



**Constructing the "Homeworld" and "Alienworld":
Understanding North Korea Through Propaganda
Posters**

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Abstract

*"In the arts of representation are found the real origins and organs of social control..What then is a King? He is a King's portrait,and that alone makes him a King."*¹

Propaganda art plays a major role in not only conveying the ideas of the regime but also in building an "Us" versus "Them" narrative that aids regime legitimacy. Through the application of the Tartu School's Cultural Semiotic approach and the Lifeworld concept, this paper presents a thematic study of 42 propaganda posters released by the North Korean State since the end of the Korean War (1950-1953) i.e. from 1953 till 2021², and through it, seeks to understand the nature and unique characteristics of North Korean Communism, its visions of past and future, the retention of pre-Communist ideologies as well as its changing perceptions of the desirable and undesirable traits in the populace vis à vis socioeconomic changes at home and abroad.

Keywords: Propaganda, North Korea, Homeworld, Alienworld, Regime Legitimacy

¹ Louis Martin, Portrait of the King:1988, 218.

² These posters have been taken from North Korean State websites, University of California San Diego's North Korea Propaganda posters Library Digital Collection, Wikimedia Commons which are free to use. The source of images taken from books and news websites have been cited.

North Korea at a Glance

The last surviving specimen of Stalinist socialism, North Korea has been a curiosity for many since its inception. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) was established in 1948 under the leadership of Kim il-Sung, a Communist anti-Japanese guerrilla fighter, who became the leader of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK). By the late 1950s, Kim il-Sung successfully purged all rival factions and established his own Kapsan faction as the sole authority. Since then, Kim single-handedly channelised the course of North Korean politics, economy and society till his death in 1994 (Buzo 2007: 86; Hunter 1999: 21; Seth 2010: 344-45; Simons 2014: 130-31). North Korea sees itself as surrounded by several hostile forces such as the United States with its omnipresent military, Washington's "puppet" regime in South Korea as well as its former coloniser and US ally, Japan. The threat of inroads of liberalism escalated after the German Unification which saw the absorption of the socialist Eastern Germany by the capitalist Western Germany. While during the Cold War (1945-1991), the main threat was militaristic in nature; since the fall of the USSR in 1991, the regime perceives any policy changes to liberalise the order as a major threat to stability and hence, displays a complete refusal to embrace market economy (Cumings 2004: x; Park 2004b: 194). The foremost concerns of the regime include survival, stable leadership and attaining prosperity (Park 2004b: 197). Ideology, particularly Pyongyang's interpretation of Marxism-Leninism centred on the Juche idea, continues to play a significant role.

Juche

The trajectory of North Korea's ideological evolution is ensconced in the idea of *Juche* which loosely translates as "Self-reliance". First emerging in Kim's 1955 speech *On Eliminating Dogmatism and Formalism and Establishing Juche in Ideological Work*, Juche has been the core ideological fixation of the regime from the 1960s till the present era (Kim 1980:589-94). The term *Juche* or *Jaju* remains significant to the extent that it is regarded as North Korea's state religion (Belke 1998). Though loosely translated as 'self-reliance', it is a much deeper and broader concept which could be understood only by studying its etymology. "Juche" (주체) comes from the Chinese word "Zhuti" (主體) where Zhu (主) means "main, master, owner" and Ti (體) means "substance or essence". Hence, the concept means "master of one's essence", "self-essence" or the "essence of national self-determination". It did not just

draw from the Imperial Japanese concept of *Kokutai* or a Family State (Cumings 2018) but also from Woodrow Wilson's 14 points of national self-determination (Quinones 2009). In *On Eliminating Dogmatism and Formalism and Establishing Juche in the Ideological Work*, Kim (1980: 589-94) vaguely defined Juche as:

“What is Juche in our Party's ideological work?... We are not engaged in any other country's revolution but solely in the Korean revolution. Devotion to the Korean revolution is Juche in the ideological work of our Party. 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 entirely for the purpose of carrying out our own revolution.”

Thus, Kim distinguishes Juche as essentially devoted to Korea which can be applied to both individuals and groups including nations. The evolution of Juche, hence, becomes necessary to understand the nature of the regime and the principles that guide it (Waldenstrom: 2005). Han S. Park identifies five stages in the evolution of the Juche ideology, namely: Juche as Anti-Japanism; Juche as Anti-Hegemonism; Juche as a Nationalist Ideology; Juche as Economic Self-Reliance and Juche as a Worldview (Park 2004b: 135).

Juche as Anti-Japanism can be traced back to Kim il-Sung's writings during the mid-1920s when Korea was under Japanese colonial rule, though back then, it had not developed as an ideology even in a rudimentary form (Park 2004b: 135). Kim used the concept of self-reliance at this point to criticise the Korean political leaders for failing to preserve national independence and political sovereignty against the Japanese and demanded that Koreans rely on their own combat capability and spiritual solidarity to fight against the militarily superior Japanese in order to liberate the motherland.

Juche as Anti-Hegemonism developed in the aftermath of the Korean War (1950-1953) as the threat of the US loomed large on North Korea (Park 2004b: 136). Participating on behalf of South Korea under a United Nations Command during the Korean War, the US had not only pushed back North Korea's Korean People's Army but could have absorbed it entirely had the Chinese People's Volunteers not stepped into Pyongyang's aid (Seth 2010). Moreover, the US carried out extensive air bombings in the city of Pyongyang to the extent that all

major infrastructure that North Korea had inherited from the Japanese was razed to the ground. The American Air bombers claimed that “Pyongyang would not rise to its feet again for at least the next decade” (French 2014). After the ceasefire was declared, the US did not just conduct military exercises with South Korean troops but also stationed its troops in South Korea which North Korea has been opposing since the signing of the Panmunjom Declaration in 1953 (Park 2004b). American “imperialistic” and “hegemonic” military presence continues to be a major irritant for North Korea (Koga 2009). The late 1950s, specifically the August Faction Incident of 1958, highlights the use of Juche as anti-hegemonism in the domestic context when Kim il-Sung purged all rival factions including the pro-China Yen-an faction and the pro-Soviet faction to establish his own Kapsan faction as the supreme authority. Kim’s personality cult further ensured the continuation of his idea of prioritising developing heavy industries and the military simultaneously (Chung 2007: 61).

The 1960s presented another major challenge for North Korea on the international front. As ideological rift and territorial issues between the USSR and China widened post Stalin’s death and as the process of de-Stalinisation began in the Soviet Union under Nikita Khrushchev, North Korea found itself caught between the tussle and promoted the ideology of Juche as anti-hegemonism as the rationale behind its policy of equidistance from the power struggle between its two major allies. However, it tended to criticise the Soviet Union for its expansionist policies in both Eastern Europe and Vietnam. Though China’s Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) was not officially supported, North Korea appreciated China’s indigenisation of Marxism-Leninism which it found useful for its own domestic use by developing what came to be known as Kimilsungism. However, relations with China soon soured as the Chinese Communist Party criticised Kim il-Sung as a “revisionist” for promoting his personality cult (Wertz et al. 2016: 3).

Juche as Nationalism developed following the 1960s as the economy recovered from the ruins of the Korean War. Kim’s post-war reconstruction was advanced by the socialist economic mass reconstruction movement called the Chollima Movement (1953), named after a mythical horse which is believed to fly at the speed of 400 kilometres a day (Buzo 2007: 91) (French 2014: 111). Workers were encouraged to increase production by several folds because of which the targets of the First Five Year Plan (1957-1961) were reached within two and a half years (French 2014: 111; Person 2009: 54). Combined with centralised campaigns for public health and literacy, the North surpassed the South Korean economy till the 1970s

(Buzo 2007; 91; French 2014; 110). Nationalism was used to further enhance the legitimacy of the state. Kim il-Sung defined Juche as the true nationalism of North Koreans and contrasted North Korea's achievements with that of the Syngman Rhee and Park Chung Hee administrations which heavily relied on American capital. By the late 1960s and through the 1970s, the goals of Juche-oriented nationalism were refined from mere anti-foreignism towards non-socialist countries to the three-pronged goals of political sovereignty (*Chaju*), economic subsistence (*Charip*) and military self-defence (*Chawi*) (Ku and Woo 2018) (Waldenstrom 2005) (Park 2004b: 138).

Juche as Economic Self-Reliance or *Charip* developed through the 1970s and 1980s when Kim il-Sung's son, Kim Jong-il was declared as his heir at the Sixth Party Congress in 1980. It was the period of the *dependencia* movement in the Third World where the newly independent countries largely believed that full independence can only be realised with economic and cultural independence. However, its closed economy proved to be detrimental for North Korea's economic growth and as cracks began to appear in the Stalinist socialist economic model, economic stagnation stepped in and North Korea fell behind all its neighbours (Ku and Woo 2018) (Waldenstrom: 2005) (Park 2004b: 142). Juche as a Worldview developed post the 1980s and finds reference in Kim Jong-il's work, *On the Juche Idea* (1982) which is considered the most authoritative text on the philosophical nature of Juche. Kim writes:

“The philosophical principle of the Juche idea is the principle of man-centred philosophy which explains man's position and role in the world. The leader made it clear that man is a social being with Chajusong (independent spirit), creativity and consciousness. Man, though material existence, is not a simple material being. He is the most developed material being, a special product of the evolution of the material world.”

Thus, man is not just the most developed being but the master of the world who possesses the ability to change it. As per Juche, Nature exists to serve the needs of man and not vice versa. Kim writes that because of the inherent independent spirit, creativity (*Janguisong*) and consciousness (*Uisiksong*), no man deserves to be enslaved and hence, self-determination at individual, group and national levels should be the primary goals which must be achieved through ideological indoctrination. He also discredits the international division of labour as

the enslavement of nations as those who produce raw materials would endlessly continue to do so and would never develop at par with the industrial nations. With such an argument, Kim Jong-il did not just cement North Korea's economic idea of self-reliance but also discredited the phenomenal economic growth of Newly Industrialising Countries (NICs) and provided a critique of international capitalism (Woo: 2018) (Waldenstrom: 2005) (Park: 2004b, 144). The text *What is the view of Juche on the World* (2014) written by Kim Song Gwon under the reign of Kim Jong-un places Juche above Marxism-Leninism as an international thought and argues:

“For thousands of years, the different ideologies led the people to the fate under slaves' chains, feudal yokes and chains of capital. The rise of Marxism was a turning point. It closed the door of destined fate after smashing the chains of capital, but failed to open the door of true shaping of the destiny..It was the birth of the Juche idea that illuminates the road of shaping destiny independently, putting an end to the history of human destiny full of subjugation and distress.”

Thus, the idea of Juche defines the essence of the North Korean regime and acts as a window to its objectives, thought process and worldview. Propaganda is seen as one of the foremost pillars to build a credible image and reproduce the legitimacy of the WPK regime.

Propaganda in North Korea

Propaganda is defined as "the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions and direct behaviour to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist" (Jowell and O'Donnell 2012: 7).

Unlike the Western world, Propaganda is not understood as a pejorative term in Socialist countries. In his *Party Organisation and Party Literature* (1905), Lenin argued that the purpose of literature must be to further the cause of the Revolution (Lenin 1905: 44-9). Under Stalin, a new artistic and literary doctrine of political censorship developed which came to be known as Socialist Realism. Accepted as the compulsory practice by the Union of Soviet Writers in 1932, it was formulated as the official State policy in August 1934 at the First All Union Congress of Soviet Writers. Defined by Stalin as "Socialist in content, Nationalist in

form", Socialist Realism came to be defined as simple, instructive, easily comprehensible literary and art work which would not just further the Party's ideas but would also inspire the proletariat to achieve the envisioned Communist utopia by creating a "New Soviet Man", capable of carrying forward the revolution (Heller 1988, 27-8). Maksim Gorky (Gorky qtd. USSR: 1934) elaborated the "New Man" as the one who:

".. is conscious of being the builder of a new world, and although his conditions of life are still arduous, he knows that it is his arm and the purpose of his rational will to create different conditions and he has no grounds for pessimism."

This model was emulated by other Socialist countries including North Korea. The purpose of propaganda i.e., to further the idea of the revolution, as well as the Party-controlled structure of the propaganda organisation continues to bear heavy resemblance with the Soviet Union. Kim's ideas on Literature and Arts are found particularly in two of his speeches; *On the Tasks of the General Federation of the Unions of Literature and Arts* (1961) and *Let Us Further Develop Mass Art* (1961)³ (Kim 1961a: 33-42; 1961b: 43-50).

Kim perceived writers and artists as a "military contingent", who, through their large numbers and arduous struggle against the "Japanese, US imperialists and anti-Party factionalists", have acquired the prominent role of furthering social development. Highlighting the limitations of school education and political information, Kim recognised the importance of popular art and literature in "arming people with Communist ideals". Moreover, Kim emphasised on the application of Juche in order to promote and "preserve Korean cultural heritage" and drive out "sycophancy" of stooping to foreign ideals while ignoring one's national heritage (Kim 1961a: 37). A link with both Stalin and Mao emphasising on "nationalist form" can be seen. A link with Mao's idea of Mass Line can also be seen as Kim instructed professional artists to learn from the masses and produce "militant, Party-oriented, vigorous and realistic art which gives people joy, hope, strength and inspiration" (Kim 1961b: 44).

Following his father's footsteps, Kim Jong-il reaffirmed the mission of art as to craft a "heroic Juche man" in his *On the Art of the Cinema* (1973). He reaffirmed the need to use positive examples instead of characters critical of the regime as he believed North Korea to

³ Kim. *Collected Works*. Volume XV, 1961

have transcended class conflict (Kim 1973: 102). A contrast can be seen with Soviet and Chinese posters in which class enemies continued to be depicted.

The Humanics theory put forth in his work is a reaffirmation of Kim il-sung's belief in the Mass line approach. It emphasises on *Chajusong* or the Korean “independent spirit”, a metaphysical essence of human struggles against oppression (Kim 1973: 10). The other concept is the Seed theory which emphasises on Party ideals being the “seed” or basis of all creative arts (Kim 1973: 25). Such ideas justified and strengthened Party control.

Jowell and O'Donnell (2012: 314) lay down ten steps for the analysis of propaganda that include:

- The ideology and purpose of the propaganda campaign
- Context
- Identification of the propagandist
- Structure of the propaganda organisation
- Target audience
- Media utilisation techniques
- Special techniques to maximise effect
- Audience reaction to various techniques
- Counterpropaganda, if present
- Effects and evaluation

Focused on the State's use of propaganda to craft individual subjectivities, the scope of the study is deliberately restricted to the first seven steps of the analysis namely, The ideology and purpose of the propaganda campaign; Context; Identification of the propagandist; Structure of the propaganda organisation; Target audience; Media utilisation techniques and Special techniques to maximise effect.

In the case of North Korea, the foremost purpose of all forms of propaganda remains to reproduce the legitimacy of the Party-led State and the Leadership of the Kim family. The central ideology revolves around Juche, Kimilsungism, and Kimjongilism.

The propagandist is the Party-led State and propaganda appears in varying contexts, such as celebrating achievements, criticising adversaries, etc. Depending on the context, the target audience differs which includes both North Koreans and foreigners. The propaganda organisation in North Korea is entirely controlled by the Party-led State. Propaganda posters, for instance, are released by the Mansudae Art Studio, one of the largest art production studios in the world, which falls under the supervision of the Propaganda and Agitation Department of the WPK, North Korea's central propaganda machinery. The Department often acts through the Ministry of Culture, State Security Department and Ministry of Public Security. Efforts to promote the Party among the youth have been stepped up since Kim Jong-un came to power in 2011 (D' Ambrogio: 2016). Elaborating on the use of techniques, Katharina Zellweger argues that posters, based on socialist realism, show a consistency in style since the 1950s. They are brightly coloured and mostly hand-painted (Holland 2018).

Various forms of media are used to further State propaganda including television, songs, etc. In the past decades, the internet has been actively used as both a tool of propaganda and surveillance (Seliger and Schmidt 2014: 72). The 1990s resulted in major leaps in the development of intranet and internet networks in North Korea with the launch of internet cafés and the Operating System (OS), 'Red Star' which has its own search engine called 'Naenara BSS' (Seliger and Schmidt 2014: 75). Mobile phones were introduced in 2000. Initially restricted to the top elite, around 20,000 to 30,000 mobile phones were in use by 2004 (Seliger and Schmidt 2014: 75).

Since 2010, North Korea has extended its official online presence to social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube under the name of 'Uriminzok' or 'Our People'. These accounts, in addition to the official website Uriminzokiri, frequently share propaganda related to North Korea (BBC: 2016). Though Kim Jong-un, in his April 2012 speech *On Affecting a Drastic Turn in Land Management to Meet the Requirements for Building a Thriving Socialist Nation*, emphasised the importance of the internet for economic development (Seliger and Schmidt 2014: 77), connectivity remains limited (New York Times: 2014), with only 26% of the population having access to electricity (CIA: 2022). This study is solely concerned with propaganda posters. Posters can be very cheaply produced in large volumes and hence form a major tool of propaganda. Moreover, their ability to occupy personal and public spaces alike and accessibility by a wide audience irrespective of socioeconomic conditions enhances the outreach of the propagandist. Additionally, images

are known to have a unique psychological impact which is often used to form individual subjectivities and convey collective identities (Philippe 1980: 9; Ranta 2020: 6).

Lifeworld and Collective Identity

Edmund Husserl introduced the concept of 'Lifeworld' which he defines as a background which shapes consciousness (Husserl 1970: 142; Ranta 2020: 2; Sonesson 2016: 244). It is not an exclusively individual phenomenon but a latitude where intersubjective higher-order groupings such as family and nations are established, cemented together by common purposes, practices, communal memories, and shared stories which might be both real and fabricated (Ranta 2020: 2). Hence, individual consciousness gets conjoined with a "supra personal consciousness" (Ranta 2020: 2; Sonesson 2016: 244-45). It is built through joint projects, goals and purposes (Ranta 2020: 2). Moreover, Lifeworld is not a static concept as it changes form with the dynamism of historical forces (Husserl 1970: 108-09; Sonesson 2016: 244-47).

Lifeworld is constitutive of a "Homeworld" and an "Alienworld". Homeworld refers to a single community of subjects forming their common Lifeworld, a general framework of shared values or meanings, fixed by implicit intersubjective standards that determine what should be regarded 'normal' (Ranta 2020: 2; Sonesson 2016: 246-47). It is limited by an Alienworld which constitutes the system of values despised or considered undesirable, standing in contrast to the perceived standard of normality (Husserl 1970: 133-35; Ranta 2020: 2-3; Sonesson 2016: 246-47).

The Tartu School of Semiotics states that all societies craft their own Lifeworld where the distinction between the Homeworld and the Alienworld can be understood as the one between culture and non-culture, civilisational and barbarian, order and disorder, etc. (Sonesson 2016: 247). The Alienworld is not an exclusive entity and is formed in conjunction to the Homeworld, shaped through an asymmetric relationship between the two where the latter plays a dominant role (Ranta 2020: 3).

Pictures and pictorial storytelling play a major role in establishing and consolidating worldviews regarding the Lifeworld. Hence, Visual artworks have been actively used to

construct and reproduce narratives of collective beliefs and attitudes or “Us” against the portrayals of “the Other” or “Them”.

North Korea’s Homeworld

An analysis of North Korean propaganda posters based on the Homeworld concept reveals attempts of drawing on common strands to unify the populace and build a common identity. The posters have been categorised into depictions of class; the discourse on race; the relationship between the leadership, the party and the people as well as notions of a collective and the nation.

Custodians of the Revolution: Class

Like all socialist collectives, class forms the primary fixation in North Korea where it came to be defined through the *Songbun* system adopted by the Party Congress in 1957 (Worden 2014: 78). The classes were defined on a preferential basis as "Tomatoes" ie "Red from the outside and core"; "Apples" ie "red from the outside, white from the inside" and "Grapes", with not a single trace of redness. While the first were "worthy Communists" and the second "needed ideological training", the third were "hopeless" (Lankov 2013: 43; Hunter 1999: 4; Worden 2014: 79).

Unlike Mao and Stalin, Kim il-Sung recognised the importance of the educated intelligentsia in post-War reconstruction and hence, accorded them the status of a revolutionary class. The insignia of the WPK consists of a hammer (workers), a sickle (peasants) and a calligraphy brush (intelligentsia). However, these were not the Confucian literati of the Joseon era but a new educated class trained in Socialist education (Hunter 1999: 255). Like Stalinist USSR and Maoist China, the aim of the regime remained to vanish the distinction between mental and manual labour by political conversion of the intellectuals and intellectual upliftment of the rest of the population.

A unique feature of the DPRK is the prominence given to the military as a class. In his *Tasks for the Proletariat in Our Revolution* (1917), Lenin put forth the need to establish a people's militia with an ideological basis (Lenin 1917: 55-92). Being at the forefront of the anti-

Japanese guerrilla himself, Kim il-Sung reflected these ideas which were accepted as the "Four Military Lines" in the Fourth and Fifth Party Plenary Sessions in 1962, calling for the arming of the whole population, fortifying the state, educating the entire military to become party cadres and modernising the military. The focus on heavy industrialisation was for the dual purpose of strengthening the economy and the military (French 2014:109).

Several geopolitical considerations post the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 enhanced the importance of the military and self-defence. In 1995, Kim Jong-il declared *Songun* or "Military first" as an official state ideology. The policy justified the regime's heavy investment in defence at the cost of the civilian sectors (Vorontsov: 2006).

Figure 1 shows the three Revolutionary classes (peasant, worker, and intellectual) standing shoulder to shoulder linking arms while the soldier stands a step ahead (depicting "military first"). Interestingly, none of the posters found portrayed women as intellectuals.



Figure 1: "May comradeship be the eternal emblem of unity and victory for our revolution!", 2002
Source: University of California San Diego. North Korea Propaganda posters Library Digital Collections

Figure 2 depicts three soldiers, two men and a woman, standing in an offensive position holding high-tech rifles. The city in the background and the missiles in the sky show a high level of infrastructural and military development.



Figure 2: “Long live the great victory of the military-first politics!”, 1995

Source: University of California San Diego. North Korea Propaganda posters Library Digital Collections

In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, recent posters (Figure 3) depict masked healthcare workers, one testing a sample and the other holding some medical equipment, in addition to the rest. A soldier announces their advancement. While retaining the Songun philosophy in the official discourse, Kim Jong-un has made concerted efforts to minimise the economic clout enjoyed by the Military and allocate resources to civilian sectors (Mansourov: 2013).



Figure 3: “Let’s complete our battle goals this year”, 2020

Source: KCNA/NK News

The “Pure Child” Nation

Koreans on both sides of the border consider themselves as belonging to a common "Cleanest race". The idea dates to Shin Chaeho's 1908 book, *A New History of Korea*, where he claimed

all Koreans to be the descendants of Tangun, the God king of Korea's first Kingdom, Go Choson. Both Pyongyang, the location of the Go Choson and Mount Paektu, the birthplace of Tangun as per the 13th century text *Samguk Yusa*, fall in the North Korean territory, aiding it in claiming itself to be the true and legitimate leader of the Korean peninsula (Myers 2010: 22).

Across all patriarchal societies, Women and their sexuality are closely linked to the 'purity' of the community, North Korea being no exception. As Figure 4 shows, Women are often portrayed with innocent looks and warm smiles. The attire is abundantly white, associated with purity. Moreover, the traditional attire is not just a symbol of traditional notions of femininity and chastity but also a link with the past which North Korea claims to be closely associated with (Myers 2010: 77).



Figure 4: Flower Girl, 1991

Source: University of California San Diego. North Korea Propaganda posters Library Digital Collections

The 'purity' of the "Cleanest race" is also reflected in its innocence and childlike innate tendencies. Koreans are considered inherently virtuous and innocent, a characteristic which often makes them vulnerable to the 'cunning' of foreign powers (Myers 2010: 73).

North Koreans in the propaganda posters appear with a purely white, unblemished skin and cherubic appearances. While women are shown with rounded, plump faces, Men appear boyish with short cut hair, thick eyebrows and lips and no facial hair (Myers 2010: 24). Both Men and Women in modern attire appear with short cut military hairstyles as too much concern for one's looks is considered a bourgeois idea (Myers 2010: 71), as seen in Figures 5 and 6.



Figure 5: “Let’s Wash our Hands!”, 2020

Source: Naenara



Figure 6: “Working on Fridays is patriotic!”, 1998

Source: University of California San Diego. North Korea Propaganda posters Library Digital Collections

The Leader, the Party and the People

The cult of the leader, developed in the form of the *Suryong* System, strongly ties the North Koreans together. The system operates through the idolisation of the supreme leader and the hereditary succession of power within the Kim family. It has earned different descriptions from scholars: a blend of Totalitarianism and Confucianism (Oh and Hassig 2002:4); a dynastic model of Asian totalitarianism (Buzo 2007:6) and a monolithic state (McCormack 1981:59). The regime justifies the personality cult by using the racial discourse. Because the

"Child race" is so "vulnerable", they require a parent leader to protect and lead them (Myers 2010:6).

Young Chul Chung views the system as North Korea's unique reaction to carry forward the contradictory goals of remaining true to the socialist revolution while achieving high economic growth (Chung 2007:43). Social turbulence and disillusionment created after the deaths of Stalin in the Soviet Union and Mao in China as well as the ideological and economic course correction which ensued worried Kim about his own legacy. Hence, not only was his cult of personality raised to a supernatural pedestal but his careful choice of keeping the leadership within the family ensured the prevalence of his thought (Oberdorfer 2004:150-51) (Chung 2007:61).

Unlike the Soviet Union, where Stalin's image was masculinised as the "iron leader", the image of the Kims is portrayed as benevolent, motherly figures. They do not appear with any masculinist features such as facial hair but with a 'motherly calm'. Posters portray them as embracing and often crying with the populace. In Confucian societies, while the father is a figure of patriarchal authority, it is the mother who understands and comforts the child. Therefore, the leader becomes the caring mother as seen in Figure 7 (Myers 2010:23,100). Another Confucian ethos reflected in North Korea's political culture is the exclusivity of the title "Suryong" to Kim il-Sung (Hayes 2012:121).

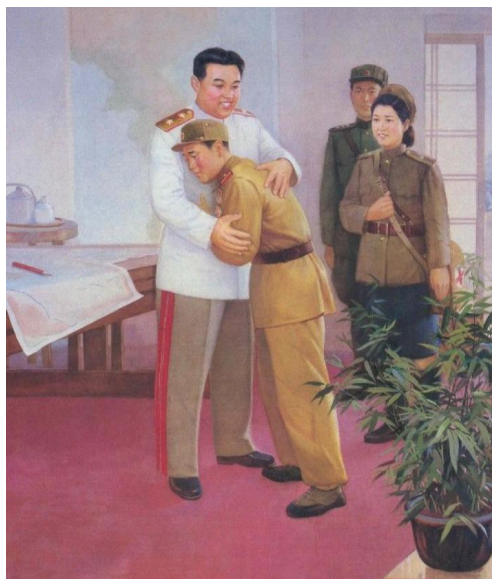


Figure 7: Kim il-Sung embracing a soldier as others look in awe

Source: Myers: 2010

Economic development followed the Chongsan ni system in agriculture and Taehan work system in industries where Kim il-Sung personally guided the peasants and workers on what and how much to produce. Like China during the Great Leap Forward (1958-1962), being "red" was considered more important than being an "expert" (Constitute Project 2021: 5; French 2014:52). Many posters like Figure 8 portrayed Kim il-Sung and Kim Jong-il mingling with the commoners and advising them. The blooming harvest points to the perceived agrarian utopia.



Figure 8: Kim il-Sung and Kim Jong-il inspecting fields

Source: NK News

Propaganda paintings and posters heavily draw from Korean tradition and folklore. Mount Paektu is regarded as the birthplace of Kim Jong-il in North Korean official history (Martin 2004:292) and forms the background in many of the Kims' paintings as depicted in Figures 9 and 10.



Figure 9: Kim il-Sung with Kim Jong-il at Mount Paektu

Source: Wikimedia Commons



Figure 10: Kim Jong-il depicted in front of Mount Paektu
Source: Wikimedia Commons

Figure 11 shows Kim Jong-il's ability to comfort an inconsolable crowd who mourn the death of his father, when suspicions were raised about his capacity to ensure the survival of the regime amidst the global fall of Communism. The grey sky and heavy rains point to it being a moment of turbulence for the nation. The Statue of the Suryong shows his posthumous eternal presence, also a traditional Korean concept.



Figure 11: Mourning Kim il-Sung's death, 1994
Source: Myers: 2010

The leader's image is often portrayed in the Sun as shown in Figure 12. This is a common feature between Soviet, Chinese and North Korean posters. The Sun is not just a symbol of eternity but also a guide. The poster depicts soldiers, an intellectual and a woman, armed with

the works of Kim il-Sung, looking towards his appearance in the Sun for guidance as flags of the DPRK and the WPK wave in the background.



Figure 12: Kim il-Sung in the Sun

Source: Wikimedia Commons

The Collective and the Nation

Collective socialist construction campaigns play a major role in crafting a sense of belongingness not just among the people but also between the people and the leader. On division in 1945, the DPRK was blessed with a fertile base for economic growth. It inherited 75% of the Peninsula's mines, 90% of its electricity generating capacity and 80% of its manufacturing industries (French 2014:110). Combined with centralised campaigns for public health and literacy, the North surpassed South during the 1950s and 1960s even after being reduced to rubble during the Korean War (1950-53) (Buzo 2007: 91; French 2014: 110). Kim's post-war reconstruction was advanced by the Chollima Movement (1953), named after a mythical horse which is said to fly at the speed of 400 kilometres a day (Buzo 2007: 91; French 2014: 111). The movement drew inspiration from the Soviet Stakhanovite movement as it was believed that if trained in the right ideology, humans could achieve anything without physical limitations restricting them. Workers were encouraged to produce more and the targets of the First Five-Year Plan (1957-1962) were reached within two and a half years (French 2014: 111; Person 2009: 54).

Figure 13 shows a model worker called Chollima Rider (French 2014: 111) flying high on a red Chollima encouraging the spectator to join the movement. A developed city with skyscrapers can be seen in the background.



Figure 13: “Burn passivity to Chollima!”, 1953
Source: NK News

As Figures 14 and 15 show, peasants were advised to expand and diversify production through various methods such as double cropping (French 2014: 177). Though production increased, the Chollima movement resulted in the problem of overproduction and abundant low-quality products lacking any export value (French 2014: 163-64).



Figure 14: “Achieve bigger harvest by double cropping according to each region’s conditions!”, 1998
Source: University of California San Diego. North Korea Propaganda posters Library Digital Collections



Figure 15: "Produce a rich harvest of sunflowers!", 1999

Source: University of California San Diego. North Korea Propaganda posters Library Digital Collections

Since then, the economy has severely faltered, more so after the decline of the USSR which left China as the only major trade partner. During the 1990s, the DPRK faced a massive food crisis as famine struck several parts of the country. The period came to be known as the "Arduous March" where people were advised to stay loyal to the nation and work harder to pull themselves and the Homeland out of the crisis (Buzo 2007:165; Martin 2004:860; Myers 2010:34). Sanctions imposed on the DPRK over its nuclear programme have also had a crippling effect on its purse. As foreign trade plummeted, a massive energy crisis ensued. Posters such as Figures 16 and 17 urged people to not only save water and electricity but to contribute from their meagre means for the Collective.

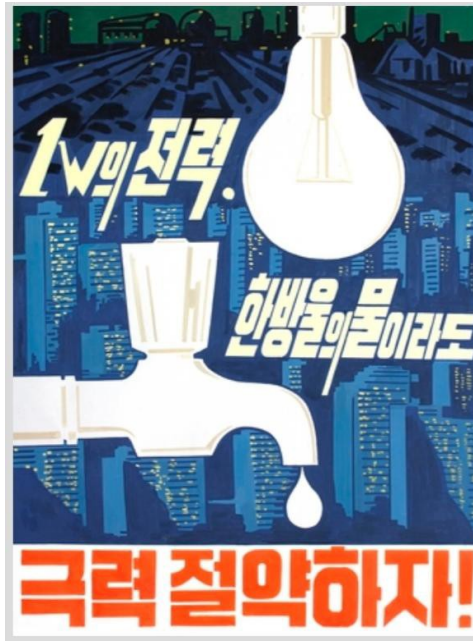


Figure 16: “Save every single drop of water, every single watt of power!”, 2001

Source: University of California San Diego. North Korea Propaganda posters Library Digital Collections



Figure 17: “Help increasing productivity by saving the things that will be needed!”, 2001

Source: University of California San Diego. North Korea Propaganda posters Library Digital Collections

A Joint Rapid Food Security Assessment of the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and the World Food Programme released in May 2019 noted that an estimated 10.1 million people i.e. 40% of the North Korean population was food insecure and in urgent need of food assistance (FAO and WFP 2019:4). However, propaganda posters remain far from reality. As Figure 18 shows, peasants are still encouraged to produce more as glimpses of utopic cornucopia reveal that depict content peasants holding sheaves of grain. As per a 2020 report

by the NK News, Tatiana Gabroussenko writes that potatoes are increasingly replacing rice in North Korean propaganda iconography which might be a sign of a worsening food crisis. Potato production was encouraged by Kim Jong-il during the late 1990s to replace rice as North Korea battled the “Arduous March” (Oh and Hassig 2009:79).

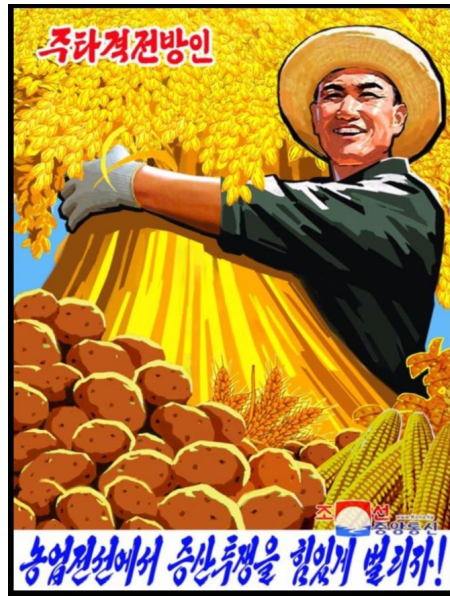


Figure 18: “Let’s speed up the struggle to increase production on the agricultural front!”, 2019
Source: KCNA

Figure 19 shows that the focus of Kim Jong-un's regime is on attracting the youth to join productive forces in various ways: as planners, workers, scientists and musicians.



Figure 19: “Let the young people become pioneers of new technology, creators of new culture and pathfinders for a great leap forward!”, 2019
Source: KCNA

Being aware of the limitations in heavy industrial development, the regime now emphasises producing good quality lightweight consumer goods. In Figure 20, a female worker can be seen surrounded by good quality consumer goods, despised in the early days as a symbol of bourgeois individualism.



Figure 20: “Let us produce and supply various kinds of consumer goods that are favoured by the people in the sector of light industry!”, 2019

Source: KCNA

A characteristic feature of the North Korean Communist Movement since the very beginning was its anti-colonial and nationalist character. Unlike Lenin, Kim il-Sung was a staunch nationalist and his struggle against the Japanese forces and then the looming terror of a possible US invasion made nationalism a central policy. Post his death, Kim Jong-il faced a turbulent time where not just the cracks in the socialist model began to appear as the economy stagnated but there were also wide speculations that North Korea would not survive the elder Kim's death. On the international front, the events post the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Tiananmen Square Movement in China in 1989, as well as the fall of the USSR in 1991, questioned the legitimacy of Communism as a state ideology. In order to shield Pyongyang from such uncertainties, Kim Jong-il resorted to ultranationalism to bind the population (Park 2004a:200), which continued under Kim Jong-un as the economy further worsened. In Figure 21, a North Korean soldier holds the national flag, he is followed by the revolutionary classes (a peasant woman with a sheaf of grain, a worker, an intellectual holding scrolls of development plans and an athlete with a trophy). The bright red crowd stands on a red globe pointing to ambitions and perceived capacity of global dominance.



Figure 21: “Provide a strong line of defence for the Republic’s honour and sovereignty!”, 1991
 Source: University of California San Diego. North Korea Propaganda posters Library Digital Collections

North Korea’s Alienworld

North Korea has often been described as a unique case of "solipsism", a nation state too indulged in itself to consider and acknowledge the experiences and achievements of other states (Cumings 2004: ix; Myers 2010:61), However, as noted, the Alienworld plays an active role in reproducing the glue which binds and often strengthens the Homeworld. The Alienworld comprises two segments: the ones considered “good” and "equals" i.e. Alter and the other “evil” and “inferior” i.e. Alius (Sonesson 2016: 246-47).

The Good Alienworld

Socialist countries dominate the rhetoric of the "Good" Alienworld. Figure 22 celebrates the Cuban Revolutionary leader Che Guevara. Three children of different nationalities, from the Young Pioneers (as indicated by the Red scarves), look towards his portrait, eyes up, drawing inspiration. A boy of Korean descent stands at the front, holding flowers. The depiction of Children shows the intention to continue the unity as children are associated with future generations. Koreans are mostly seen at the front, closest to the frame, and portrayed as leading others (Myers: 2010).



Figure 22: “Che Guevara International Freedom Fighter, will be remembered forever!”, 2000

Source: University of California San Diego. North Korea Propaganda posters Library Digital Collections

Even though countries like Cuba and Laos are described as "friendly", they are portrayed as subordinate to the DPRK and are portrayed to be learning from it (Myers: 2010). In these representations, the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China are the only foreign countries which are not considered subordinate to North Korea. Pyongyang is not just thankful to the Soviet Union and Beijing for aid but also for helping it during the Korean War. China and Russia continue to provide diplomatic support to North Korea against sanctions to curb its nuclear programme. Figure 23 shows a stamp released by North Korea on the 60th anniversary of the arrival of Chinese troops in Korea during the Korean war. It portrays an elderly Korean woman dressed in traditional attire holding a young Chinese soldier in a filial embrace. Behind them, Chinese soldiers can be seen tending to Korean children as China's flag waves.



Figure 23: 60th anniversary of the arrival of Chinese troops in Korea during the Korean war (1950-53)

Source: Nautilus Institute

The 'Evil' Alienworld

Released at a time when North Korea sought a greater international role in terms of cleansing its image tarnished by records of human rights violations and the nuclear programme, Figure 24 calls for action against sexual harassment of women. Three women of African, Caucasian and Korean races can be seen stopping and jolting away two men dressed in military uniforms, symbolic of cases of marital rape, many of which have been recorded in the Korean peninsula itself against Japanese and American soldiers. The globe at the back gives a sense of international solidarity. The Korean woman, dressed in traditional attire, stands closest to the viewer, leading the way.



Figure 24: "Put an end to sexual violence in the 21st century!", 2000

Source: University of California San Diego. North Korea Propaganda posters Library Digital Collections

Unlike Communist China and the Soviet Union, the North Korean posters do not depict the Class enemies following both the emphasis that Class conflict has been resolved and the policy of portraying only positive examples (Kim 1961b:44) (Kim 1973:100-2). Underlying this idea is the fear to avoid the notion of the presence of any voice critical to the regime which is altogether erased. Instead of searching for enemies within, the regime seeks "the Other" in the historical landscape. Two nations, the US and Japan, feature as the main adversaries. Memories, both real and fabricated, play a major role in building and dividing group solidarities. Most posters concerning Japan and the US call North Koreans to remember the atrocities committed on them by the two imperial powers.

Figure 25 depicts two North Korean children holding their fists in a vowing fashion. The Red background is a common feature of all Communist propaganda posters, red being the colour

of revolution, associated with change. The background depicts crimes committed by the Japanese colonisers on children. Crimes committed by adversaries against children are widely used in North Korean propaganda posters. Children form the most cherished section of all societies for they are associated with the future existence of the nation. In Socialist countries, Children are additionally viewed as the future of the revolution, making crimes against them a lot more heinous.



Figure 25: Anti-Japanese Poster

Source: Eric Lafforgue/ Flickr (In Public Domain)

The slump in Japan's political significance after its defeat in the Second World War and the direct conflict created between North Korea and the US of America since the Korean War has made Washington Pyongyang's principal adversary. A highly aggressive form of anti-American propaganda is used to strengthen regime legitimacy (Myers 2010:127). Figure 26 evokes the bitter memories of exploitation by the Americans during the Korean War. An American soldier smiles as he is about to throw a Korean child in a well. His mother, dressed in traditional attire, leaps ahead in grief but is held back by another American soldier. Pieces of white cloth hang indicating some other Koreans were pushed inside the well.



Figure 26: “Never forget the US imperialists, those wolves!”, 2000

Source: University of California San Diego. North Korea Propaganda posters Library Digital Collections

Figure 27 shows the reflection of an American soldier trying to grab and harm the person. The letters "COCOPA" refer to the US Warship USS Cocopa stationed on the Korean shore in 1953. The poster calls North Koreans to "never forget until death" the atrocities committed by the American troops during the Korean War. The proximity of the figure to the eye shows that the US threat continues to prevail and is not yet a thing of the past.



Figure 27: “We never forget until we die!”, 2000

Source: University of California San Diego. North Korea Propaganda posters Library Digital Collections

Figure 28 shows three hands crushing down a White American soldier lying under an American nuclear missile. It portrays the US as the main aggressor of a nuclear war.



Figure 28: “Crush US attempts to provoke a nuclear war!”, 1997

Source: University of California San Diego. North Korea Propaganda posters Library Digital Collections

Figure 29 shows a blue-eyed American officer of the Military Police (signified by the letters "MP"). The soldier holds a knife in an attacking position and with his claw-like hands, hides behind an olive branch. Olive branch signifies an offer for peace. This poster cautions North Koreans to not take US rhetoric of peace at face value and beware of its dubious motives.



Figure 29: “Don’t be fooled by US deceptions!”,2002

Source: University of California San Diego. North Korea Propaganda posters Library Digital Collections

Figure 30 portrays an aggressive looking North Korean soldier with a rifle, punching his fist on the map of the US to affirm that North Korea intends to do what it says. His punch sends shockwaves across the map indicating the severe repercussions which the US might invite if Pyongyang's word is taken lightly.



Figure 30: “We do what we say, we do not talk idle!”, 2008

Source: University of California San Diego. North Korea Propaganda posters Library Digital Collections

Many posters portray the US being attacked by North Korean nuclear missiles, almost always red in colour. Such posters intend to reflect the nuclear capabilities of the North Korean regime. Symbols of state legitimacy are specifically attacked. Figure 31 shows the accuracy of the North Korean missiles, one of which is about to hit the US.



Figure 31: “We will blast the US from the face of the Earth!”, 2008

Source: University of California San Diego. North Korea Propaganda posters Library Digital Collections

Figure 32 shows a nuclear missile labelled “Korea” completely destroying the Statue of Liberty, a gift from France marking the success of the American Revolution and a significant symbol of the US regime's legitimacy.



Figure 32: “Touch us, you will get it!”, 2008

Source: University of California San Diego. North Korea Propaganda posters Library Digital Collections

Similarly, Figure 33 shows several red nuclear missiles razing down the US Congress, the symbol of liberal democratic order.



Figure 33: “When provoking a war of aggression, we will hit back, beginning with the US!”, 2008

Source: University of California San Diego. North Korea Propaganda posters Library Digital Collections

Figure 34 shows four children dressed as a fighter pilot, an army officer, a navy officer, and a medical worker attacking an American soldier and his Japanese accomplice along with two smaller accomplices. The figure of the American soldier is bigger than the rest and is shown shielding them pointing to a US-led alliance. Children attacking adversaries are a common feature between Communist posters of North Korea, China, and the USSR.



Figure 34: "Drive out the Americans! Let's Reunify the Country!"

Source: Daily Mail, UK

South Korea

South Korea stands between "the Good" and "the Evil" as while North Korea shares a racial affinity with the South on the one hand, it sternly despises its Liberal Democratic-Capitalist system on the other. Pyongyang has also officially espoused destabilising the South Korean regime by supporting Communist uprisings (Kim 1961: 211).

In many propaganda posters, Reunification features as the main theme. Figure 35 shows two Korean children, the boy from the South and the Girl (with the red collar) from the North affirming to "pass on a unified Korea". The children with equally round faces do not just depict how much the two Koreas care about their future generations but also that the North does not lag behind the South in terms of childcare. The Peninsula in the background is covered in what appears to be *Magnolia sieboldii* flowers, the National flower of the DPRK.

The pink flowers in the background look like *Kimilsungia* flowers, depicting the underlying intention to reunify the peninsula with North Korea gaining the upper hand.



Figure 35: “I will hand over a unified country to the posterity!”

Source: Wikimedia Commons

Figure 36 shows the Korean peninsula covered in what appears to be the flower *Kimjongilia*. Contrary to the previous poster, two leaves mark the border separating the two nations. It can be said that while the leaves show the subtle awareness of the North Korean regime of its limitations in terms of a decisive resolution of the issue, the blossoming of *Kimjongilia* shows the underlying hope to absorb the South.



Figure 36: “Reunification flower *Kimjongilia* is in full bloom!”, 2001

Source: University of California San Diego. North Korea Propaganda posters Library Digital Collections

Figure 37 calls for a peaceful resolution to the Reunification issue with two equally modern Koreans (one from the South and the other from the North) upholding a copy of the 27 April, 2018 Panmunjom Declaration in front of a unified Korean flag, pointing to the meet between Kim Jong-un and South Korean President Moon Jae-in.



Figure 37: “Let’s build a prosperous unification power!”, 2018

Source: DPRK Today

Deforestation is a major issue in North Korea as it is linked to the often-occurring natural calamities which cause immense economic losses to the regime every year. Reforestation is often cited as a major area of cooperation between the two Koreas. Figure 38 depicts a tree in the form of the peninsula as several jovial children dance in front. The white birds symbolise peace. The world map in the background shows the international significance of a peaceful resolution to the issue.



Figure 38: “A permanent and peaceful regime on the Korean Peninsula”, 2018
Source: DPRK Today

Released in 2002, at a time when North and South Korea commenced their first-ever peace talks under South Korean President Kim Dae Jung's Sunshine Policy, Figure 39 seeks to raise a voice against the sexual exploitation of South Korean women. It shows a woman in torn clothes inching closer to the wall behind her, showing she has no escape left. The shadow in the background appears to be of an American military officer, who has been accused of sexual exploitation of Korean women, which remains a raging political issue in South Korea.



Figure 39: “We denounce the violent crimes against South Korean women committed by US soldiers!”, 2000
Source: University of California San Diego. North Korea Propaganda posters Library Digital Collections

Several posters portray the US as a roadblock to Korean reunification and North Korea's stern response to it. Figure 40 shows two arms forcing down and joining a track, a symbol of connectivity between North and South as three White American figures who are resisting the

act get crushed. Broken barbed wires at the back show the breaking down of shackles restricting unification.



Figure 40: “Help reunify the country by adding strength to the patriotic forces in the North!”, 1991
Source: University of California San Diego. North Korea Propaganda posters Library Digital Collections

The presence of American troops in South Korea has been another bone of contention between North Korea and the US with Pyongyang demanding the US forces to withdraw, often protesting with nuclear tests when the demand is not met. Figure 41 shows two American soldiers being pushed out of the Korean peninsula and thrown into the sea.



Figure 41: “Let’s wipe out the US imperialist invaders forever!”, 2000
Source: University of California San Diego. North Korea Propaganda posters Library Digital Collections

Figure 42, similarly, shows a metal hammer labelled "National Independence" stamping out American soldiers from South Korea and breaking down chains with which they had tied the Peninsula.



Figure 42: “Let’s establish National dignity and sovereignty!”, 2021

Source: DPRK Today

Apart from revealing how the North Korean State creates an "Us" vs "Them" identity through visual propaganda so as to reproduce its regime legitimacy; an analysis of propaganda posters also reveals the basic characteristics of North Korean Communism.

Communism, Pyongyang Style

North Korean Communism can be understood as an amalgamation of North Korea’s unique historical experiences and Soviet and Chinese models of Communism. The monolithic ideological system, centralised economic control, concentration of personal power, suppression of oligarchical power sharing and political culture of terror to suppress dissent are distinctively Stalinist in nature (Cheong 2000:138-39). The independent nationalist form of leadership professed by North Korean leadership is strikingly drawn from Mao which inspired the North to pursue an ideological line independent of the post-Stalin Soviet Union (Cheong 2000: 144-46; French 2014: 52-3). However, certain features make it starkly unique. While Mao bitterly despised and suspected the intellectuals, Kim realised their importance and even co-opted them as a revolutionary class. Unlike Mao, Kim did not see intellectuals as a monolithic 'traitor' class but as heterogeneous elements which could be co-

opted. The Kims also accepted an end to class conflict which spared them much of the chaos that defined Mao's period. The personality cult of the leader, to the extent of metaphysics and spirituality, is a unique feature rooted in Korean pre-Confucian and Joseon Confucian traditions. It also draws from Imperial Japanese state ideology where Mount Paektu replaced Mount Fuji and the divinity of the Kims that of the Japanese Emperor (Cumings 2004:158; Cheong 2000: 157; Myers 2010: 22). Two features deserve more attention. The narrative of the "Pure Child" nation falls in sharp contrast to Marxism-Leninism which forced individuals to shake off their ignorance and employ intellect over instincts (Myers 2010: 72). The heavy emphasis on self-determination and self-sufficiency also contradicts Leninism which professes an international alliance of the working class. North Korean Communism thus appears to be a blend of traditionalism, Chinese communism, Soviet Communism, Marxism-Leninism and nationalism, reflective of the country and its leaders' unique experiences and perceptions.

Conclusion

The political system whose obituary was written since its very inception by Western and non-Western analysts continues to survive. As noted, an efficient and intensified use of visual propaganda, particularly posters, plays a major role through which the regime creates a feeling of belongingness among the people on the one hand and identifies the threats for them on the other, which they are instructed to despise and avert. It is by coursing through this "Us" versus "Them" narrative that the DPRK regime continues to survive. The posters do not just reveal how the regime perceives itself, how it wants to be seen by its people and foreigners, its goals, its fears but also its underlying ambitions which become crucial to understand in order to deal with it and ensure a peaceful world.

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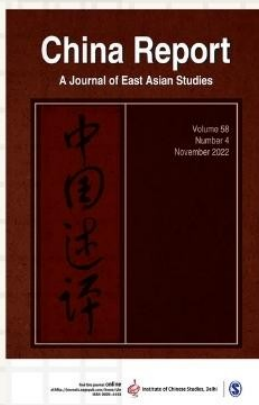


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