

THE SECRET OF KIM IL SUNG

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Kim Il Sung celebrated his 80th birthday in April 1992, the last surviving dictator of a "communist" country with the last surviving cult of personality. Fragile though North Korea's future may be, and hard though life continues to be for many of its people, his was still a considerable achievement. Certainly he had used the tools of repression with ruthless skill. Certainly he owed much at the start to the supporting hand of the Soviet Union. And certainly China saved him from extinction at an early stage.

For the past two decades and more it has been hard to see Kim's real features through the clouds of a suffocating cult. Yet there must have been more to his career than the mere use of force and the secret police. It will be suggested here that Kim was able to tap and exploit a deep vein of insecurity and self-doubt among the Korean people arising from their historical subjugation first by China and then by Japan. He appealed to the sense of shame of the Korean nation. He denounced his enemies as "flunkies" to a foreign power—it did not much matter which one.

Against the crime of "flunkeyism" he counterposed the spirit of "Juche" [*chuch'e*]—the doctrine that man (and particularly Korean man) is "master of his resources." This appeal had probably lost most of its genuine attraction by the mid-1980s. The doctrine had become routine. The economic gains had been squandered on empty projects. Even a well-sealed society could not remain immune from changes abroad. The succession—in the dubious person of his son, Kim Jong Il—caused elite dissension and required an even more extravagant ritual of political cult. But the charade of North Korean political culture by this time should not distract attention from its earlier more genuine features. We understand very well how Mao played on the ambivalent feelings of the Chinese people towards social order and disorder. Stalin's self-projection as mythical Russian father figure is also well understood. The secret of Kim's appeal is more elusive, but this essay seeks to explore an important aspect of it.

Let me begin with a speech by Kim from 1965 on the subject of "revolutionising" Korea's intellectuals. After Marxism-Leninism, he said, opposition to "flunkeyism" should be the most important aspect of education and scientific work:

As you know, geographically speaking, our country is situated among the Soviet Union, China and Japan. These adjacent countries are all big countries, with larger territories and populations than ours... Therefore, unless our country joins advanced nations by quickly developing its science and technology, flunkeyism towards these neighbouring countries will remain in our people's minds...

From old times, our country [has been] known as a golden garden for its beautiful mountains and clear rivers; it has rich natural resources though the territory is small. Ours is an industrious people with refined sentiments, outstanding talent and sturdy will. They have a long history and [rich] cultural traditions. Why should such a wise people as we blindly admire and worship others?

Even after the world-wide victory of communism, the Koreans will live in Korea. Why should we leave the golden garden of three thousand *ri* and live in an alien land? We must exploit our inexhaustible natural resources and build a wonderful paradise in this land where our people will live through all generations.¹

The Legacy of Shame

During fifty years (1895-1945), first under Japanese influence, then as a Japanese colony, Korea produced many brave patriots and revolutionaries who suffered discrimination, imprisonment or death. Yet liberation was achieved at a time when the resistance both internally and across the Manchurian frontier was quelled. A people whose sense of united nationhood dated back a thousand years to the beginning of the Koryŏ dynasty in 918 had become passive and guilty. Korea was adjacent to its colonisers and therefore more easily subdued than most nations elsewhere. In 1937 some 21 million Koreans were ruled by nearly a quarter of a million Japanese with only 63,000 Koreans in subordinate positions. Industry and commerce was also dominated by Japan, through the triad of the government, the banks, and the big *zaibatsu* houses of Mitsubishi and other familiar names.²

On 1 March 1919, two months before similar events in Peking, Korean students led a wave of demonstrations for independence in all the major Korean cities. Independence, said the declaration signed that afternoon in a Seoul restaurant, was the only way forward "if we are to deliver our children from the painful heritage of shame..." Japan had broken many solemn treaties and had shown contempt for Korea's civilisation, but "We, who have greater cause to reprimand ourselves, need not spend time in finding fault with others..."³ The note of self-reproach is characteristic.

The post-war rekindling of Korean nationalism led to the "cultural policy"—an easing of direct Japanese rule which allowed some hope of independence in the far future. But Japan's hand was too heavy to encourage a significant national bourgeoisie of the type which emerged in China. Small nationalist and communist groups, always penetrated by effective Japanese intelligence, were active in the 1920s, but were crushed or driven abroad as Japan's pressure intensified after the Manchurian take-over in 1931. Rapid industrialisation now created new tensions among the Korean working people, many of whom were abruptly transplanted from field to factory. There were rent protests, strikes and many acts of bravery which led to imprisonment or worse. But armed struggle was only possible beyond the frontier in Manchuria, sometimes seeping back into the border region. When Japan's open war against China began—soon to merge into the Pacific War—the "cultural policy" of the past two decades was reversed. Korea was to be wholly Japanized and integrated into the war effort. Humiliation was complete for thousands of young Koreans at school and college who were forced to study in Japanese, to sing martial songs about the "invincible Imperial forces" and to adopt Japanese names. The somewhat idealised memory (for some at the time were more impressed by Japan's power) persists in many post-war writings. The novelist Richard Kim recalls his father's apologetic words:

Sure, we had some people abroad carrying on the independence movement, and so forth, but they accomplished very little for the people inside the country. Those of us who had to stay in the country and carry on...well, we could do very little, too, except, perhaps, as your grandfather said in his prayer, to sustain our faith and remain strong in spirit, hoping, just hoping, that, someday, a day like today would come. Survival, yes, that's it. Survival. Stay alive. Raise families, our children, like you, for the future. Survival, son, that's what my generation has accomplished, if that can be called an accomplishment.⁴

One former student at college during the war describes his growing disillusionment with his "respected teacher" who had signed the 1 March Declaration but now advised patience. "...I was driven to despair by thoughts of the possibility of losing our national identity altogether," he recalls. "For me, the Korean nation was suffering precisely from an identity crisis—due primarily to inadequate national leadership."⁵ For others, schoolhood humiliations remain fresh decades later. Peter Hyun, revisiting the north after 35 years absence, would have his memory jolted after being briefly mistaken for a South Korean spy. That night, he recalled a confrontation with his Japanese headmaster who had intercepted a letter from a friend who did not even have "a proper Japanese name." Hyun had been beaten and then forced to kneel *samurai* fashion in the snow. Now he remembered both the admiration of his fellow-students and the humiliation later that day of a visit to his home by the repulsive headmaster, who forced this mother to bribe him with a bowl of black market apples.⁶

Behind the shame of subjugation to Japan lay a deeper shame from the past of a much longer submission to China. The historian John Fairbank has written of the Chosŏn dynasty's "unwavering loyalty" to China over a period of five centuries (it lasted from 1392 to the Japanese takeover), during which it became an almost model Chinese society. Since Korea was relatively small, he writes, and thus a more manageable and homogeneous unit than the Chinese empire, "it may have become more uniformly and fully permeated by Confucian ideas than China was itself."⁷ Official Northern history now condemns the Chosŏn dynasty for "flunkeyism" —a concept which as will be seen has been the central target of Kim Il Sung's political career since 1945. The term was originally used to denote the central principle in the conduct of foreign relations by the Chosŏn court. This was embodied in the phrase *sadae kyorin*: *sadae* (literally, "serving the big") referred to Korea's

deferential relations with China, while *kyorin* (literally, "friendly relations with one's neighbour") referred to those with Japan. The first half of this phrase, used by Chosŏn diplomats approvingly, became the pejorative term "flunkeyism" (*sadae-juũi*), a term not invented by Kim Il Sung, but already a term of abuse amongst pre-war Korean nationalists. As for relations with Japan, the friendly relationship between equals which was implied by the term *kyorin* became transformed into a further humiliation.⁸

Fighting beyond the border

There is an old photograph of four young soldiers, hands in pockets, somewhere in a Manchurian forest, two of them leaning familiarly against each other. In 1958 it reappeared minus one soldier in a North Korean publication, captioned "Comrade Kim Il Sung and his comrades-in-arms in the period of armed struggle against the Japanese imperialists." Twelve years later the same photograph appeared once more. Kim was now standing straight (though another colleague leaned on thin air). The third man had been reduced in height so that Kim was now the tallest. In the final version first published in 1975 Kim was moved into the centre.⁹ In more recent publications even this version rarely appears and Pyongyang's [P'yŏngyang's] museums now rely entirely on paintings to portray the official record of Kim's revolutionary past. (It is reported that the most recent version of the photograph had reappeared in the Revolutionary Museum by 1992). The new record dismissed in a few words the 1 March 1919 movement and the foundation of the Korean Communist Party in 1925, or ignored the period altogether. Kim Il Sung's appearance was now back-dated to October 1926 (when he was fourteen years old), when he formed the "Down-with-Imperialism Union." A few years later he was in

Manchuria, where he was said to have founded the Korean People's Revolutionary Army in April 1932. In 1936 Kim set up the Association for the Restoration of the Fatherland, with its base in the forest around Mt Paektu—Korea's most sacred mountain—on the Chinese border. Every victory against the Japanese was ascribed to him and no one else.

The elaboration of Kim's early revolutionary record reached its height in the mid-1970s. In earlier versions published in the 1950s, Kim was described only as "joining" the youth organisations which in the later accounts he founded. The KPRA was said to have been set up two years later in 1934, and the inspiration for it was attributed to "the staunch communists headed by Comrade Kim Il Sung" rather than to Kim alone. Some attention was also paid in these earlier accounts to the role of revolutionary leaders unrelated to Kim. Peasant leaders in the 1890s were mentioned, and there were references to the development of the peasant struggle and the spread of workers' strikes in the late 1920s. But the later hagiography focused exclusively on the alleged exploits of Kim's family. His great grand-father was said to have led the assault in 1866 on the General Sherman, an American merchant ship which sailed up the Taedong River to Pyongyang, while his father had founded the only true revolutionary organisation of the 1919 period.¹⁰

These exaggerations have made it easy for South Korean propaganda to dismiss Kim's entire revolutionary past as a fraud, yet they overlay a substantial and not entirely unknown record. "Kim Il-song had a revolutionary past," admits Dae-Sook Suh in his otherwise critical study, "not as splendid as he claims and perhaps not devoted solely to the spread of communism in Korea or to the independence of Korea, but still a revolutionary record of some repute, of which any man thirty three years old [at the time of the Soviet liberation] could be proud. He is certainly

not a nonentity."¹¹ By glossing over the fact that Kim operated mostly across the border in Manchuria, the North Korean sources invite the derision of hostile commentators. Yet by the 1930s, this area was strategically a critical part of the Japanese war effort, and peopled by Koreans who had migrated for economic reasons or had been driven into exile. The trains across the Yalu and Tumen Rivers into Manchuria appear frequently as symbols for displacement and flight. Richard Kim describes in *Lost Names* how his parents, stopped at the border by Japanese Thought Police, were forced to cross at night on the ice.¹² The poet Yi Kwangsu, Korea's most famous nationalist writer who went into exile soon after taking part in the March 1919 events, described the sensation of exile in a poem:

My train rushes on,
Whether early or late, at night,
It never slackens its rapid pace.

In the crowded third-class car,
Passengers lie cramped in narrow places.
How weary look their sleeping faces!

Where in the world are they all going?
What is the work they have to do,
Travelling ceaselessly the whole night through?¹³

Kim Il Sung's own family migrated to Manchuria in the early 1920s. Kim joined them in 1926 after living with his grandparents and attending primary school in Pyongyang. He then continued at a Chinese secondary school—the Yukmen Middle School in Jilin province. Some of his school books, returned as a gift from China many years later, are preserved in the collection of foreign presents to Kim at the "International Friendship Exhibition" at Mount Myohyang. All in Chinese, they include Gorky's *Mother*, Lu Xun's collection of essays *Call to Arms*, and Marx on *Wages*,

Labour and Capital.¹⁴ Many young Chinese of the same age were inspired by a similar selection. Kim had briefly attended a Korean school in Manchuria before moving to the Yukmen Middle School for a proper Chinese education. Not surprisingly the Chinese flavour of his education—which probably helped his later career with Chinese-led guerrillas—is obscured by the official biographies. If, as claimed, he joined the Communist Party in 1931, this must have been the Chinese Communist Party.

After internal resistance had been largely crushed, Manchuria was the destination for all young Koreans who wished to join the guerrillas. By 1935, Kim was the leader of a detachment of soldiers in a guerrilla force set up by the local Chinese Communist Party, incorporating Korean communists and Chinese nationalists. The only previous contemporary reference to Kim in the Japanese police records shows that in May 1929 he attended the abortive founding of a small communist youth group in Jilin province. He was quite probably jailed for some months after the youth group leaders were arrested. The much later inflation of Kim's revolutionary record obscures the fact that he had undeniably committed himself at an early age (he was born in 1912) to the dangerous path of revolution. He survived a purge of Koreans in the Northeast People's Revolutionary Army and by 1937 was a divisional commander in its successor, the Northeast anti-Japanese United Army. Kim conducted several daring raids across the border to attack Japanese forces in Korea. One of these—the Battle of Poch'ŏnbo on 4 June 1937—is authenticated by Japanese records which admit that they suffered a serious defeat. By 1939, as Bruce Cumings has established, Japanese police reports judged Kim to be the equal of his Chinese superior Yang Ching-yu, founder of the NEAJUA, and both had about 400 partisans under their command. A "Kim Special Activities Unit" was set up to track

him down. A Soviet journal published in 1937 described the daring performance of Kim's detachment.¹⁵

As occurred elsewhere in China, successful guerrilla operations invited more intensive Japanese counter-measures and the NEAJUA came under severe pressure from 1940 onwards. Kim himself has admitted that it was necessary to re-group in smaller units because of a special Japanese security operation in that year and official accounts refer to measures taken by Kim to "preserve and reinforce the revolutionary forces." The First Route Army to which Kim belonged headed north to join the Third Route Army, which had already begun to move into Soviet territory north of Khabarovsk. Japanese intelligence at the time reported from several sources that Kim and his men moved to the Khabarovsk area early in 1941, although there is no confirmation from Soviet sources. The story that Kim joined the Red Army, and in another version even fought in the defence of Stalingrad, appears without foundation. There is no doubt that Kim did move onto Soviet territory: it was a sensible strategic move and Soviet help was acknowledged fulsomely after 1945 until it was deleted from the official Pyongyang version in the 1970s. Russian sources indicate that his eldest son Kim Jong Il was born in Khabarovsk. His birth date was 16 February 1941—though Kim himself may not yet have crossed from China.¹⁶

To summarise: Kim Il Sung was not a theorist and probably not a Marxist either. Until 1970, the official record had failed to produce the text of a single speech or writing by Kim allegedly dating to the revolutionary period of 1930-45. Nevertheless, the record shows that Kim was a fighter in a nation which mostly did not fight. That would be a strong asset in bidding for the leadership after Korea was liberated by Soviet forces in 1945.

New Face in the North

The pride and self-respect of our nation which had been repressed and trampled down under the long Japanese imperialist colonial rule, began to revive and unfurled (its) wings and soared higher with each passing day in the struggle to create a new life after liberation... Our nation can never again be reduced to a humiliating status as before (Kim Il Sung).¹⁷

On 14 October 1945—just six days before Syngman Rhee was welcomed by General Hodge further south in Seoul—Kim Il Sung appeared on the platform before the main square in Pyongyang, wearing a suit and tie, a Soviet-style fedora hat, and with a cheerful but slightly tentative smile. There are three versions of the event. Hostile South Korean sources claim that he was merely a Russian puppet, whose speech had been written in Russian and translated into Korean. Even his tie had been knotted for him by a colonel of the Red Army. The audience had heard of a legendary Kim Il Sung but were puzzled by the appearance of this young man. The official North Korean version now presents Kim as declaring the liberation of the Korean people to an ecstatic crowd. The Soviet officers on the platform have been blotted from the written and pictorial record, and Kim is said to have founded the Workers' Party of Korea just four days previously. (It was in fact founded nearly a year later in August 1946, as is correctly recorded in official histories until the 1960s). The third version, which is closest to the truth, acknowledges that Kim was sponsored by the Russians, but not to the exclusion of others, and that his rise to leadership was not a foregone conclusion. The veteran nationalist Cho Manshik (who introduced Kim at the rally) was chairman of the Pyongyang People's Committee with Soviet support. The Southern communist leader Pak Hōnyong was also looked on favourably by the Russians. Korean communists who had operated under the Chinese Communist Party—known as the Yanan faction—were allowed to return and to set up

the New Democratic Party. But although Kim could not have established himself without Soviet approval, his own qualifications were considerable and would ensure that he never appeared as a "puppet"—indeed, that he would shake off Soviet tutelage in the future.¹⁸

Kim now acquires for the first time an audible and distinctive voice. His speeches from the 1945-48 period already reveal the characteristics of the later Kim. There is an appeal to simple national sentiment on the theme of making Korea great again, a single-minded concern for control of the leading organisations (especially of the Communist Party) while being very ready to condemn his opponents as factionalists or traitors. There is a corresponding concern to build a broad base of mass support, particularly in the countryside with a high proportion of party to non-party members, and a ready borrowing of appropriate theoretical concepts from Stalin and Mao, but there is no indication of independent thought on Marxist themes. The beginnings of a cult of the leader and family can also be noted from around this time.

The Russians kept their grip on the top political command in Pyongyang, but otherwise encouraged the Koreans to establish their own authority at provincial and local levels. Later Kim was able to contrast effectively the inconspicuous Soviet approach with the much more visible American intervention in the south. "You have attained liberty and liberation. Now everything is up to you!" Kim quoted the Soviet command as saying in its first message to the Koreans. Meanwhile General MacArthur proclaimed formalistically that, "All powers of government...will be for the present exercised under my authority," and declared English as the official language for the purposes of military control.¹⁹

In December 1945, when Kim became secretary of the Northern Bureau of the existing Korean Communist Party (which at the time was nominally subordinate to the central committee led by Pak Hōnyong in Seoul), total membership in the North was 4,530. In August 1946, when the Northern party merged with the New Democratic Party to form the North Korean Workers' Party, the combined membership was 366,000. By January 1948 it had risen to 708,000. Outside the party, local People's Committees were organised which by September 1946 already embraced, or so Kim claimed, more than six million people from all walks of life. This was then nearly the entire adult population of North Korea. The real strength of this "united front" lay in the countryside where land had been redistributed to nearly three-quarters of a million peasant households. Kim ordered that "tested activists" from the ranks of poor peasants should be selected to run the new peasants' associations which should merge with the rural People's Committees. The party, he said, must establish "deep roots" among the workers and peasants, and its most important task was "to expand and reinforce its positions" there.²⁰

Only in the course of struggling, said Kim in one of his first speeches, "not in words but in deeds," for a People's Republic, could the Party win over the masses to its side. Kim's concept of the Party was both Stalinist, in its insistence that it should be totally involved in all spheres of society, and Confucian, in its idealised view of a teacher-student relationship with the masses. The Maoist view that the party should also "learn from the masses" was expressed by Kim more perfunctorily. Cadres, he said, should not "decry the masses for their backwardness instead of breathing the same air as they and teaching them kindly."²¹

Doctrine did not loom very large in Kim's presentation. North Korea's economic construction, he said without

further explanation, was "not a socialist one, and yet, it is not, of course, going in the direction of capitalism." However Kim appealed strongly to a sense of national pride. The reconstruction of the North, he said in January 1948, demonstrated that the Korean nation had exceptional qualities. Any "ordinary nation would probably have perished" in the face of Japan's persecution and efforts to suppress Korea's cultural identity. But the Korean people did not give in. They "carefully preserved the history of their country and their national sagacity, loved their culture and did not abandon their language." One of earliest post-war reforms in the North was to abolish the use of Chinese characters and to rely entirely—unlike the south even to this day—on the *han'gŭl* phonetic script. Kim even claimed that North Korea's new labour law was ahead of the countries of Eastern Europe, and that its "democratic reforms" were a "heartening example to the people of many Eastern countries."²²

Another feature of the early post-war Kim was his readiness to label party opponents as splitters and pro-Japanese. In reality the Northern branch of the Communist Party set out to absorb first the pro-Chinese New Democratic Party and then those who belonged to the Seoul-based central organisation to which it was nominally subordinate. Disunity, he argued, played into the hands of the enemy—an argument which had some historical basis in the leftwing politics of Korea in the 1920s. Those who claimed loyalty to the Seoul party centre, he claimed, only did so because it was unable to supervise them properly so that they could behave as "factionalists and individualist heroes." Kim's first party purge was conducted at the second congress of the Workers' Party in March 1948 when he turned against many of the "domestic" communists from the South. He accused the "factional elements" of drawing people to their side for the sake of kinship, school or provincial ties, or even friendships formed when in prison

together, and by "making sly mischief and inviting and treating them to a drink at their homes."²³

But over and over again Kim played the national card, taxing the Koreans with their failures against the Japanese and hailing their escape from humiliation.

How is it that we suffered from Japanese imperialist aggression and failed to repulse it all by ourselves? It is, first of all, that we lacked a national sense of dignity and power before and our people were weak in awakening and in united strength...

Today ours in a nation that is conscious of its ability and mission, a stout nation now which no force can bring to its knees and override. Particularly, the North Korean people have become masters of the country who handle everything by themselves according to their own decisions, the masters of a new, free and happy life.²⁴

The Scars of War

Korea's was a war of overwhelming destruction. It was started by Kim, and over time significantly helped him to consolidate his power. The scale of military casualties was reminiscent of the first world war, with a similar protracted struggle along a fixed line. There were an estimated half a million casualties on the North Korean side, while the US announced over 140,000 on the United Nations side and a further three hundred thousand among the South Korean forces. A million Chinese were killed—an important number, given Kim's later claims of "single-handed" victory. But Korea also echoed the second world war in the vast displacement which the war caused among the civilian population. Civilian deaths have been estimated at one million, and when the war ended there were between two and a half and three million refugees—or one-sixth of the population.²⁵

The physical devastation of the Korean peninsula was immense, especially in the north where centres of population were regularly bombed in 1952-53 by the United Nations airforce in an attempt to force concessions at the Panmunjŏm armistice negotiations. Economic targets in North Korea—railways, bridges, factories, power stations, and so on—were regularly attacked. In May 1953, in a further effort to secure UN objectives at Panmunjŏm, an assault was launched against dykes and irrigation dams, with the aim of destroying the rice crop and thus causing famine both among civilians and the Northern armies.

Five out of the targetted 20 major dams were destroyed before the armistice was signed. "Floodwaters poured forth and left a trail of havoc," the official US history of the war records. "Buildings, crops and irrigation canals were all swept away in the devastating torrent."²⁶ There were very few other targets in the whole of North Korea left standing by this time. Only two buildings remained intact in Pyongyang. The North's own statistics show that national income declined by almost a third during the war, while prices rose by more than 150%. Famine in 1952 may only have been averted by food aid from the Soviet Union and China.

The Korean War was not a revolution which encouraged a spirit of individual initiative and heroism, but a national trauma which could only be endured by the exercise of the tightest collective discipline. It reinforced Kim's ability to eliminate all sources of dissent and to make the party a super-loyal tool of power. It is no accident that the main documents from this period included later in Kim's *Selected Works* all stress the need for "the improvement of the Party's organisational work" (the title of his concluding speech to the party's Fourth Plenum in November 1951).²⁷ Later editions do not include Kim's earlier report to the Third Plenum, held soon after he had been saved from

defeat by Chinese intervention, in December 1950. Characteristically he used this occasion to launch a bitter attack against Mu Chŏng, the Korean leader who was closest to the Chinese. Mu was made a scapegoat for the retreat to the Yalu and accused of resorting to "military cliquism similar to the emperors in the feudal period, shooting people at will without any legal procedures." Thus Kim diverted the brunt of criticisms which could have been levelled against his own impetuosity leading to the retreat and a breakdown of social discipline. He now demanded "stern revolutionary discipline" and called on the party to act as "one man" under the orders of the leader.²⁸

During the retreat, many Koreans had collaborated with the enemy, and some had hunted down and massacred those known to be supporters of the Northern government. As the North re-established its control, it had to decide how to deal with civilians whose loyalty was now in doubt. At the Fourth Plenum, Kim admitted that even those "who had shared in the distribution of land and were of the same class position with us" committed "criminal acts" during the retreat. His approach was again characteristic: he insisted on broadening the party's organisational base, recruiting large numbers of peasants with few political qualifications, and he blamed party secretary Hŏ for having pursued a "closed door" policy in party recruitment and for having punished those who "wavered" too severely. Hŏ had favoured the entry of urban workers and before the war had been too partial, in Kim's view, to the recruitment of members of the former South Korean party. Kim's policy of rural recruitment coupled with the losses of the war resulted in a largely new party, poorly educated but loyal to the leader. A year later at the Fifth Plenum, Kim reported that the party had absorbed 450,000 new members during the war, of whom the absolute majority were "green both in the political level and experience in work, and about half of all the recruits barely manage to write and read the Korean

letters." Here, to borrow Mao's phrase, was a blank sheet of paper on which Kim could write his own script.²⁹

The Rise of Juche

What is Juche in our Party's ideological work? What are we doing? We are not engaged in any other country's revolution, but precisely in the Korean revolution... Therefore, all ideological work must be subordinated to the interests of the Korean revolution. When we study the history of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, the history of the Chinese revolution, or the universal truth of Marxism-Leninism, it is all for the purpose of correctly carrying out our own revolution.³⁰

The "Juche Idea," which by the 1970s would be hailed as a beacon illuminating the path of mankind towards revolution, emerged a decade or so earlier from a complex mixture of motives. It was in part a necessary process of fashioning an authentic Korean approach to the post-liberation task of building a "socialist" state. Kim identified quite frankly (although this perception was later blurred from the official record) some of the new state's weaknesses, particularly the low political level of the working force and the incompetence of many cadres. A national ideology would be needed to underpin the enormous efforts which Kim demanded of the Korean people to overcome their material and political weaknesses (efforts which some of his colleagues felt would place too high a demand). Such an ideology also helped establish a barrier against excessive influence from Pyongyang's two powerful socialist neighbours, although at first Kim both encouraged and welcomed their help—also a feature later deleted from the official version.

All of this was interwoven with a fierce factional struggle which began even while the Korean War was on and extended well into the 1960s. The comparison is often made

with Mao Zedong's "Sinification" campaign during the early 1940s in Yanan. This had confirmed Mao's authority independently of the Soviet Union, provided a revolutionary path which led the Chinese Communists to victory, and finally isolated the "returned students" faction from Moscow. But there were important differences with Kim's Koreanification. Mao's campaign occurred in the course of revolutionary struggle with a considerable degree of genuine popular participation, and the factional aspect was less evident. Kim's own revolutionary credentials were not inconsiderable, but had to be rewritten after the devastating effect of the war.

Discussion of the Juche idea is complicated by a simple bibliographical fact. The struggles, material and political, of the 1950s were over before the word Juche was publicly used. Since then the idea has been backdated not just to the mid-1950s, but to the very start of official revolutionary history in the 1930s. The paragraph quoted above occurs in a speech dated December 1955 which is the first officially recorded use of the word Juche, but which was not published until 1960. The section on Juche occurs at the beginning and reads as if it has been inserted later into the original text.³¹

North Korea after the war was almost entirely dependent upon foreign aid and foreign example from China and the Soviet Union. In psychological terms, the end of the war could be greeted with nationwide joy, but it could never be seen as a national triumph. The Chinese could—and did—congratulate themselves on having vanquished US imperialism. North Korean satisfaction had to be qualified not only because this had been achieved with massive Chinese help, but because Korea was still divided. South and North suffered much the same blow to their self-esteem, although with different results. For Southerners the war revived, writes a Seoul professor, "the emasculated outlook

on life based on strong self-contempt which Koreans had felt during the Japanese occupation." From this it was only a short step to "the unconstructive and impulsive escapism that gained headway" and to the attitude that "anything of foreign origin, be it an idea or a manufactured article, automatically meant that it was superior to anything Korean."³² Northerners were not faced with the variety of foreign stimuli first brought to the south by the allied forces and then greatly multiplied by the post-war inflow of foreign capital. But the Chinese armed forces remained in the North until 1958, having completely written off the cost of the war, while Soviet advisers dominated the work of post-war construction. In 1954, more than 30% of North Korean state revenue was provided from foreign aid. China helped to restore the railway system; the Russians rehabilitated power stations and iron and steel works; Hamhŭng was rebuilt with the aid of East Germany; thousands of Korean students and technicians were trained in eastern Europe.³³ However necessary this "fraternal aid," it also threatened a similar process of cultural assimilation, which Kim soon labelled as "flunkeyism"—the term was also used by post-war critics in the South.

North Korea in the mid-50s had its Marx Square, its Stalin Street and its Mao Zedong Avenue. The Peking resident Rewi Alley, who visited Pyongyang in 1956, writes of a long line of industrial plants on the bank of the Taedong River: "They have all been erected since the armistice and machinery has rolled in from the USSR and the new democracies..." Alley asked a young student of philosophy what he studied in his classes: "Various schools of Chinese philosophy, Indian, European, Graeco-Roman... It is all very interesting. I think it will help us to understand much about the rest of the world."³⁴

Kim's own political initiatives were inescapably influenced by Russian and Chinese models even while he

began to criticise party leaders for "swallowing whole" the experience of "the parties of other countries." "Those who lack Party spirit," he said, "who have no enthusiasm to work for the Party and the revolution and think themselves outstanding figures, are of no use to our Party, whether they returned from the Soviet Union, China or even from Heaven."³⁵ His criticisms in the December 1955 Juche speech of (at this stage) mostly pro-Soviet features of political behaviour in Korea echoed those being voiced by Mao Zedong in China:

In our propaganda and agitation work, there are numerous examples where only things foreign are extolled while our own are slighted. Once I visited a People's Army rest home, where there was a picture of the Siberian steppe on the wall. Russians probably like that landscape. But we Korean people prefer the beautiful scenery of our own country...

I noticed in a primary school that all the portraits on the walls were of foreigners, such as Mayakovsky and Pushkin but there were none of Koreans. If children are educated in this way, how can they be expected to have national pride?³⁶

In the same speech Kim referred approvingly to the Chinese rectification campaign, saying "There is a need to conduct a rectification as in the Chinese party." Echoes of Mao can be detected in many of Kim's pronouncements on subjects such as the "mass line" and relations between the army and the people. Started in 1958-59, the Chŏllima "Flying Horse" movement for rapid economic growth, with speeded-up collectivisation in the countryside, owed much to the example of the Chinese Great Leap Forward. Similarly, Kim's insistence on making heavy industry a priority in the post-war programme, although criticised by the post-Stalin leadership in Moscow, clearly derived from orthodox Soviet thinking on the need to give top priority to development of the means of production. Kim's opponents also sought encouragement in the de-Stalinisation theme which emerged at the Soviet 20th Party Congress in February 1956, challenging Kim's leadership at party

plenums in August and September in what proved to be the final showdown. Leading members of both pro-Soviet and pro-Chinese factions were accused by the victorious Kim of "babbling about freedom" and of having denied that his economic policies were "consistently correct." Both Moscow and Peking appear to have intervened to reduce the intensity of Kim's purge, but by 1958, after a further campaign against "sectarian influences," all of Kim's main rivals appear to have been eliminated.³⁷

How did Kim succeed in establishing his ascendancy in just over a dozen years in spite of a disastrous war for which he could be largely blamed? The support or acquiescence of the Soviet Union and China was a prerequisite, yet this could have been withdrawn in favour of other contenders. He was no doubt ruthless in the factional struggle, but those with Soviet experience must have been equally skilled in waging it. It is suggested that the combination of revolutionary myth and assertion of national identity offered by Kim was attractive to many and seemed appropriate to a people seeking recovery from half a century of shame.

But for how long? Historical myths have a finite life: their period of greatest attraction lies not in the immediate aftermath of the events which have been mythologised but at a certain remove. As North Korea recovered from the catastrophe of the war, the role of Kim Il Sung and the theme of standing up against foreign intervention had a genuinely inspirational character. The threat plausibly presented—at least to a North Korean audience—by a South Korea with nuclear-tipped backing from the United States reinforced its appeal. But in the 1980s and 1990s the message of the Kim cult is being undermined from two directions.

First, it has simply become more remote and more routine. This writer has observed on the basis of three visits to North Korea (1976, 1986 and 1988) that much of the fervour has disappeared. Workers' Party cadres who once spoke with real conviction now more often sound as if they are merely reciting by rote the marvellous deeds of the Great Leader. Second, the myth has been conscripted and inflated to impossible lengths in the succession struggle by Kim's son, the Dear Leader Kim Jong Il. Its most powerful element, the doctrine of self-reliance to which was attached the label of *Juche*, has become Kim Jong Il's principal weapon. Loyalty to *Juche*, to the father, and to the son, are presented as an indissoluble trinity. In so doing, Kim Jong Il has antagonised the Party's old guard both on political and ideological grounds. In a revealing speech in 1986, he admitted that some officials still "regard our Party's *Juche* idea as something that is contrary to Marxism-Leninism". The Great Leader's works were only being studied "in a perfunctory manner". Kim Jong Il complained that there were still unnamed "defeatists" who "worshipped the major powers" and took "a dogmatic approach to things foreign". In a particularly revealing passage, he warned:

The first thing we must realise is that our Leader, not some great man from some other country, won back our lost country by overcoming all the hardships and difficulties in the dark years of Japanese imperialist rule and he has built a prosperous socialist nation in this land.³⁸

The necessity for such a warning after 40 years of insistence on the leader's supreme revolutionary role indicates a very deep problem. North Korea is not so totally insulated from outside influence as is commonly assumed. In his other capacity Kim Jong Il is himself engaged in building up a core of younger cadres with a more outward-looking commitment to modernisation (and with better access to foreign goods and other material rewards). It may well be that the historical myth which sustained Kim Il Sung

and gave him powerful, and often lethal, ammunition during his rise to supreme power, is now repeating itself less as epic and more as farce. North Korea's crisis in a much changed world is not only the loss of a "socialist camp" at its rear which, despite the claims of Juche, it could rely on and manipulate. The deeper damage may be to the credibility of its central doctrine. In the world of inter-dependence and global markets, who is the flunkey now?

NOTES

1. Kim Il Sung, *On Juche in our Revolution* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House (FLPH), 1980), pp.490-91. A *ri* is a unit of distance; Korea was once known as "the 3,000 *ri* land," based on the distance from northern border to southern coast.
2. Bruce Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), I: pp.12, 20.
3. C. I. Eugene Kim, "Nationalist Movements and Students," in Kim & Dorethea E. Mortimore (eds), *Korea's Response to Japan: the Colonial Period* (Kalamazoo: Western Michigan University Center for Korean Studies, 1977), pp.266-68.
4. Richard E. Kim, *Lost Names* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1971), pp.185-6.
5. Young Hoon Kang, "Personal Reminiscences of my Japanese School Days," in Kim & Mortimore (eds), pp.287-90. Kang admits that there was a significant number of "pro-Japanese" students who argued that Korea was too small to constitute a separate nation-state.
6. Peter Hyun, *Darkness at Noon: A North Korean Diary*, (Seoul: Hanja Publishing Co., 1981), pp.87-100.
7. John K. Fairbank *et al.*, *East Asia: Tradition and Transformation* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1973), p.300ff.
8. C.I. Eugene Kim & Han-kyo Kim, *Korea and the Politics of Imperialism 1876-1910* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1967), pp.134-5; see also Cumings, *Origins...* I: p.475, note 17.
9. Photograph sources: (1) Dae-sook Suh, *Kim Il Sung: The North Korean Leader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p.45; (2) *Democratic People's Republic of Korea* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1958); (3) *Revolutionary Activities of Comrade Kim Il Sung* (Pyongyang: FLPH, 1970); (4) *The Immortal Revolutionary Traditions* (Pyongyang: FLPH, 1975). Suh ascribes the original photo to 1943 when Kim's guerrillas were operating from the Soviet Union. The Korean volumes imply an earlier dating, because Kim looks much younger than 31 years old. My thanks to Tony Coogan for help with this.
10. Compare the relatively modest account of Kim's revolutionary role in *Korean Handbook, 1959* with the hagiography in *Korean Review, 1974* (both Pyongyang: FLPH).
11. Dae-Sook Suh, *The Korean Communist Movement, 1918-1948* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), p.261.
12. Kim, *Lost Names*, p. xx.
13. Andrew C. Nahm, "Themes of Popular Songs and Poems of the Koreans as Oppressed People" in Kim & Mortimore, (eds), p.212.
14. My observation in April 1986.
15. Kim's early exploits and subsequent historical detail are taken from Cumings, *Origins...* I: pp.35-8.
16. *New information on Kim's wartime record*, Associated Press, 8 April 1992; *The Independent*, 6 April 1992.
17. Speech of 12 January 1948, quoted in Lim Un, *The Founding of a Dynasty in North Korea* (Tokyo: Jiyu-sha, 1982), p.149.
18. See further Robert Scalapino & Chong-Sik Lee, *Communism in Korea*, Vol. 1 (Berkeley, UCLA, 1972).

19. Kim contrasted the two statements in his 28 March 1948 report, *Selected Works*, Vol. 1 (Pyongyang: FLPH, 1971) (cited below as SW1), p. 217. See also Suh, *Kim Il Sung...*, p.65.
20. Kim Il Sung, speeches of 10 April & 26 Sept. 1946, SW1, pp.48 and 105.
21. Kim, speeches of 13 October, 17 December 1945; 28 August 1947, SW1, pp.4, 15, 150.
22. Kim, speeches of 20 June 1946; 12 January & 28 March 1948, SW1, pp.64, 156, 228.
23. Kim, reports of 28 & 29 March 1948, SW1, pp.238-39, 266.
24. Kim, speech of 12 January 1948, SW1, pp.158-59. Note that for all these texts we are in the hands of Kim's editors.
25. Much higher estimates are given in Jon Halliday & Bruce Cumings, *Korea: The Unknown War* (London: Penguin, 1990), pp.200-1.
26. Walter G. Hermes, *Truce Tent and Fighting Front* (Washington: Office of the Chief of Military Science, 1966), p.461; see also John Gittings, "Talks, Bombs and Germs: Another Look at the Korean War," *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, V:2 (1975), pp.212-16.
27. Kim, report of 2 November 1951, SW1, pp.337-49.
28. Suh, *Kim Il Sung...*, pp.122-23, 358 note 15.
29. Kim, reports of 2 November 1951; 15 December 1952, SW1, pp.344 and 390; see also Scalapino & Lee.
30. Speech of 28 December 1955, "On Eliminating Dogmatism and Formalism and Establishing Juche in Ideological Work," SW1, pp.582-83. This speech was first published in the 1960 edition of *Selected Works* (Korean edition).
31. Scholars at the Institute for the Study of the Juche Idea in Pyongyang confirmed to me in 1986 that the 1955 speech was the first recorded use of the term. See the useful discussion of Juche in Suh, *Kim Il Sung...*, chapter 17.
32. Kim Chong-un, "Postwar Korean society and the short story," *Korea Journal* 26/4 (1986), pp.23-31.

33. Yoon Kuark, "North Korean industrial development during the post-war period," *China Quarterly*, No. 14 (1963), pp.55 and 61-2.
34. Rewi Alley, *Land of the Morning Calm* (no publisher given, 1956), p.35; *Children of the Dawn* (Beijing: New World Press, 1957), p.184.
35. Kim, speeches of 1 & 4 April 1955, SW1, pp.533 and 565-67.
36. Kim, "On Eliminating Dogmatism....," SW1, p.586.
37. Suh, *Kim Il Sung...* pp.141-57.
38. Kim Jong Il, *On Some Problems of Education in the Juche Idea*, talk of 15 July 1986 (Pyongyang: FLPH, 1987), pp.9, 25, 27, 29.