ryang, *Reading North Korea: An Ethnological Inquiry* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Asia Center, 2012), 142-3.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

Koreans actually feel the psychological effects she describes, Ryang offers a convincing religious interpretation of the criticism sessions that helps us recognize their intensity, importance, and intentions.

At the start of each person's self-critique, they must stand up in front of everyone, cite a quote by Kim Il Sung or Kim Jong Il, then either produce a public admission of guilt for a mistake or make a critical accusation against someone else in the session. North Korean defector Eunsun Kim recalls in her memoir a criticism session while in school in the 1990s. While toiling in her teacher's garden, as a classroom assignment, Eunsun complained "What's the point of gathering all this corn if we won't be able to eat it?" A classmate tattled on her, which caused the teacher to sharply rebuke Eunsun: "That individualistic attitude is unacceptable in the socialist society of North Korea!" The following day during *saenghwal chonghwa*, Eunsun criticized the classmate who snitched on her, much to her satisfaction.<sup>82</sup> Other things admitted during self-criticism sessions include failure to live up to the Ten Principles, tardiness to meetings, not studying hard enough, and not doing enough chores. As we can see, these are relatively innocuous short-comings that are unlikely to garner severe admonishment from peers or authorities. This is because North Koreans do not take the risk of confessing actual ideological deviations, such as listening to South Korean music or watching American films, which are serious offenses in North Korea. As a result, self- and mutual criticism sessions – according to North Korean defectors themselves – are largely performative activities where ideological conformity is exhibited but not completely sincere.<sup>83</sup> Children, who are less socially adept, tend to interpret criticism sessions either as genuine moments of spiritual and political self-improvement, or as games to adjust or assert their social ranks among peers, but this is not

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<sup>82</sup> Eunsun Kim, Sébastien Falletti, *A Thousand Miles to Freedom: My Escape from North Korea*, translated by David Tian (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2015), 23-4.

<sup>83</sup> Lankov, Kwak, Cho, 209.

always the case. North Korean defector Hyeonseo Lee recounts in her memoir that she would coordinate with a class friend to fabricate accusations against each other every other week, to conceal actual deviations and dampen the austere atmosphere of self-criticism sessions.<sup>84</sup>

The highly performative nature of Organizational Life may give the impression that the sessions are ineffectual, but this is not the case. As we established through Durkheim's and Geertz's definitions in the introduction, a religion is more than just a set of propositions meant to inspire a believer to act in specific ways. It is an entire social network that connects people through intersections of symbolic significance. It is not just about belief, but also about action that leads to the formation and sustenance of a community, by individuals demonstrating commitment to an orthodoxy regardless of their degree of conviction. If Organizational Life rituals can cause people to act (and possibly believe) together, then they are efficacious in sustaining the regime's power.

### ***Day of the Sun***

In addition to Organizational Life, North Korea also hosts several large-scale celebrations on national holidays that function as rituals for the state religion. It may seem strange to regard such activities as religious, but as Durkheim asked, what is the difference between an assembly of Christians celebrating the main events of the life of Christ, or Jews memorializing their exodus from Egypt, and citizens commemorating a great event in the history of their nation?<sup>85</sup> There is arguably none because their functions are essentially identical. In the North Korean case, the most important of such rituals is the Day of the Sun, the birthday of "Eternal President" Kim Il Sung. Held annually on April 15 since the 1960s, it is the most sacred holiday in the country, an event which Tatiana Gabroussenko finds comparable to Christmas in the West. It has

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<sup>84</sup> Hyeonseo Lee, David John, *The Girl with Seven Names: Escape from North Korea* (London: William Collins, 2016), 34.

<sup>85</sup> Durkheim, 156.

been officially referred to as the Day of the Sun (*T'aeyang-jöl*) since three years after Kim's death in 1994, and North Koreans mark the occasion through family meals and public festivities, such as art exhibitions, musical performances, athletic events, lectures on the *juche* idea, and mass spectacles.<sup>86</sup> These events include the Pyongyang Marathon; the April Spring Friendship Art Festival, which invites foreign musicians (particularly from the Third World and former Eastern Bloc) to perform in Pyongyang; the April Spring Arts Festival, which invites musicians from within the country to perform in the heart of the Revolution; and the Kimilsunglia Festival, an exhibition dedicated to a single orchid gifted to and named after the Great Leader by President Sukarno of Indonesia. Art and photo exhibitions – all in the socialist realist style – are also displayed around the country to present images of the Great Leader that suggest his brilliant and compassionate leadership, as well as the fictitious successes of the Sacred Revolution and socialist construction. The holy day concludes with a massive evening youth gala in Kim Il Sung Square and a fireworks display along the Taedong River every 5th and 10th anniversary.

*T'aeyang-jöl* is also one of the few days North Koreans can be guaranteed to receive rations from the Public Distribution System, with children receiving wrapped bags full of cookies and candies in their schools. Eunsun Kim recollects the excitement and anticipation she felt before receiving her kilogram of sweets:

The night beforehand, we were always about as excited as we could possibly be, and I could never fall asleep. The morning of [Kim Il Sung's and Kim Jong Il's] birthdays, with my uniform completely clean, I would proudly go collect my clear plastic bag of goodies with the inscription 'we have nothing to envy in the world' written on the exterior. I suppose that this was one way the regime ensured we understood that there was no one happier than us.

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<sup>86</sup> Lim, 2015, 38.



Figure 3.1: “Posters for 7th April Spring People’s Art Festival Produced.”

Figure 3.2: “Posters for April Spring Friendship Art Festival Produced.”

Figure 3.3: “Poster for 20th Kimilsungia Festival Produced.”

Since the North Korean regime invests such incredible time and resources in extravagant rituals, anthropologists Heonik Kwon and Byung-Ho Chung argue that the North Korean regime is a theater state, borrowing the term from Geertz’s analysis of 19th century Bali. According to Geertz, pre-colonial Bali was pointed not towards tyranny or systematic governance, but spectacle, ceremony, and the public dramatization of social hierarchy. “[T]he kings and princes were the impresarios,” he argues, “the priests the directors, and the peasants the supporting cast, stage crew, and audience.” The mass rituals of Bali, Geertz continues, were not intended to maintain the position of the ruling class, but were ends in themselves: “Power served pomp, not pomp power.”<sup>87</sup> Although Kwon and Chung find the concept theater state to be suitable for understanding how North Korea functions, they have their reservations. They critique the static nature of Geertz’s model, which imagines pre-colonial Bali as a relatively stable order. This framework simply cannot be applied to North Korea, because despite its rigid orthodoxy and

<sup>87</sup> Geertz, *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth-Century Bali* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 13.

ultra-conservative appearance, the country does change.<sup>88</sup> Also, Geertz's framework makes the rather counterintuitive claim that there is no political or material basis for the rituals.

To add credence to Kwon and Chung's argument, we will apply Southeast Asian historian Anthony Reid's version of the theater state, which is much more intuitive and practical than Geertz's original conception. In early modern Southeast Asian cultures he states – specifically Javanese, Siamese, and Malay – religious festivals, ceremonies, games, plays, and other forms of art and entertainment were organized to demonstrate the majesty and splendor of the state. They were used to legitimize the ruling dynasty by reinforcing elaborate narratives that sanctified the royal family and their relationship with the divine. These activities were laborious and not considered leisure by the Southeast Asian peoples, but were nonetheless genuinely popular; fulfilling the basic human needs of social bonding. As a result, the unity of the community and the king's authority were both strengthened.<sup>89</sup>

North Korea can be thought of and described in similar ways to how Geertz and Reid analyzed Southeast Asia. The priests in North Korean society are the supreme leader and the party, while the people are the supporting cast, crew, and audience who both spectate and participate in theatrical performances – the rituals – for state media and the international community. Holidays like Day of the Sun, Day of the Shining Star (Kim Jong Il's Birthday), Foundation of the Republic Day, and several more, are the festivals and ceremonies that sponsor the artistic displays of national solidarity, state power, and the revolutionary or divine lineage of the Kim Dynasty passed down from the Great Leader, president-for-life and the afterlife.

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<sup>88</sup> “If North Korea appears to be an unchanging, unchangeable actor on the international stage, it is probably because the changes the country is now undergoing are unfamiliar and therefore not easily perceptible to the outside world rather than because North Korea is truly defying change.” Kwon and Chung, 13.

<sup>89</sup> Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450-1680* (New Haven: Yale University Press: 1988), 173-235.

In addition to the festivals already mentioned, there are certain sacred customs North Koreans are expected to perform during the Sun Festival. Figure 3.4 shows participants for the 2022 April Spring Arts Festival delivering flowers and bowing before statues of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il at Mansu Hill in Pyongyang. Laying flowers and bowing before the late leaders' statues (an amount approaching a thousand) is a custom not only expected of performing artists in Pyongyang, but of all people in North Korea at their local statues in cities, suburbs, and the countryside.<sup>90</sup> The ritual is on the one hand an act of worship to the country's late leaders, who function as gods of the North Korean people in all but name, a term which Durkheim defined as "a being whom man imagines to be superior to himself in some way and on whom he believes himself to be dependent."<sup>91</sup> It is also, however, an act of sacrifice, since it costs time and energy to go to the statues and pay respects to them, and money to buy the expensive flowers.<sup>92</sup> Fulfilling this simple but symbolic act has profound implications in demonstrating loyalty to or at least acquiescence towards the regime.

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<sup>90</sup> Jane Portal, *Art Under Control in North Korea* (London: Reaktion Books, 2005), 82.

<sup>91</sup> Durkheim, 125.

<sup>92</sup> Since real flowers are so expensive, demands for synthetic ones have soared in recent years during the Sun Festival in the gray market. Daily NK, "Private flower producers profit on Kim Il Sung's birthday," *The Daily NK*, April 25, 2016, [dailynk.com/english/private-flower-producers-profit-on/](http://dailynk.com/english/private-flower-producers-profit-on/).





Figure 3.4: “Participants in People’s Art Festival Pay Floral Tribute to Statues of Great Leaders.”



Figure 3.5: Ri Sol Ju, Kim Jong Un, and members of the politburo visit the Kumsusan Palace of the Sun, where the late Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il lie in-state.

Pilgrimages are another set of rituals that take place during the Sun Festival. Figure 3.5 shows supreme leader Kim Jong Un, his wife Ri Sol Ju, and members of the politburo visiting the Kumsusan Palace, the national mausoleum where Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il lie in state. Again, this particular form of reverence to the late leaders is available for all North Koreans to demonstrate (in the case of school children, mandatory), and constitutes as an act of worship and sacrifice. Along with pilgrimages to the Kumsusan Palace, adults and especially student youth will visit a reconstruction of Kim Il Sung's alleged childhood home in Mangyongdae district (figure 3.1); the Korean Revolution Museum at Mansu Hill (figure 3.4), a shrine to the official history; Pochonbo, the site of a battle that gave Kim Il Sung notoriety in Korea; Popyong, the border town where Kim made his departure from Korea to Manchuria; the Revolutionary Martyrs Cemetery, where Kim's guerilla comrades and high-ranking military and party officials rest, and many more.<sup>93</sup> More important perhaps than the memorials and museums at these locations is the mass mobilization of people and the myth the state attempts to imbue them with. As Jae-Cheon Lim describes it, the symbolic world of Kim Il Sung's anti-Japanese struggle is "an imaginary space in which illusion and reality are interlaced, and past, present, and future intersect."<sup>94</sup> The pilgrimages are intended to make North Koreans not just simply remember their nation's fictitious past, but to identify with the leader and his guerilla comrades in the present by acting out physical representations of the official history, i.e. vicariously suffering through long treks to sacred revolutionary sites. This helps them internalize the notion that they are comrades inheriting the spirit of the Revolution, carrying out the orders of the immortal fatherly general and his physical representative on earth (Kim Jong Un) into the future.

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<sup>93</sup> Lim, 2015, 65-66.

<sup>94</sup> Lim, 58-59.



Figure 3.6: Members of the Kimilsungist-Kimjongilist Youth League make their pilgrimage to Kim Jong Il's fabricated birthplace at Mount Paektu, the "sacred" mountain of revolution.

One of the most recognizable events that have taken place during the Sun Festival are the Mass Games, which were held annually between 2002-2013 under the name Arirang Festival. They were a symbiotic relationship of arts, acrobatics and athleticism and drew on elements from physical theatre, rhythmic gymnastics, Cirque du Soleil and Broadway musicals, according to Udo Merkel.<sup>95</sup> The Mass Games were resumed in 2018 under the name "The Glorious Country" to commemorate the country's 70th anniversary, then renamed "People's Country" the following year. The last performance of the Mass Games was in 2020, and have been on hiatus since then due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the Mass Games have been performed time and time again since the founding of the country, because they have been discontinued, they will not be the main focus of this chapter.

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<sup>95</sup> Udo Merkel, *Power, Politics and International Events: Socio-cultural Analyses of Festivals and Spectacles*, edited by Udo Merkel (New York: Routledge, 2014), 150.



Figure 3.7: A float with the Workers' Party Flag passing by the Grand People's Study House at Kim Il Sung Square.

Instead, we will concentrate on another mass spectacle whose features can be understood and analyzed in similar ways to the Mass Games: national parades. On April 15th, every fifth and tenth anniversary of the founding patriarch's birth, hundreds of thousands of Pyongyang residents are organized in Kim Il Sung Square to spectate and participate in one of the most visually stunning productions of choreography in the world. Like the gladiator matches in the ancient Roman colosseum, these mass spectacles in the heart of Pyongyang are one of the few times North Koreans see their supreme leader in the flesh. While Kim Jong Un, politburo, and other city residents watch from the Grand People's Study House (figure 3.7), a mass rally, composed of students, office workers, factory workers, and mothers, congregate in Kim Il Sung Square and display words and symbols using colored foldable cards at the signal of the band conductor. Some of these are the *juche* principles – political independence (*chaju*), economic self-sufficiency (*charip*), military self-reliance (*chawi*) – the names of the leaders, the national flag, and the Workers' Party emblem. Rehearsals for mass spectacles, whether they are parades

or gymnastics, begin at least two months in advance during the frigid winter, with each practice session lasting several hours and taking place multiple times a week. The grueling nature of these rehearsals can inspire resentment among the masses against the regime.<sup>96</sup> Yet, in her interviews with defectors, Suk-young Kim found that despite the fact that these performance rehearsals “stripped people of basic human rights and dignity, ... the North Korean people seem to have enjoyed the collective shaping experience of [them].”<sup>97</sup> Day of the Sun parades typically feature a procession of goose-stepping soldiers from all ranks, showing off the country's military hardware, such as tanks and medium to long-range missiles, as aircraft fly overhead. Following them are civilian floats, representing the three official classes of North Korea: peasants, workers, and intellectuals. The floats themselves often contain portraits or statues of the late leaders, socialist realist depictions of urban and agricultural development, and slogans such as “people’s country,” “socialism in our style,” and “we have nothing to envy in the world.”<sup>98</sup>

Figure 3.8 shows the beginning of the April 15, 2022 public procession commemorating the 110th birthday of the Eternal President in Kim Il Sung Square. The *Rodong Sinmun*, the official newspaper of the Workers’ Party, describes the performance thus:

“As the public procession of Pyongyang citizens began with the solemn melody of the song ‘The Glorious Motherland’ [the third national anthem], the square immediately seethed with passions and cheers. The people raised the stormy cheers of hurrah looking up to the respected Comrade Kim Jong Un standing on the platform and proceeded past the platform with writings ‘Single-minded Unity’ and ‘We’ll Travel One Road Forever.’”<sup>99</sup>

What is lacking in this description of the scene is any mention of the national flag, as pictured in figure 3.8. Close-ups by Korean Central Television show rows and columns of young women

<sup>96</sup> Jieun Kim, “North Korea Mobilizes Citizens for Kim Jong Il Birth Celebration Amid Covid-19, Cold Temperatures,” *Radio Free Asia*, February 1, 2021, [rfa.org/english/news/korea/star-02012021185453.html](http://rfa.org/english/news/korea/star-02012021185453.html).

<sup>97</sup> S.K. Kim, 13.

<sup>98</sup> Surprisingly, the 2022 celebration did not feature any military procession. However, one was held on April 25th to commemorate the 90th anniversary of Kim Il Sung’s anti-Japanese guerilla army.

<sup>99</sup> Anonymous, “Public Procession in Celebration of Day of Sun: Pledge of Faith to Be Loyal to Leader,” *Rodong Sinmun*, April 20, 2022, [rodong.rep.kp/en/index.php?strPageID=SF01\\_02\\_01&newsID=2022-04-20-0001](http://rodong.rep.kp/en/index.php?strPageID=SF01_02_01&newsID=2022-04-20-0001).

holding it with one hand while holding synthetic magnolias (the national flower) in the other. The symbolism in this part of the procession has significant implications and the psychological impact it has on the spectators and participants is tantamount to the effects found in conventional religious rituals.



Figure 3.8: Beginning of the 2022 Day of the Sun parade. Ibid.

In his study of Australian aboriginals, Durkheim found that when practitioners perform rituals dedicated to their totem – the tangible symbol of their tribe’s god – their psyches are elevated from the level of mundane everyday life to a rare, ineffable moment of ecstasy. At the same time, the practitioners “lose” themselves, yet become part of something larger. When an activity such as a religious ritual, a music concert, a political convention, or a sporting match reaches a certain degree of emotional intensity, it produces an ephemeral but powerful social

psychological phenomenon known as collective effervescence.<sup>100</sup> The feelings elicited range from bliss to delirium, but always affirms the values of a group and strengthens its unity.

The totem, the focal point of the ritual, is more than a material representation of the tribe's god. It is the symbol of the tribe itself, "the flag" as Durkheim calls it, that distinguishes it from other tribes. If, as Durkheim asked, the totem is at once the symbol of their god and their society, is it not because they are both one and the same thing?<sup>101</sup> Likewise, the flag of North Korea is not only a symbol of the people, but of the nation-state, and by extension the supreme leader himself, who is both the state and a symbolic figure that transcends it because of his "revolutionary" – i.e. divine – lineage. The procession of the national flag through Kim Il Sung Square by the Pyongyang residents, in the presence of state officials and Kim Jong Un, is a symbolic act of loyalty representing a kind of holy trinity between the people, state, and leader; embodying the totalitarian ideal of single-minded unity.

To put it more technically, the entire parade itself exemplifies what Kim Jong Il called the socio-political organism. "By uniting around the leader [the focal point] into one organization with a single ideology," the Dear Leader explained, "the masses form a socio-political organism which is immortal as an independent being." "Just as a man's brain is the centre of his life," Kim further wrote, "so the leader, the top brain in a socio-political community, is the centre of the life of this community."<sup>102</sup> We can unpack this theoretical doctrine by applying it to our analysis of national parades, whose purpose is threefold. Firstly, they intend to strengthen the citizen's relationship with the supreme leader. Secondly, they intend to strengthen the individual's relationship with society and its members. Thirdly, and most importantly, they intend to imbue

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<sup>100</sup> Durkheim, 151.

<sup>101</sup> Durkheim, 124-5.

<sup>102</sup> Kim Jong Il, "On Some Problems of Education in the Juche Idea" (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1995), 16-17.

North Koreans with what the psychologist Ernest Becker called an immortality project, a higher purpose that outlives the individual. The immortality project that North Koreans are expected to sacrifice and surrender their lives to is the socio-political organism, the nation-state, and by extension the supreme leader himself. As defector Thae Yong Ho said, physical life in North Korea is mortal, but political life is eternal.<sup>103</sup> It is through this metaphysic how North Koreans can supposedly achieve oneness with the Father Eternal President Kim Il Sung, give thanks to Him for the mortal and political lives He gave them, and epitomize the theater state at its greatest extent: through mass spectacle.

I will let the *Rodong Sinmun* finish the earlier quoted report to show the regime's desire to harness the power of rituals to produce and maintaining the national faith, and the feelings of ecstasy and effervescence it wishes to associate with it:

“Let us be loyal to the respected Comrade Kim Jong Un forever along the road of victory and glory as we remained loyal to President Kim Il Sung and Chairman Kim Jong Il. [...] The cheers of hurrah originated at Kim Il Sung Square in April reverberate far and wide with the echoes of loyalty sounding to the minds of all the people in the country.”<sup>104</sup>



Figure 3.9: Decorations in Kim Il Sung Square for the 2022 Sun Festival. In prior years, a portrait of Kim Il Sung would be hung here, but for the first time a sun, with the words “Day of the Sun,” surrounded by the national *Magnolia sieboldii* was displayed for the 110th birthday. There could not be a more explicit implication by the state that Kim Il Sung is a celestial being to the people and their nation. From Korean Central Television.

<sup>103</sup> Tae Yong-ho, “Rep Tae Yong-ho explains essentials of North Korea.”

<sup>104</sup> *Rodong Sinmun*, April 20, 2022.



## ***Conclusion***

The sociologist Erving Goffman famously argued that all of life is a performance, where everyone is an actor fulfilling a role, presenting and maintaining a front to others, and switching out between different masks depending on their audience. There is perhaps no better example of his dramaturgical analysis than the theater state of North Korea. As Merkel wrote, North Korea is a highly performative society where “Public and private events, such as commemorations, celebrations, rituals, parades and festivals, as well as everyday life and routines, are all governed by a code,” namely the Ten Principles of the Monolithic Ideological System.<sup>105</sup> Among the most important rituals of everyday life are Organizational Life, where North Koreans are routinely indoctrinated in long meetings several times a week, and are required to perform critical self-purification sessions. Criticism sessions are also another way the state conducts surveillance on its people, not through directly policing their lives, but by making ordinary citizens complicit in the monitoring of society. North Korean defector Yuna Jung has stated that Organizational Life severely diminishes the time North Koreans have to think for themselves or pursue personal hobbies, by constantly inundating people with information to memorize over and over, and making them incessantly prepare for meetings.<sup>106</sup> Building on this claim, we can speculate that the time-consuming and all-encompassing nature of them also makes it extremely difficult, if near-impossible, for North Koreans to privately communicate or gather. This would by extension prevent them from either airing grievances against the regime, or organizing to plot against it.

Not all rituals in North Korea are so dry and austere. There are also the national holidays such as Day of the Sun, and mass spectacles such as parades and the Mass Games, that discipline

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<sup>105</sup> Merkel, 147.

<sup>106</sup> Jacco Zwetsloot and Yuna Jung, “Why North Koreans don’t have time to pursue hobbies,” *NK News Podcast*, April 5, 2022, Podcast, web., 82:37, [nknews.org/category/north-korea-news-podcast/older-podcasts/why-north-koreans-dont-have-time-to-pursue-hobbies-nknews-podcast-ep-230/913143/](https://nknews.org/category/north-korea-news-podcast/older-podcasts/why-north-koreans-dont-have-time-to-pursue-hobbies-nknews-podcast-ep-230/913143/).

the population and elicit the feelings of effervescence that makes religious worship so meaningful to practitioners of various faiths. As Suk-young Kim eloquently puts it, mass spectacles as performances “embody the collective ways of North Korean life in a literal sense, bringing the members of the family-nation into a physical space and thereby visually ascertaining the corporeal unity of the collective.”<sup>107</sup> Despite the long and arduous rehearsals, many defectors have regarded these events as some of the most memorable moments of their lives. “In North Korea,” defector Jae Young Kim recollected, “the enthusiasm to participate in mass gymnastic and dancing groups was so high that those who did not participate were considered weird.”<sup>108</sup> Defectors Chang Ch’ôlbong, Yi Hye-soon, Kim Ch’ôlho, who all participated in the Mass Games and parades in Kim Il Sung Square, recalled feeling ecstasy, great pride, thrill, and such a burning desire to achieve oneness with the Father (Kim Il Sung or Kim Jong Il) as to be in tears.<sup>109</sup> As anthropologist Hyang Jin Jung argues and as we established earlier, “the centrality of symbols, collective effervescence, and sense of oneness” that occurs in North Korean mass performances “all resonate with what Durkheim attributed to totemic rites.” The rituals of the North Korean state religion paint a more complicated picture of itself, expanding our question in regards to its effectiveness beyond the mere binary of belief and unbelief. Instead of simply being a set of propositions about reality, it is also a set of highly emotive activities and routines that successfully garner support or compliance from the true believer, the private skeptic, the agnostic, and the apathetic alike. In this way, we can conclude that the rituals of the North Korean state religion are efficacious in manufacturing the consent of the governed.

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<sup>107</sup> S.K. Kim, 58.

<sup>108</sup> Jae Young Kim, “People Who Don’t Like The Mass Games Are Weird,” NK News, January 21, 2013, [nknews.org/2013/01/people-who-didnt-like-mass-games-were-weird/](http://nknews.org/2013/01/people-who-didnt-like-mass-games-were-weird/).

<sup>109</sup> Hyang Jin Jung, *Jucheism as an Apotheosis of the Family: The Case of the Arirang Festival*, *Journal of Korean Religions*, October 2013, Vol. 4, No. 2, North Korea and Religion (October 2013): 112-4.

## CONCLUSION: TWILIGHT OF A NIGHTMARE?

When North Koreans learned on July 9, 1994 that Kim Il Sung had died the day before, it came as a shock to a majority of them and initiated an intense period of national bereavement. “It felt like the world was coming to an end,” In-hua Kim recalls 25 years later. “A Democratic People’s Republic of Korea without Kim Il Sung was unthinkable,” she continues, “and so without him the Korean people felt that they no longer had any purpose in life.”<sup>110</sup> The amount of loyalty and remorse that North Koreans expressed for their late leader appeared astonishingly bizarre to many outsiders, especially those who were keenly aware of the country’s poverty and brutal repression. However, if the North Korean leadership and ideology is understood through a religious framework, as opposed to a purely political or secular one, then the grief performed at Kim Il Sung’s funeral (most of which was genuine) should be at least somewhat understandable. Kim Il Sung was not merely a charismatic politician or national hero. He was a messianic figure who cast off the yoke of Japanese imperialism, successfully resisted the “Yankee” invasion, and brought socialist redemption to the Motherland. Even if Kim no longer lived on Earth, he lived on in the hearts and minds of his people. The myth of the Great Leader was routinely reinforced through propagandistic art and political rituals during his lifetime, and continues to be so today under Kim Jong Un through the state religion that his father Kim Jong Il built.

By no means was In-hua’s sentiments or of those she witnessed universal. In an interview with Barbara Demick, “Mrs. Song” felt a sharp disappointment when she realized that the North Korean regime would continue under Kim Jong Il. “Now we’re really fucked,” she remembers uttering to herself.<sup>111</sup> Mrs. Song’s prognostication was all too prescient, as North Korean society

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<sup>110</sup> In-hua Kim, “Ask a North Korean: were North Koreans genuinely grieving when Kim Il Sung died?”, *NK News*, January 30, 2020, [nknews.org/2020/01/ask-a-north-korean-were-north-koreans-genuinely-grieving-when-kim-il-sung-died/](http://nknews.org/2020/01/ask-a-north-korean-were-north-koreans-genuinely-grieving-when-kim-il-sung-died/).

<sup>111</sup> Demick, 96.

was experiencing a severe food shortage at the time. The Eastern Bloc had been transitioning to liberal democratic capitalism since 1989, the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, and China was experimenting with marketization. None of these countries were interested in subsidizing North Korea's rationing system like they had for decades prior. As a result of these diplomatic and economic losses, between 1994-1998 North Koreans suffered a catastrophic famine that killed between 3-5% of the DPRK population, or 600,000 to 1 million people.<sup>112</sup> The North Korean government has framed the famine as an inevitable tragedy that should be blamed on naturalistic factors such as heavy rainfall and massive flooding. Government policies, however, such as the overemphasis on heavy industry, deforestation, and over-reliance on chemical fertilizer, exacerbated the crisis.

The "Arduous March" famine, as it is officially called in North Korea, was a human failure that not only resulted in the collapse of the socialist system, but also inspired many North Koreans to either lose faith or doubt their government. The crisis also gave birth to a new generation of North Koreans who reinvented capitalism and are more skeptical of the regime's propaganda. They are known as the *jangmadang* generation, named after the North Korean word for market. Women have become breadwinners for their families by selling smuggled goods from across the Chinese border while their husbands are forced to "work" at state enterprises. In addition to miscellaneous foodstuffs and hard currency (mostly Chinese yuan), DVDs, CDs, laptops, radios, and USB drives, containing foreign media such as South Korean pop music and dramas, Chinese TV shows, and American films, are also making their way into North Korea.<sup>113</sup> Clothes and make-up from China, Japan, America, and South Korea (and their knock-off forms) end up on the *jangmadang* markets too, allowing North Koreans to subtly rebel against the

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<sup>112</sup> Marcus Noland, "Famine and Reform in North Korea," *Asian Economic Papers* Vol. 3, no. 2 (2005): 18.

<sup>113</sup> James Pearson, Daniel Tudor, *North Korea Confidential: Private Markets, Fashion Trends, Prison Camps, Dissenters and Defectors* (Vermont: Tuttle Publishing, 2015), 47-57.

state-mandated restrictions on fashion.<sup>114</sup> Cheap cell phones and radios smuggled across the border help North Koreans coordinate defections, keep in touch with family members, and hear foreign news.<sup>115</sup> While the North Korean government does not like the rise of market activity, the regime simply has no choice but to tolerate it to avoid another famine.

The *jangmadang* generation, by importing outside knowledge, growing private communication, and cultivating self-sufficiency, is laying the foundations for change in North Korea. Although exact figures cannot be known, the broad consensus among defectors is that only a minority of North Koreans buys-into the propaganda now. “It is not wrong to say [that North Koreans] believed propaganda 100% before the death of Kim Il Sung,” Mina Yoon stated in 2014, “Nowadays, people believe less than 20% of what is being televised or broadcast.”<sup>116</sup> However, not all propaganda is of equal quality or effect, and the minority who either believe or tolerate the system is still substantial. Many North Koreans old enough to remember the Kim Il Sung era still have nostalgia for it because of its larger-than-life leader and relative economic stability.<sup>117</sup> According to defector Yuna Jung, if South Korea or especially the US were to invade the DPRK, hundreds of thousands would lay down their lives for the regime because of the impact of anti-American propaganda and the leader cults. Since it is unlikely that a war would feasibly resolve the situation, nor do economic sanctions appear to be improving it, the only people who can truly change North Korea are the North Korean people themselves. I speculate this could either happen through a peaceful transition of power from the top, or a violent revolution from the bottom. Once the people become fully aware of their oppression, the state religion will look too delusional for them to believe or pretend to believe, and they will rise up.

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<sup>114</sup> Pearson, Tudor, 129-43.

<sup>115</sup> Pearson, Tudor, 145-60.

<sup>116</sup> Chad O'Carroll, “Do North Koreans still believe the Pyongyang Propaganda? Defector perspectives,” *NK News*, April 11, 2014, [nknews.org/2014/04/do-north-koreans-still-believe-the-pyongyang-propaganda-not-really/](http://nknews.org/2014/04/do-north-koreans-still-believe-the-pyongyang-propaganda-not-really/).

<sup>117</sup> Andrei Lankov, “Why North Koreans now long for the age of indoctrination,” *NK News*, November 23, 2013, [nknews.org/2013/11/why-north-koreans-now-long-for-the-age-of-indoctrination/](http://nknews.org/2013/11/why-north-koreans-now-long-for-the-age-of-indoctrination/).

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