The Cultural Dimension and Context of North Korean Communism
Author(s): Young Whan Kihl
Published by: University of Hawai'i Press
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/23720091

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at https://about.jstor.org/terms

University of Hawai'i Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to Korean Studies
A newer perspective is needed in studying North Korea's brand of communism that takes note of parallels between the traditional cultural legacies and the ideological rhetoric of chuch'e socialism. In the process of adapting to the cultural context of North Korea, Marxist-Leninist ideology has evolved into an intensely nationalist ideology unique to North Korea. Although Confucianism and Buddhism, as well as Christianity and shamanism, have officially been banned as unscientific superstitions, their cultural legacies linger on.

Introduction

The demise of communism in East Europe and the Soviet Union has led many observers to wonder if the Asian communist states like North Korea will survive and, if so, for how long. The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK), or North Korea, is today the longest surviving communist state in the world. Although many pundits predict North Korea’s imminent downfall soon after its leader, Kim II Sung, passes from the scene, that may or may not happen for a variety of reasons.

History is full of surprises and contingencies, as German reunification following the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989 indicates. No one seriously thought that German reunification would happen so soon, before the reunification of Korea, a country that was also divided arbitrarily at the end of World War II and prevented from reunification by the onset of the Cold War. Instead of engaging in idle speculation regarding the certainty and timing of the downfall of North Korean regime, this study will reexamine the conventional wisdom by accepting the existence of North Korean communism at face value: we need to take another look at the strengths and weaknesses of North Korea as a communist system.
If North Korean communism outlives its founding leader, Kim Il Sung, it will be for reasons of cultural adaptation. The fact that North Korean communism did not follow the path East European communism provides counterintuitive evidence of how resilient and enduring the system has become. One can argue that the institutions built around the Asian communist leaders are quite different and somewhat unique: they were influenced by an interplay of cultural and human agents who guided the historical process of socioeconomic and political transformation. The contextual variables and factors other than geography, such as culture and history, may have intervened to keep Asian communism intact and enduring. In short, the time has come to seriously study the cultural context of Asian communism.

Cultural Context of North Korean Communism

North Korean communism has its own history and cultural roots. For more than four decades it has flourished and entrenched itself. North Korea is a fiercely proud, independent, and nationalistic country that professes to be the “socialist outpost” in the East. Although it preaches international solidarity, upholding the slogan of anti-imperialistic struggle against big-power domination, it has become an ethnocentric society that guards unduly against foreign influence and promotes the virtues of independence and self-reliance. These virtues are culture-bound and culturally conditioned.

Culture has played a role in modifying North Korean communism. Since culture is ubiquitous, there is a tendency to take it for granted and remain unconscious of its existence. The erosion of communism as an ideal takes place over time, as the communist edifice degenerates. Not surprisingly, the North Korean communist system today is less than an ideal and perfect system.

Before delineating the cultural context of North Korean communism, the concept of culture needs to be clarified. Broadly yet simply, culture may be defined as a way of life or artifacts that a society manifests at a given point in time. Values, norms, and institutions (such as family and school) are tangible evidence of culture in a society. Culture as a behavioral concept may also mean “the publicly available symbolic forms through which people experience and express meaning.” As Ann Swidler argues, “culture influences action not by providing the ultimate values toward which action is oriented, but by shaping a repertoire or ‘tool kit’ of habits, skills, and styles from which people construct ‘strategies of action’.”

A renewed emphasis on culture has emerged to play a central role in contemporary social science. This new analytical perspective, apart from
the prevailing interpretative approaches popularized by anthropology, will
deal with such questions as “how cultural elements constrain or facilitate
patterns of action, what aspects of a cultural heritage have enduring effects
on action, and what specific historical changes undermine the vitality of
some cultural patterns and give rise to others.”

From a more theoretical perspective, three different notions of cul-
ture may be identified. First, culture may mean “a system of attitudes, val-
ues, and knowledge that is widely shared within a society and transmitted
from generation to generation.” The way in which North Korea responds
to any given situation, in terms of individual or collective human agents
making rational choices, is shaped by subjective orientations derived from
cultural norms and values. Second, culture may mean “the presuppositions
of social meaning” often embedded in language and action relative to
the authority and the participation of an individual vis-à-vis the group.
Third, culture may also mean “the socially recognized elements of mean-
ing” attached to symbols and signs in society, such as the nation, people,
unification, and so forth.

Among the cultural mores and legacies in North Korea that shape
“strategies of action” are the traditional value systems, such as Confucian-
ism and shamanism, and the modern ideology of North Korean commu-
nism, such as the chuch’e idea, that has worked to modify human actions
and institutions. An ideology is “a highly articulated, self-conscious belief
and ritual system, aspiring to offer a unified answer to problems of social
action.” Ideology, in this sense, may be thought of as a phase in the devel-
opment of a system of cultural meaning.

The process of cultural adaptation or acculturation that has affected
North Korean communism by modifying ideology and institutions may be
shown in the following schematic.

Culture → Ideology → Institutions

To grasp the essence of North Korean communism today, it is thus
necessary to examine how North Korean ideology has evolved over time
under the influence of its culture. Alternatively, we need to explore how
the Korean cultural mores, such as Confucian legacies, have manifested
themselves in the new ideology and institutions of North Korea. The rhet-
oric of socialism and the chuch’e ideology in North Korea reflects tradi-
tional cultural values. The steps by which this cultural adaptation has
taken place to influence North Korean communism may be shown in
another schematic.

North Korean communism (as manifest in the chuch’e idea)
= theory and ideology + cultural mores
  (e.g., Marxism-Leninism) (e.g., Confucianism)
Marxism-Leninism, the initial ideology of North Korean communism, was mediated and modified by Kim Il Sung (acting as human agent) to arrive at the current chuch’e idea in the context of North Korea. This modification (as a rational act) was a necessary and indispensable means to perpetuate the rule of Kim Il Sung and his followers. A cultural apotheosis took place. Culture prevailed over ideology in the long run, as the ruling elite utilized the revolutionary rhetoric of Marxist-Leninist ideology as an instrument to perpetuate its rule.

The interaction between culture and communist ideology in the Korean context gave a particular shape to North Korean institutions. For instance, Confucian cultural norms that placed high value on hierarchical human relations interacted with imported Marxist-Leninist ideology that stressed egalitarianism and democracy, to produce such peculiar North Korean institutions as the cult of personality and the worship of supreme leadership. Likewise, Confucian group norms and family values modified the Marxist-Leninist notions of class struggle and competing interests to produce a style of family-like party rule that emphasized loyalty and personal ties. Confucian values of stability and harmony also interacted with a revolutionary ideology of class struggle and class solidarity, giving a rise to such institutional practices as mass mobilizations, as well as indoctrination and surveillance.

At this time of fallen communism, North Korea has become increasingly isolated from the rest of the world. Today it struggles to free itself from the image of a renegade nuclear state and to join the international community by a new “diplomacy of promotive adaptation.” Confronted with rapid external change, North Korean leaders have taken a series of bold initiatives to cope with the mounting pressures from outside. North Korea’s entry into the United Nations in 1991, followed by the historical signing of a reconciliation and nonaggression pact with South Korea, demonstrates a new, pragmatic stance.

However, as it adapts, North Korea continues to invoke the chuch’e ideology as its guiding principle. Its adaptive behavior is therefore culture-
bound. Since its adaptation is a matter of survival, the regime has little alternative but to continue its risky policy of partially opening its door in order to inject new ideas into its stagnant economy.

**Ideology and Its Modification**

Since North Korea was founded in 1945, the teachings of Marx and Lenin have provided the political doctrine and guiding principles for building its state. As a communist state, “all state organs” in North Korea have followed the Leninist principles of democratic centralism, although Kim II Sung has also invoked the Maoist principle of mass-line democracy. However, Kim subsequently modified Marxism-Leninism to suit conditions in North Korea. His exhortations were codified in the principle of *chuch’e*, which has now become the official ideology of North Korean communism.

The socialist constitution of 1972 states in Article 4 that the DPRK is “guided in its activity by the *chuch’e* idea..., a creative application of Marxism-Leninism to the conditions of our country.”\(^{11}\) A new socialist constitution revised in 1992, however, makes no reference to “Marxism-Leninism” and merely states that “the DPRK is... a *chuch’e* country.” The preamble to the 1970 bylaws of the Workers’ Party of Korea (WPK) is more explicit in crediting Kim II Sung for being the author of the *chuch’e* idea, stating that the WPK is “guided in its activities by... the *chuch’e* idea of Comrade Kim II Sung.”\(^{12}\)

The justification for excluding Marxism-Leninism from the constitution and party bylaws is the notion that it is an alien ideology imported from the West, that historical conditions are different today than they were in the days of Marx and Lenin, and that classic teachings cannot solve the complex problems of our time, as the rise of revisionism in international communism shows. In interpreting the *chuch’e* idea and how to apply it to the concrete historical context of North Korean communism, however, the ruling WPK and its leadership has an exclusive voice.

**MARXISM-LENINISM AND THE IDEA OF *CHUCH’E***

Marxism-Leninism was declared useful during the initial phase, but not ultimately adequate to build socialism in North Korea. Kim Il Sung therefore developed the new ideology of *chuch’e* to replace Marxism-Leninism, with its Western values. The *chuch’e* idea has become an indigenous belief system and an intensely nationalistic philosophy, although its proponents claim it has universal applicability. What makes the *chuch’e* ideology peculiar to North Korea, however, is the fact that its rhetoric is centered around the life history of one leader, Kim II Sung.

Under the pretext of adapting to the conditions of North Korea, the
chuch’e ideology has become something rather different from the initial teachings of Marx and Lenin. In guiding the communist revolution, Marx originally envisioned a major role for the working class, while Lenin put more emphasis on the role of the party. In contrast, Kim II Sung stresses the role of the leader.

The meaning of the term chuch’e in Korean connotes self-identity, self-reliance, autonomy, or “subjectivity” as opposed to “objectivity.” In North Korea, the term is used to describe the mental attitude of people capable of carrying out politics by themselves, without being subject to outside influence. North Korea’s search for self-identity is manifest in the chuch’e idea, which has in turn provided an important basis for its claim to legitimacy. This is the historical context in which the chuch’e idea has been promoted.

As an ideology, the chuch’e idea claims that man is the master of his destiny; that self-reliance is the soul of human existence; that the masses of the working class are the prime movers of historical development; that the leader (suryŏng) is supreme and the center of revolution and unity. The masses need to be properly guided by the leader, and need to be subjected to campaigns to imbue them with ideological consciousness, and to display their loyalty to the leader.

In short, the chuch’e idea is not merely an ideology, but a philosophical system. It is comparable to Marxism-Leninism but goes further. The chuch’e idea relates itself to three basic elements: man, matter, and spirit. But humans always take precedence over matter and spirit, since “men alone can change the world.” In this way, the chuch’e idea affirms that “man is the master of everything and decides everything.”

Such claims give the chuch’e philosophy an air of voluntarism and subjectivity, while Marxism remains a philosophy of dialectical materialism and objectivity. This element of voluntarism in the chuch’e ideology reflects a sense of optimism, since “if there’s a will, there’s a way.” Just as Confucianism was proclaimed the reigning ideology of the Chosŏn dynasty by its founder, King T’aejo in 1392, so the chuch’e ideology was proclaimed the guiding principle of the DPRK by its founding leader Kim Il Sung.

KIMILSUNGISM AND THE CHUCH’E IDEOLOGY

The chuch’e idea, to begin with, reflects the Korean people’s search for a collective or national identity, the agenda of Korean nationalism. Yet it has become an all-purpose revolutionary ideology used by Kim Il Sung to solidify his leadership in North Korea. The thoughts of Kim Il Sung were incorporated into a philosophy of chuch’e ideas in an effort to apply...
the theory of Marxism-Leninism to the realities of Korea. In this way, Kimilsungism resembles Maoism, the thoughts of Mao Zedong integrated into the theory and practice of the Chinese revolution.18

Although initially conceived as a means to overcome the crisis of identity and legitimacy in a divided Korea, the chuch’e idea has subsequently become a tool for justifying the dictatorship of Kim Il Sung and his followers in North Korea. In the late 1950s, Kim used the idea to eliminate rival factions and stamp out North Korean imitations of Soviet practice. Later, after his position was made secure by the purge of rival factions, including domestic and South Korean communists, and pro-Soviet and pro-Chinese factions, Kim acted to incorporate Marxism-Leninism into his own system of chuch’e.19

The term “Kimilsungism,” which in many ways resembles Stalinism (that is, Stalinist interpretations of Leninism), was coined to accommodate the chuch’e idea. Kim Il Sung’s son and heir, Kim Jong II, openly proclaims that “Kimilsungism is an ideological and theoretical system with the Juche [= chuch’e] idea as its core.”20 Kim Jong II continues:

The Juche ideology is the essence of Kimilsungism. The Juche ideology is the conceptual or methodological basis of Kimilsungism. The Juche ideology is the fundamental basis of a revolutionary worldview in our time, the principal guiding ideology of revolution and construction, and, at the same time, the banner of human emancipation.21

Moreover, the chuch’e idea is claimed to be “a new philosophy created by the leader” (his father Kim II Sung).22

In commemoration of his father’s 70th birthday, Kim Jong II published a treatise on 31 March 1982 entitled “On the Juche Idea.” In it, he claims that the chuch’e idea is “the precious fruit of the leader’s profound, widespread ideological and theoretical activities, and its creation is the most brilliant of his revolutionary achievements.”23 Kim Jong II published two additional treatises soon thereafter: “The Workers’ Party of Korea is a Juche-type Revolutionary Party Which Inherited the Glorious Tradition of the DIU [Down-with-Imperialism Union]” on 17 October 1982, and “Let Us Advance Under the Banner of Marxism-Leninism and the Juche Idea” on 3 May 1983.24

The first treatise attempts to trace the origin of the chuch’e idea to as far back as 1926, the year Kim Il Sung allegedly began his revolutionary movement at the tender age of 14. The Down-with-Imperialism Union was allegedly formed by Kim Il Sung. The second treatise attempts to move Kim Jong II to the forefront of the world revolutionary movement by publishing his essay on the 165th anniversary of the birth of Karl Marx and the 3 May 1983 centenary of his death. Such self-serving rhetoric
shows the younger Kim’s interest in preserving some tie to Marxism-Leninism while claiming that his father’s “brilliant” chuch’e idea transcends it.

Over time, however, the chuch’e idea has degenerated, in the words of Samuel Kim, “from principled self-reliance to a credo of inevitability, imprisoning creative imagination and constraining adaptive behavior.”

CHUCH’E THOUGHT IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

Chuch’e has now replaced Marxism-Leninism as the reigning ideology of North Korea. Once established, the chuch’e idea became a self-serving ideology justifying the father-son rule of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il as dual leaders of the Workers’ Party of Korea. Father and son work together to perpetuate the myth of their impeccable revolutionary credentials. However, since the son could not hope to match his father’s revolutionary claims, he is always paired with his father, riding on the coattails of his father’s reputation. Kim Jong Il’s first major responsibility was to give an authoritative interpretation of the chuch’e ideology that his father had inaugurated.

The ideology of North Korean communism, similar to a theoretical system of Maoism, preaches the mass-line democracy, democratic centralism, and egalitarianism. North Korean ideology rejects exploitation and domination of the social classes in favor of a proletarian dictatorship and people’s democracy. Yet, North Korea under communism has become a personal dictatorship of Kim Il Sung and has turned into a kind of authoritarianism that, in reality, suppresses all those who oppose him. Why has this gap been allowed to develop? How does one explain this variance between theory and practice?

Obviously, the cultural context has intervened between the theory of Marxism-Leninism and the practice of North Korean socialism to make North Korean communism its own unique political system. The old ideology of Marxism-Leninism was modified into a new ideology of chuch’e in order to suit the needs of Kim Il Sung and his followers. The idea of chuch’e has served well as a belief system and tool kit from which to construct “strategies of action” by the ruling elites of North Korea. The chuch’e ideology has offered a repertoire of methods to rationalize the behavior of the North Korean leaders.

This newer, cultural perspective helps us grasp the nuances of North Korea’s chuch’e socialism. The chuch’e ideology is the product of North Korea’s search for self-identity in the face of a legitimacy crisis resulting from the foreign role in establishing the new government and Kim Il Sung’s failure to win the Korean War, which he justified as a “fatherland liberation war.” Kim Il Sung overcame such crises by constructing the
chuch’e idea and making it a symbol of self-esteem and national pride for the Korean people. The cultural context of the chuch’e ideology is shown clearly when it is compared with Marxism-Leninism in different stages of development.26

Parallels between the ideological rhetoric of socialism as practiced in North Korea and traditional cultural values illuminate the true color of North Korean communism under Kim’s rule. An analysis of institutional experiments can also provide evidence. The following discussion will seek further insights by examining three areas of institutional experience: (a) political succession, (b) political mobilization, and (c) reform politics.

Institutional Manifestations

The cultural imprint of North Korean communism is clearly evident in the ways in which the chuch’e ideology was translated into institutions and practices. North Korea has become a hard-shell, one-party, “Leninist” state with a rigid system of centralized control from the party center. The WPK leadership wields authority and exercises power in the name of the working masses. It has become a one-man dictatorship of Kim Il Sung, and his son and heir apparent, Kim Jong Il. This father–son family rule is sustained by the coercive instruments of the party, the army, and state security agencies. North Korea’s one-man, “Stalinist” command system has thus become not so much a state with large coercive institutions as a state that is a coercive institution.

The peculiar features of North Korean communism are manifest in each of the following institutional mechanisms: political succession, mass mobilization, and reform politics. The cult of personality is so extreme and so pervasive that the myth of “outstanding and exceptional quality” is now used to justify the father–son political succession. Forced mobilization campaigns are waged constantly in the name of continuing the revolution and building socialism. No serious attempt to reform the existing system is likely, so long as the father–son regime remains intact, for fear of the heavy price of coping with the adverse effects of liberalization.

SUCCESSION POLITICS

What makes North Korea unique as a political system is the cult of personality of its leadership. The level of praise for Kim Il Sung is perhaps unsurpassed in the annals of the communist states, certainly exceeding that for Mao Zedong in China and Joseph Stalin in the Soviet Union. As undisputed leader of North Korea since 1948, Kim Il Sung serves as president of the state, general secretary of the party, founder of chuch’e thought, and served until recently as supreme commander of the armed forces.
Chuch’ē has been exploited not only as a tool of statecraft but also as a kind of religion worshipping the Great Leader Kim II Sung. Kim wields absolute authority and demands total obedience and loyalty from his people. As the Great Leader, Kim II Sung has become the godlike absolute ruler of a “paradise on earth,” at the same time claiming—without intended irony—to have always been at the service of his people.  

Another factor that makes the North Korean version of communism almost unique is the hereditary succession from Kim II Sung to his eldest son, Kim Jong II. This succession has been in the making for some time. As a member of the party’s Organization and Guidance Bureau in 1964, the younger Kim was already being groomed as a future party leader. He was finally elevated to a position of leadership in October 1980, during the Sixth Party Congress of the Workers’ Party of Korea. The transition has thus been in the making for more than two decades.

One reason for the intense campaign to build a cult of personality around Kim Jong II is psychological. The younger Kim lacks the charisma and revolutionary credentials of his father. To make up for this deficiency, the regime has designated Kim Jong II as “Dear Leader,” a title intended to mystify. The attempt to promote a mythic view of Kim Jong II has taken several forms. Kim is credited with carrying out the three-revolution team movement, with possessing the “remarkable” quality of mastering the chuch’ē idea, and with displaying absolute loyalty (i.e., filial piety) toward the Great Leader, his father. The three-revolution team movement was launched by Kim Jong II as a way to build up a political base for his future leadership. He initiated the obligatory mass rallies and youth campaigns in 1973 with the aim of exhorting the population to greater effort, such as the Speedy Campaign to Reach the Target of the Seven Year Plan Ahead of the Schedule.

The formula of hereditary succession is defended on the basis of the principle that leadership requires an organic tie between the leader and the people and the principle of loyalty to the leader “generation after generation.” In his 1992 New Year’s message, Kim II Sung claimed that North Korea has completely resolved the problem of political succession by assuring an inheritance of the revolutionary task “generation after generation,” by a smooth political succession from “father to son.” The double celebration of Kim Jong II’s fiftieth birthday on 16 February 1992, and his father’s eightieth birthday on 15 April 1992, was given much fanfare, as it marked the symbolic transfer of power from father to son. In December 1991, Kim Jong II had been made supreme commander of the Korean People’s Army. At his birthday celebration in February, he was given the rank of marshal, although he had never served on active military duty.
There is now underway an intense campaign to build a cult of personality around Kim Jong Il that resembles similar efforts with regard to Kim Il Sung much earlier. Whether the leader's charisma can be inherited or acquired through apprenticeship remains to be seen. Although rhetoric and propaganda are used to enhance Kim Jong Il's claims to legitimacy, actual performance is equally necessary. In its front-page birthday "best wishes" to Kim Jong II on 16 February 1992, the Pyongyang Times cited several accomplishments.

A man with total knowledge and understanding of the chuch'e idea founded by President Kim II Sung, Comrade Kim Jong II has to his credit a number of brilliant achievements, both ideological and theoretical, in enriching this idea. He has rounded President Kim II Sung's idea into a complete system and developed it in keeping with the demands of the present time and the development of the revolution. Particularly to be noted is that he has given perfect answers to the theoretical and practical problems arising in socialist construction, thus showing the way to achieving the independent causes of the popular masses.

It also depicted Kim Jong II's personality in an unabashedly exaggerated manner.

Comrade Kim Jong II has a remarkable set of human qualities: he is modest, unaffected, and considerate. He takes the people to his all-embracing heart and is responsible for their fate, showing warm care in every way for their lives. That is why the Korean people call him "our dear leader" and are advancing along the road indicated by him, entrusting their fate to him.

The campaign to inflate Kim Jong II's claim to legitimacy reached a zenith in 1992 as the Great Leader praised his own son. Kim II Sung’s poem of praise for Kim Jong II in commemoration of his son's fiftieth birthday was carried by the Nodong shinmun on 27 April 1992.

Soaring above Mt. Paektu is Jong Il peak.  
And the blue water in Sobaeksu meanders.  
Already, 50 years have passed  
since the Bright Star was born,  
but all look up to him, a man equally  
distinguished as a soldier and a scholar,  
loyal and dutiful.  
Unanimous is the mind of all admiring him,  
And the thunderous shouts of "Hurrah!"  
shake the sky and earth hard.

16 February 1992  
Kim II Sung

This degree of mythmaking and idolization is clearly excessive. Not only does this exaggeration distort historical fact, it also seems to violate Confucian norms of propriety. It has no doubt become offensive to some,
since it violates the cultural norms and sensitivity of the Korean people. This is degenerate familism. Confucian norms call for filial piety toward parents and for parental benevolence toward children. In the Confucian value system, a son's praise for his father is thus entirely proper and expected. But a father who praises his son's filial acts violates the cultural mores of the Korean people. Those who openly praise their siblings and spouses in public are regarded as fools.

The Dear Leader is depicted as a man of compassion and modesty toward his subjects in the socialist kingdom. The son's filial piety has taken the form of mastering the chuch'e idea founded by his father. He is also praised for erecting a series of monuments for his father (the Chuch'e Tower and Arch of Triumph) and his deceased mother. This a grotesque version of ancestor worship in socialist garments.34

Upon his son's succession to power, expected to follow the yet-to-be convened Seventh Party Congress of the WPK, Kim II Sung will probably retire from direct management of the party and state and play a background role as elder statesman. Perhaps he will create a council of elder statesmen and senior cadres, as Deng Xiaoping did in China. He will then make a graceful and orderly exit from power, accompanied by some of his faithful followers, such as Pak Sŏng-ch'ol, Yi Ch'ong-ok, or O Chin-u.35

Mobilization Politics

Ideology and culture have interacted in North Korea to create a unique type of socialism under the authoritarian rule of Kim II Sung and his son. The coercive nature of the system, despite its claim to be a land of “people's democracy” and a “democratic people's republic,” remains intact.

A familiar scene in North Korea is mass-mobilization campaigns to carry out the directives of the party leadership. In a manner similar to China's "Great Leap Forward" during the late 1950s, North Korea launched the Ch'ŏllima [thousand-ri horse] movement to catch up with Japan in per-capita output of heavy industry, apparently within a single year (1959). The mass rallies and youth games were among the familiar techniques utilized for mobilization and indoctrination. The three-revolution team movement, which Kim Jong Il initiated in 1973 with his father's blessing, was a mass campaign under the banner: "Let Us Further Accelerate Socialist Construction by Powerfully Carrying Out the Three Revolutions." The reference is to a threefold ideological, technological, and cultural revolution.

The collapse of communism in Eastern Europe in 1989, and in the Soviet Union two years later, should serve as a warning to those who orchestrate the essentially misdirected mobilization campaigns of North
Korea. These events provided the external context to stimulate change in North Korea. But the ideological indoctrination and campaign to build socialism and defend the chuch’e idea still remain intact. This unbending policy line is shown in Kim Il Sung’s 1991 and 1992 New Year’s addresses and in Kim Jong Il’s subsequent talk entitled “The Historical Lesson in Building Socialism and the General Line of Our Party,” to the WPK senior cadres on 3 January 1992. In this speech Kim Jong Il strongly defended chuch’e socialism in North Korea. He also analyzed the recent setbacks caused by the collapse of socialism in Eastern Europe and the breakup of the Soviet Union. He suggested that one reason why socialism was frustrated in some countries was the failure “to recognize the qualitative differences between socialism and capitalism” and “to adhere consistently to the fundamental principles of socialism.”

Kim Jong Il also attempted to provide an ideological shield to protect North Korea from external pollution. “The path to socialism is an untrodden path; it is a thorny path of revolution, advancing in the face of relentless confrontation with an uncompromising struggle against imperialism.” Therefore, he continued, “trials and difficulties are inevitable in the advance of socialism, and unexpected situations may arise. The frustration of socialism and the revival of capitalism in some countries... is only a temporary, local phenomenon. But we can never regard it as an accidental phenomenon, nor can we consider that it has been brought about only by external factors.” This is the statement of an ideologue, not a pragmatist bent on reforming a foundering policy.

North Korea is a full-mobilization system, wherein the population is subjected to constant indoctrination and surveillance. The ratio of party membership to population, currently 17 percent, is the highest in the communist world—the ratio was around 4.5 to 5 percent in the Soviet Union and 11 percent in Romania under Ceausescu. Change within the party is therefore more difficult in North Korea than it was in other communist countries.

One of Kim Il Sung’s unfulfilled tasks is to reunite a divided Korea. The realization that the country could not be reunified in his lifetime along the lines of the confederation scheme he favors has been deeply disappointing to Kim and for many of his followers. Nevertheless, Kim wishes to leave to his son a framework acceptable to North Korea in dealing with the U.S. and Japan and also in negotiating with South Korea about reunification. This is what led it to seek diplomatic normalization with Japan and the United States and also to sign the reconciliation and nonaggression pacts with South Korea in 1992. Its success in confronting international pressures on its “suspected” nuclear development program in 1992–93 has been attributed to Kim Jong Il’s skillful leadership.
REFORM POLITICS

So long as North Korea stresses the purity of the chuch’e ideology, a more open-door economic reform policy is not likely to bear its intended fruit and genuine liberalization is not likely to be implemented. Kim Jong II has even moved to forestall any ill effects of liberalization that may ensue from the anticipated open-door policy.

Timed to coincide with Kim Jong II’s fiftieth birthday on 16 February 1992, North Korea announced across-the-board pay hikes. On average, wages for workers increased 43.4 percent, pension benefits for retirees, 50.7 percent, and scholarships for students, 33 percent.41 This was an extraordinary birthday gift from the leader to the people, an extravagantly generous act to celebrate the Dear Leader’s birthday. The last time North Korea made such drastic moves along the same lines was the abolition of taxation in the 1970s and the payment of the “special bonus” (equal to a month’s wages) and scholarship benefits in 1989. The latter measure was the Great Leader’s gift to the people following a 200-day hard-labor campaign.

These pay hikes may not mean much, however, unless the extra money can be used to purchase goods and services, which would require increased investment in industries producing consumer goods. Otherwise, inflation may increase and the economy may suffer. The latest pay hikes were perhaps meant to be the regime’s version of the “peace dividend” following the anticipated new détente with South Korea as the Cold War continued to thaw.

Kim Jong II has unequivocally ruled out the possibility of political reform and democratic opening in North Korea, stating:

Socialist society is based on collectivism, and regards the unity of the popular masses as its lifeblood; therefore, socialism cannot be compatible with “pluralism.” The introduction of “pluralism” into socialist society fosters individualism and “liberalism” that encroach upon the common interests of the society, break the unity and cohesion of the popular masses, and produce social disorder and chaos. Permitting liberalism in ideology and a multiparty system in politics in a socialist society means, in the long run, to open the road to counterrevolutionary maneuvers aimed at demolishing the foundation of socialist society and overthrowing the people’s government.42

He is unambiguous on this matter, stating that a multiparty system in politics and diversity in the form of ownership, which pluralism advocates, “are the mode of politics characteristic of capitalist society in which competition for survival dominates, based on individualism and liberalism.” Therefore, “a struggle in the sphere of ideology (between capitalism and socialism) is the prelude to a political struggle.”43 He continues:
Historical experience clearly shows that if antisocialist ideas are disseminated by liberalizing ideology and the activities of antisocialist parties are permitted through the tolerance of a “multiparty democracy,” class enemies and reactionaries will rear their heads, commit antisocialist acts and ultimately drive the working-class party out of power. The revisionists, harboring illusions about capitalism, completely rejected socialist principles and fully introduced the capitalist mode of politics and economic system with the result that socialism was frustrated and capitalism revived. Single concessions and a gradual retreat from socialist principles have resulted in tenfold and hundredfold concessions and a full retreat until, finally, the grave consequence of the ruin of the working-class parties themselves was incurred.44

This is not the voice of a pragmatist but of a dogmatist and an ideologue. The expectation that Kim Jong II will somehow pursue a pragmatic policy of reform after the Kim II Sung era is misguided, wishful thinking. Given the self-righteous and justifying tone with which Kim Jong II defends his chuch‘e socialism against the perceived evils of pluralism and the ill effects of capitalism and liberalism, the future of North Korean communism is bleak indeed. The chance of North Korea long surviving the downfall of communism is rather small unless a radical transformation of values takes place first.

Conclusion

This study has argued that cultural dimensions and context must be taken into account in the comparative analysis of Asian communism and that culture needs to be brought back into comparative political studies. The argument for “taking culture seriously,” however, does not assume that culture determines everything, molding attitudes, behavior, ideology, and institutions. Such an assumption falls prey to the fallacy of cultural determinism. Nevertheless, the ruling elite in North Korea has exploited cultural legacies to perpetuate its hold on power and has fashioned tools from its cultural repertoire to construct “strategies for action,” including the perpetuation and survival of the system.

More than four and a half decades of rule by Kim II Sung and his WPK have institutionalized a kind of Confucianized communism. In the name of defending chuch‘e socialism, the Kim II Sung–Kim Jong II regime has openly promoted the traditional Confucian virtues of loyalty and filial piety. North Korea is also a patrimonial system of father–son succession. “Women still lack the powers of position and force,” despite its lip service to sexual equality.45 The socialist practices and institutions in the land of chuch‘e thus reflect traditional values, defending collectivism, uniformity, and male dominance over individualism, pluralism, and sexual equality.

Kim’s leadership style is marked by a mixture of flexibility and ideology. His characteristic style of strategic action was reflected in two inter-
views he gave to Western reporters in 1992, on the eve of his 80th birthday celebration, which appeared in the *Asahi shimbun* on 1 April 1992, and the *Washington Times* on 12 April. While Kim took a pragmatic-sounding stance on issues addressed to foreign audiences, he adhered to a self-righteous, ideological party line on issues that were primarily targeted at the domestic audience.46

It is for domestic political reasons, therefore, that North Korea is not willing or able to admit any policy mistakes or undertake necessary reforms. While emphasizing greater production of consumer goods to enhance living standards, the Kim regime has handsomely rewarded the ruling elites to keep them under control. Thus, on 20 April 1992, the defense minister, General O Chin-u was elevated to the rank of marshal of the Korean People’s Army (KPA), and the promotions of many other high-ranking officers of the KPA were also announced. This coincided with the father–son birthday celebration, at which Kim Jong II was made Supreme Commander of the KPA with the rank of marshal, while Kim II Sung was elevated to the rank of grand marshal or generalissimo.

The revolutionary ideology of Marxism-Leninism was imposed on North Korea with the Soviet occupation forces at the end of World War II in 1945. Since the system of government was transplanted from the Soviet Union, Kim II Sung developed his own *chuch’e* ideology as a way to strengthen his own claims to legitimacy and a collective sense of national identity. Unlike China, Korea had not been host to a strong movement of indigenous communists. It was more similar to the Eastern European countries in that regard. For this reason, North Korea engaged in a campaign of mythmaking on a grand scale, building up Kim Il Sung’s reputation as an anti-Japanese revolutionary fighter. The *chuch’e* ideology was thus an indigenization of Marxism-Leninism to suit the unique culture and conditions of North Korea.

Although Confucianism and Buddhism, as well as shamanism and Christianity, have been officially banned in North Korea as unscientific superstition, the cultural legacies of these traditions have left deep roots in society. Premodern institutions and norms represented by traditional culture and religion, such as filial piety, have managed to endure and manifest themselves in the contemporary institutions and behavior of North Korean society. Such premodern elements as Confucianism and shamanism are strongly embedded in the day-to-day psyche and behavior of communist North Korea.
NOTES

10. Besides the issue of U.N. membership in September 1991, North Korea yielded to international pressure by signing the IAEA safeguard measures on 31 January 1992 and opening its “suspected” nuclear weapons program to international inspection. However, a year later, on 12 March 1993, Pyongyang announced its intention of withdrawing from the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty that it signed in 1985. Then, on 11 June 1993, one day before the announced withdrawal was to take effect, North Korea reversed its policy by suspending its planned withdrawal from the NPT.
17. For a recent historical account of how the Chosôn kingdom became a thoroughly Confucianized state, see Martina Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation of Korea: A Study of Society and Ideology* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992). Also see Furuta Hiroshi, “Kita Chôsen ni okeru jûkyû no dentô to shûtai seishi no tenkai” *Shimonoseki Shiritsu Daigaku ronshû* 34, no. 4 (January 1991), pp. 29–71. For bringing the latter study to my attention, I thank Ms. Chung Hye-ran of the University of Hawaii.


27. Kim claimed, for instance, “As I look back on my past I can say, in short, that the 80 years of my life as a son of the people have been years of struggle devoted for the people.” Kim Il Sung, *Enhancing the Role of the Popular Masses is the Guarantee for Victory in the Cause of Independence* [speech at a banquet by the government of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, 15 April 1992] (Pyongyang: Foreign Language Publishing House, 1992), p. 2.


30. According to B.C.Koh, Kim Jong II’s appointment as commander-in-chief of the Korean People’s Army should not be confused with Kim II Sung’s position as commander-in-chief of the Armed Forces of the DPRK, a position that only the head of state can occupy according to the 1972 DPRK constitution.


32. Ibid.

33. Eyewitness accounts indicate that Kim Jong II was born and raised in the village of Biyak about 20 miles from Khabarovsk in Russian territory. See testimonial accounts by Yu Song-ch’ol serialized in *Hanguk ilbo* beginning 1 November 1990. Also see Lim Un, *Kita Choson ocho seiritsu hishi* [Secret history of the founding of the North Korean dynasty] (Tokyo: Jiyusha, 1982), pp. 109–122.

34. Ancestor worship is a ritual institutionalized by Confucian teachings in traditional Korea. See Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation of Korea*.

35. Pak Sŏng-ch’ol and Yi Chong-ok are vice presidents, while O Chin-u is defense minister.

37. This statement is almost a replica of what his father already said in his 1992 New Year address.


43. Ibid.

44. Ibid.


46. The text of Kim’s interview that was published abroad differs from that published for domestic consumption. His impromptu responses to questions are not printed in the domestic version. For examples, compare the texts of *Asahi shimbun*, 2 April 1992, and *Pyongyang Times*, 11 April 1992, p. 2. For the texts of Kim’s interview with the *Washington Times*, see *Washington Times*, 15 April 1992 and *Pyongyang Times*, 23 April 1992.