

# Changes to the State-Society Relationship in North Korea under Kim Jong-il

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## **I. Preliminaries: state and society**

In the analysis of the 'socialist' countries, conceptualising the relationship between state and society has raised a number of problems. The most significant has been ascribing a meaning to 'society' through which the social system can be described and analysed sufficiently apart from and distinct from the machinery of the state as to be meaningful. If society has no readily observable system of organisation or independent sources of movement and change beyond that which is provided by the state, an account of the state-society relationship becomes simply an account of the state and its dynamics.

In the Soviet Union under Stalin, and in China during the high tide of Maoist dominance, this latter was often the case. The cult of the leader and the program associated with his ideology gave substance to most major social phenomena; in addition, few independent accounts were available of popular beliefs and practices. In the post-Stalin Soviet Union, and in China immediately prior to the Cultural Revolution, the emergence of interest groups pluralised the power structure sufficiently so that some social groups could form or reemerge. In the Gorbachev era in Russia, and in China post-1978, it became possible to consider aspects of society including cultural and regional phenomena without preliminary reference to the state. At the same time,

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independent observers both from within the society and from without began to conduct social analysis without beginning from the ideology and policies of the state.

In the North Korean case the political system is still controlled by the original founder of the regime. Challenges to that system — the Sino-Soviet split and then the Sino-American rapprochement — were manipulated by Kim Il-sung and his clique both to tighten social controls and to adapt orthodox Marxist-Leninist ideology to the idiosyncracies of Korean political practice. However, the rise to power of a new generation of political leaders and changes within the political and economic systems have raised again the question of whether and how state-society relations can be conceptualised in North Korea.

In the former Soviet Union and in Eastern Europe, Marxist systems were imposed upon societies which had, to some degree, experience of the existence of self-referencing and autonomous social groups and corporations. If the watchwords of civil society are autonomy, self-regulation, and the satisfaction of immediate needs, can North Korea call upon any historical experience of or cultural affinity with such an understanding of society?

## **II. 'Civil Society' in North Korea**

The analysis of state-society relations in North Korea raises a number of conceptual issues, especially concerning political culture. For society to act with some autonomy in isolation from or against the operations of the state, it is necessary to be able to conceive of it as having 'civil' characteristics. The obstacles to the emergence of a genuinely civil society in North Korea are more than merely those posed by the existence of a socialist government. The understanding of these obstacles requires some comparative and historical references to the East Asian tradition and to developments in the twentieth century in China (because it partakes of that tradition as well as sharing North Korea's

socialist structure) and in the other half of Korea (for long ruled by a government with authoritarian characteristics). These steps in the argument are necessary since, first of all, Confucianism is the historical foundation for Korean political culture. Secondly, comparative study — of communist China and of South Korea — is required in order to illustrate the potentialities in the North Korean situation, and also given that there can be little direct and objective study of contemporary North Korean society.

Regarding the East Asian tradition, at least in the Confucian mainstream it is difficult to distinguish political from other forms of authority. The state is the family writ large. Morals and politics being indistinguishable, the state may intervene in any affairs in which less than exemplary standards are followed. The idea of 'limited government', with its corollary, the idea of a self-regulating and self-referencing social sphere, is absent. To the extent that the Korean political culture still retains some Confucian features, these are not an encouragement to the formation of civil society. Neither, it can be added, did Korea's experience as a colony of Japan. Between 1910 and 1945 the Korean population became accustomed to rule which was both authoritarian and dedicated to achieving rapid social transformation.

In the case of China, the period following the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911 provides some evidence for the view that the appropriate conditions might have permitted the emergence of a civil sphere in China. Between 1911 and 1927 historians have amassed good evidence of the existence of such a sphere in the most modernised regions of the country: Beijing, Shanghai, and the lower Yangzi area (Rowe, 1990: 309-29). Kuomintang rule after 1927, however, successfully imposed corporatist controls in those areas which the Chiang Kai-shek regime effectively ruled. The coming to power of the communists in 1949 empowered a political leadership even more hostile towards an autonomous social sphere, and by 1957 all remnants of independent business, professional, and local social

organisations had disappeared (Strand, 1990: 1-19). In the 1980s at least part of the substance of the Tiananmen protest movement was provided by newly organised labour and student groups which some commentators have regarded as signifying the reemergence of Chinese civil society (Sullivan, 1990: 125-43). This interpretation is, however, disputed by other scholars, who have emphasised the lack of any mass base for the Tiananmen demonstrators and critics of 1989, and the elitist program of reform which many articulated (Pye, 1990: 162-79). The point of relevance to North Korea is that it has taken China, with its comparable inheritance of political culture and institutions, ten year of thoroughgoing economic and social change, to generate even some of the elements of an independent social sphere. In particular, the experience of China underlines the impact of international media, international travel, and the penetration of domestic markets by international commodities upon at least the population of the cities and the coast. In the absence of parallel changes, North Korean society is unlikely to reflect such developments.

Finally, considering the relationship between politics and society in South Korea, the long domination between 1961 and 1987 of authoritarian political structures effectively prevented the articulation of autonomous social interests. Mass citizen activity played an important part in the transitional politics of that year, but it was unfocussed and soon subsided when the constitution was democratised. From 1987 there has been a general loosening of corporatist controls especially over labour, and the emergence of a genuinely free press has stimulated new forms of political and social action. It has only been in very recent times, however, that social movements quite independent of organised sectional interests have become established. The Korea Anti-Pollution Movement Association and the Citizens' Coalition for Economic Justice are emblematic of this trend. With only a few thousand members and mostly based in Seoul they are still yet only marginal actors (Lee, 1993: 351-

67). The point of this comparison is that even under relatively favourable conditions it has taken some time for 'society' in the South to take on some 'civil' characteristics.

In all, neither historical nor comparative perspectives provide much basis for any expectation that an autonomous social sphere could develop in North Korea. In the right circumstances such a sphere could well emerge, but nothing less than the erosion of many of the present political controls would be sufficient. Again, comparative evidence suggests that this is only likely as part of or caused by significant economic reform accompanied by a degree of opening of the country to outside influences.

The question of a North Korean 'civil society' is relevant to any consideration of the ways in which the North Korean system might evolve under conditions of reform. The revival of civil society in Poland and Hungary, and the organisation of a civic movement in East Germany, were instrumental in the transition from socialism in those places. Experiencing a loss of legitimacy, and deprived of their foreign sponsor, the communist movements in those states ultimately stepped aside to allow these civic groups into the political mainstream. By the same token, the absence of such groups in Rumania allowed a renamed communist movement to retain power. So far, the comparative and historical perspective suggests that even if state-society relations under Kim Jong-il loosen further to allow some social autonomy to develop, a civic consciousness will not make a rapid appearance.

### **III. The Kim Jong-il style**

At this point it is necessary to turn to a consideration of the Kim Jong-il state. Kim Il-sung's decision to put into effect his plan to promote Kim Jong-il as his successor was evidently made in 1973. At first only the upper echelons of the party were informed — *hanges afoot* being attributed to an otherwise unidentified 'Party Centre' — (Clippinger, 1981:

289-309; Lee, 1982: 434-48; Suh, 1983: 43-64), but by 1980 this plan was openly affirmed as an ingenious solution to the problem of political succession. From the mid-1970s North Korean political practice took on many distinctive features which have been associated with the rise of Kim Jong-il and his clique. These will be reviewed to provide a sketch of the younger Kim's political style and its impact upon the state.

Part of Kim Jong-il's claim to be an appropriate successor to his father derives from his contribution to North Korean ideology. Here Kim Il-sung had already assumed the role of the Koreaniser of Marxism-Leninism, introducing the concept of *Juche* (self-determination or self-sufficiency) as a way of focussing attention upon the Korean rather than foreign revolutions. This strategy also had a political rationale, since it undermined the claims of those other and competing factions in the Korean Workers' Party (KWP) which had once enjoyed Soviet and Chinese patronage.

In the ideological field, Kim Jong-il's room for maneuver was small, since he had to develop an original argument while neither disagreeing with any of his father's pronouncements nor representing them as a less than adequate view of reality. He solved this problem (perhaps the only problem he has ever solved) by arguing that his father had been misunderstood, *Juche* being more than a matter of political practice but a whole philosophy and world view (Kim Jong-il, 1985: 7-13). Whatever the logical status of these claims, they allowed the younger Kim to claim preeminent ideological authority, an authority which he seems to have wielded since 1974 (Kim Jong-il, 1989a: 1).

While claims to ideological authority have previously figured in the rise to power of other leaders in other socialist systems, the content of the younger Kim's ideological writings, when taken together with other aspects of the present North Korean system, provide us with important clues as to what might be described as the Kim Jong-il style.

Kim Jong-il is clearly a Marxist of the 'voluntarist' school, believing like the later Mao Zedong in the efficacy of will and

exhortation as opposed to 'objective' circumstances in the construction of socialism. "People's qualities are determined by their ideological consciousness, which plays a decisive role in all their activities" (Kim Jong-il, 1991: 29). The masses must be motivated by ideological appeals, either directly or through the use of literature, art, media, or popular culture. Kim Jong-il's fascination with cinema, the theatre and music, and his role as patron of the arts have much to do with these political beliefs. In North Korea Kim Jong-il is rarely seen, and what work if any he performs is unknown. The only area of life where he has been visible is in the sponsoring and production of motion pictures. Amongst his writings (now being published extensively in North Korea) works on literature and art are by far the largest category. A book-length text, *On the Art of the Cinema* (Kim Jong-il, 1989b), has also appeared under his name.

North Korean propaganda since the 1970s has tirelessly expounded the view that with the right attitude the popular masses can make up for any lack of materials and technology and achieve any aim they wish. This claim, of course, should be understood in its full political context. Since for some time North Korea's slowing economy has made most official targets unachievable, this provides a convenient stick with which to beat almost any individual or group. It also acts as a check on complaints of material shortage or the lack of appropriate tools or instruments: who would draw attention to any of these things given that, according to the regime, none are really necessary for the attainment of socialism?

Right attitude is also apparently a matter of unity. In inculcating the necessary revolutionary consciousness, Kim Jong-il repeatedly stresses the need for unity.

Equipping all the members of society with one revolutionary idea and achieving ideological unity on this basis is the essential demand of socialist society and the most important task for the successful building of socialism (Kim Jong-il, 1992: 19).

And unity is ultimately a matter of following the leadership. The theme which is perhaps repeated more often than any other in North Korean propaganda is the theme of leadership. The masses are nothing without the leader, and with the correct leader no obstacle cannot be surmounted. One of the greatest weaknesses of 'socialist' systems has been their general failure to make adequate provision for the succession of leadership. North Korea has 'solved' this problem by instituting succession within the Kim clan so that the revolution can be carried forward 'generation after generation'.

With unity and leadership, on Kim Jong-il's view, comes the creation of a social and political structure — the sphere of 'socio-political life'— which completely subsumes the individual.

Both man's physical life and his socio-political integrity are precious. A sound physical life helps in one's socio-political activities. But socio-political integrity is more valuable for a man, a social being. It is only when people form a social organism and acquire socio-political integrity that they can shape their destiny independently and live like men, as the masters of the world and of their own destiny. A man's physical life is mortal, but his socio-political integrity as part of the social organism is immortal (Kim Jong-il, 1988: 10-11).

Although Marxist states have all frowned upon individuality as bourgeois and divisive, there can be few more uncompromising rejections of it in the name of the collective. The irony of this position, of course, is that at the same time the individuality and caprice of the leaders is given full play.

#### **IV. The logic of succession and the Kim Jong-il state**

There is more, however, to North Korea's politics of succession than creating mechanisms to ease Kim Jong-il into the leadership. From 1973, the Kim family cult, already firmly entrenched in the official political culture, took on an

additional aspect with the publicising of the revolutionary activities of Kim Jong-suk, Kim Il-sung's first wife and the mother of Kim Jong-il. From that time the need to ensure the successful continuation of the revolutionary program 'generation after generation' became a major theme in North Korean ideological writings. Here it is important to grasp that the rationale for this development was not only to provide a basis for the political succession of Kim Jong-il himself. It was also to entrench power in the hands of the younger generation of the Kim clan, as well of the descendants of Kim Il-sung's original revolutionary band and closest associates.

The most recent full congress of the Korean Workers' Party was the sixth, held in October 1980. At that time, Kim Jong-il, although not previously in the Central Committee, joined the Political Bureau (and its Standing Committee, then consisting of five members) and a rationale was presented for the political succession. As the revolution would take more than one generation to complete, the leadership would have to be handed on to one from the new generation, personally instructed and moulded by the leader and completely loyal to his precepts (Kim, 1981: 112-13). Who better suited for this role could there be than the leader's son? With his usual modesty Kim Il-sung was able to say in his address to the congress that the question of succession which is "the fundamental question decisive to the destiny of the Party and the revolution has been solved splendidly in our country" (Kim Il-sung, 1970: 449).<sup>(1)</sup> Needing no further cue, contributors to the proceedings of the congress lauded this organisational innovation as a discovery of epoch-making proportions:

Whether the wise leadership of a leader is available is a basic question determining the ultimate destiny of a revolution. Nevertheless, ... no one had ever dared to put forward the question in the achievement of the socialist and communist cause. The

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(1) Subsequently this statement was amplified in a lecture to party workers: Kim Il-sung (1986: 103-104).

experience of history shows that when the inheritance of the revolution is not guaranteed, the Party may degenerate. ... This important question of the role of the leader and the inheritance of the leadership in carrying out the cause of the working class, was brilliantly solved for the first time in history only by the great leader Comrade Kim Il-sung, who fully understood the long-standing yearning of the people to be led by an outstanding leader in unprecedentedly difficult circumstances and who led our revolution along the single road to victory regardless of difficulties. The great leader Comrade Kim Il-sung, basing himself on a comprehensive analysis and understanding of the experience and lessons of the international communist movement, put forward a unique theory and method for the inheritance of the revolution, which would provide a dependable guarantee for our people to ensure wise leadership from generation to generation (Hwang, 1980).

Once the solution to the succession question was made a matter of public knowledge, the regime began to create a cult around the achievements and lineage of the younger Kim in much the same way (though with much less to work on) as had been done for his father (Koh, 1983: 25-41). A multi-volume biography and numerous shorter pieces appeared on the subject of the 'dear comrade leader', and within four years of the party congress no fewer than three books (one running to two volumes) had been published on the life and exploits of Kim Jong-il's mother.

Of even greater significance was the appearance of ideological material critical of the shortcomings of older cadres and laudatory of the role of youth. This argument can be traced back to the emergence of the 'three revolution work teams' of young cadres and intellectuals who, between 1973 and 1975, were sent to units and collectives across the country to provide 'guidance' in the ideological, technical, and cultural revolutions. Success in the 'three revolutions' was deemed necessary lest the revolution lose impetus, but with hindsight it can now be seen that this was a stratagem to undermine possible opposition to the political succession. Thus it has recently been asserted, in a manner reminiscent

of Marx's view of the historical mission of the proletariat, that the youth in North Korea are the 'vanguard' force in the construction of the new society. Whereas age brings 'passivity and conservatism', youth is the time when people have ideals and energy, though of course young people need the discipline of correct leadership (Kumsong Youth Publishing Company, 1984: 3).

There is a clear parallel here with some of the criticisms offered of the Chinese Communist Party by the 'Gang of Four' whose spokesman Zhang Chunqiao claimed in 1975 that there were party members who had been left behind by the revolution and who were so blinded by their power and privileges that they could not see the necessity of carrying the revolution further (Chang, 1975: 18-19; cf. Kim Jong-il, 1992: 7). But Kim Jong-il, although he shares with the 'Gang of Four' a fascination with the connection between culture and ideology, does not draw such radical conclusions on the defects to be found (and eliminated) in Korean communism. He does, however, detect a certain lack of interest in maintaining an atmosphere of struggle and vigilance: "The working class ... should be made to have a correct viewpoint on war. Trade union organisations must ensure that the industrial workers and other members repudiate war-phobia and war-weariness, eliminate pacifism, and live and work militantly, always alert" (Kim Jong-il, 1986a: 6). And he is scathing on the presence of 'senility' in the leadership of some organisations. There is hope however for sufferers of this malady. Since its basis is as much ideological as physiological, individuals who live in "fidelity to the Party and the leader ... will not become senile in thinking even though in an advanced age" (Kim Jong-il, 1986a: 21). Bourgeois ideas, revisionism, and 'flunkeyism' must be resolutely opposed, but a failure to conform to the requirements of socialist society may be attributed to a lack of the proper consciousness. This in turn may be traced to the tenacity of 'outdated ideological remnants', the cure for which is yet more ideological remoulding (Kim Jong-il,

1986b: 5). Unlike the 'Gang of Four' Kim Jong-il finds no fundamental defects in the structure of party or state. This is to be expected given the identity of their architect, and the fact that he has so far enjoyed a clear run to the succession.

In short, the politics of succession is also about the supplanting of a whole generation and their replacement by a hand picked clique. It also throws a great deal of light on state-society relations. The idea of a hereditary leadership may be attributable to remnants of the traditional political culture. In Confucian societies the household of the ruler was the focal point of the state, a fact that led Max Weber to interpret the ruler's governmental authority as an extension of his family authority. Thus the sound moral example of the ruler was taken to be the most efficacious means for achieving the good order of the society. As is often pointed out, the quasi-familial role of lesser bureaucratic functionaries was reflected in the popular description of them as 'father and mother officials'. Although in contemporary North Korea the customary loyalties to the family have been very much weakened, Kim Il-sung has deliberately constructed a myth of the leadership of the revolution by his forebears to reinforce the present dominance of his family and relatives by marriage.<sup>(2)</sup> And as 'sun of the nation' and 'father of the people' he has manipulated family symbolism to create an atmosphere of unthinking loyalty to the present members of this revolutionary family. This strategy has been facilitated by the strict political division of labour in Confucian societies where the business of government is only a matter for the officials, and where within the governing class a rigid hierarchy prevails. Without employing the past as a complete

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(2) On the manipulation of elements of the traditional political culture, see Kang (1979: 61-110). The same volume documents the occupation of positions in the leadership by members of Kim's family (Park, 1979: 137). The strongly 'patrimonial' character of the North Korean political system may be taken as a partial validation of the recent application of the Weberian thesis to Korea by Norman Jacobs (1985).

explanation of the present it should also be noted that from the fifteenth century Korean Confucianism was dominated by a factional spirit so pervasive that the struggle for office led to the monopolisation of bureaucratic preferment by one faction to the total exclusion of others. 'Society' has, after all, had an impact upon the state.

While the insistence on the need to ensure that the revolutionary inheritance is passed on 'from generation to generation' has roots in the political culture, it also possesses an institutional aspect, which has been documented by Dae-Sook Suh. The Korean Workers' Party is unusual in the very high turnover of its elite. Considering membership of the Central Committee, each party congress produces a Central Committee in which a majority of the members have never served before. Thus, of the sixth Central Committee of 1980 only 67 of the 145 full members were not newly elected, and of the fifth (1970) only 31 of the 117 were not newcomers. Even more significant is the fact that of those Central Committee members who have served on more than one occasion, only a handful (39 of 317) have served on more than twice. Of the existing leadership only Kim Il-sung has been a member of all six Central Committees, and no other individual has been a member of any five (Suh, 1981: 347-49). Even since 1980 a number of young cadres never seen before have taken up senior posts. By comparison, whereas the twelfth Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party elected in 1982 saw the rise (or reappearance after an interval) of an unusually large number of cadres, of the 210 full members 112 had served in that capacity before (Bartke and Schier, 1985: 60-61).<sup>(3)</sup> In the eleventh, tenth, and eight Central Committees the number of new members drops to one-third, and only in the ninth, convened as a result of the Cultural Revolution, does the membership turnover match what is the normal pattern

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(3) Developments since the beginning of the reform era in China have made more recent parallels with Chinese experience inappropriate.

in the Korean Workers' Party (Goodman, 1979: 37-69). Although the party conference of September 1985 resulted in significant personnel changes, the new 'younger' leaders were individuals predominantly in their fifties or sixties, while a number of veteran cadres remained in the Political Bureau (Goodman, 1986: 122-30). In the North Korean Workers' Party Political Bureau Standing Committee, the Kim family are a majority, the third member being an old guerrilla comrade of Kim Il-sung's, O Jin-u.

This turnover of leadership in North Korea must be supposed to be a device by which Kim Il-sung ensures that no faction stays in the elite long enough to constitute itself as an opposition. The objective is to leave society with no focus within the KWP for opposition to the leadership. Kim's experience in the party, when he found himself at various times opposed by a domestic (southern) faction, a faction of Koreans originally from the Soviet Union, a group who had been in Yanan before returning to Korea, and even some of his old guerrilla comrades, has undoubtedly taught him the efficacy of this tactic (Suh, 1976: 159-91; Lee, 1978: 86ff). Indeed, when his younger brother, Kim Yong-ju, made his first appearance in the party elite in the 1960s (becoming number six in the hierarchy at the party congress in 1970) many observers linked his appearance with the emergence of new personnel supposed to have been Kim Yong-ju's supporters. Events in the past two decades years may be interpreted as a repetition of the same phenomenon, this time introducing to the upper echelons of the party a cadre of members loyal to Kim Jong-il. Kim Yong-ju's reinstatement as a member of the Political Bureau in December 1993, taken together with the fact that there has been no full congress of the KWP since 1980, suggests that even these expedients have been less than fully satisfactory in guaranteeing Kim Il-sung's absolute dominance of the hierarchy (*Far Eastern Economic Review*, 23 December 1993, p. 25).

While personal data concerning the North Korean political

that at the top a change of generations is taking place in the literal sense. According to Dae-Sook Suh, a significant group amongst the present leadership including Kang Song-san (KWP Political Bureau member and Premier), Son Song-pil (Ambassador to Russia) and Yo Yon-gu (Vice-Chairman of the Supreme People's Assembly), are all children (or the spouses of children) of members of Kim Il-sung's own family or of the families of his Kapsan guerrilla faction (Suh, 1985: 704-05). It is not surprising, then that so much emphasis is placed on the need to hand on correct leadership 'generation after generation'. Kim Il-sung's ingenious and original solution to the succession problem in the party is evidently being applied on a scale more extensive than the regime is prepared to admit.

## **V. Impact upon society**

The most readily apparent impact that the Kim Jong-il state has had upon society has been in the use of performance, television and the cinema to popularise revolutionary themes and conduct mobilisation campaigns. The exhortatory style of this material must alienate some of the participants and spectators, but the sheer pervasiveness of these forms must help mould public opinion. While this side of North Korean society is readily visible, statements about the social structure are more difficult.

The foundations for the North Korean social structure are similar to those of other states of the socialist type. Unlike China, North Korea has long been committed to shifting the population emphasis from agriculture to industry. Consequently, urbanisation levels have risen sharply, and the proportion of the population engaged in agriculture have fallen to around 25%.

Objective research on the character of North Korean society is very difficult to perform. North Korean media can be analysed, and the reports of visitors to selected areas of the country (generally around the capital) can be used to provide

some information. Defectors reports can and have been employed — for example, by Asia Watch (1988) — to assemble a composite picture of control and punishment procedures, and individuals outside the country with family members in North Korea (generally in Japan and the United States) have also reported on aspects of the society. None of these sources, however, can be regarded as scientific. Information from them is fragmentary and static. We have little idea of the aggregate picture and of trends over time.

An exception to this rule is the population data obtained by Nicholas Eberstadt and Judith Banister (Eberstadt and Banister, 1992). This material was released to the United Nations Population Fund by the Central Statistics Bureau in Pyongyang in 1989. It provides both an overall account of population characteristics, and also some important data on demographic and other changes. Although this material was collected by the state, and important information was omitted to conceal the extent of North Korea's military manpower, complimented by comparative data and computer simulation a consistent and plausible picture has emerged of North Korean demography.

Several very important trends which have occurred from the 1970s stand out. The first is the buildup in the numbers of military personnel. In 1975 Eberstadt and Banister argue that the evidence shows that around 714,000 males were on active military duty. By 1987 this figure had grown to about 1.2 million, which makes North Korea one of the most militarised political systems in the world. While there is no doubt that in these years the country faced security dilemmas, principally that posed by the growing gap between South Korea's capacity to pay for ever more advanced armaments and North Korea's own capacity, it can be argued that political factors are likely to have contributed. In his rise to power, as has been shown, Kim Jong-il was forced to circumvent the usual party channels, creating parallel institutions through which to discipline party members resistant towards his candidacy and to promote personnel

loyal to himself. The armed forces may well have been augmented at this time to mobilise unprecedented numbers of the population in support of the regime's succession strategy.

Other demographic changes suggest that the Kim Jong-il leadership has encouraged other social trends. Marriage rates in North Korea in the 1980s have risen significantly, even allowing for the age distribution of the population. From the mid-1970s, fertility rates have declined markedly (Eberstadt and Banister, 1992: 86ff). Conclusive evidence is lacking, but some authorities hold the view that formerly North Korea restricted marriage but rewarded high reproduction with pro-natalist policies. Now it would seem that restrictions on marriage have been lifted, perhaps by reducing the lower age limits previously applied, but expectations that couples should reproduce have been relaxed. This may have some connection with the fact that the Kim Jong-il group are of the younger generation.

There is no doubt that a development in the 1980s which has important implications for social differentials is the opening of a sector of the North Korean population to the influence of international commerce. With the cooperation of *Chongryon*, the pro-Pyongyang organisation of Koreans in Japan, a joint-venture store was opened in Pyongyang selling foreign manufactured consumer goods (from cosmetics to electronics) for those members of the population in possession of foreign exchange.<sup>(4)</sup> This was in marked contrast to the goods available in the normal department stores which were locally manufactured, of poor quality and variety, and expensive relative to North Korean wage rates. Given the popularity of this store, and the fact that North Korea has little in the way of private economic contacts through which individuals would gain access to foreign

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(4) The importance of *Chongryon* as a device to channel foreign funds to North Korea is hard to underestimate. See *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 10 February 1994, pp. 22-23.

currency, it must be surmised that a privileged stratum of the population are supplied with foreign exchange (which circulates in North Korea in the form of coupons).

This is an extremely noteworthy phenomenon which must be associated with the rise of Kim Jong-il and his faction. As many authorities attest, scarcity of commodities has been a major characteristic of all the former socialist systems. As a consequence, access to foreign goods has been a major aspiration of inhabitants of these systems. It would appear that Kim Jong-il has made a decision to reward those whose loyalty is important to his regime with access to such goods. While this practice was well established in the former Soviet Union, in the North Korean case it can be expected to have a much greater impact. The North Korean system has been built upon claims to self-sufficiency, inherent in the notion of *Juche*. Few North Koreans have had the privilege of foreign travel, and thus the possession of foreign goods must be for many of them the most practical indication they have ever received of the shortcomings of their own system. Further, the goods available to the elite include international band radio receivers, thus making available, to a segment of a society otherwise hermetically sealed to outside opinion, information from the rest of the world (including broadcasts from Russia, China, South Korea and America which specifically targets this audience). Finally, it sets up a tangible barrier between those of the population who are in this way privileged, and those who are not. Hitherto, North Korea was undoubtedly and obviously a society in which power was rigidly differentiated. Under Kim Jong-il it has become a society in which differences in the scale of possessions have also become differentiated.

## **VI. Economic reform and its consequences**

Even before the collapse of the Soviet bloc, it became clear that North Korea was experiencing economic difficulties and dislocations. Plans were unfulfilled, targets revised or

extended to later years, and the sparse statistical information provided by the regime became almost non-existent. One of the responses in other socialist systems to such difficulties has been enterprise reform, by which management has been placed in the hands of administrative specialists who have been held accountable for the profitability of the enterprise. In North Korea the Tæan work system, developed by Kim Il-sung himself, has long been the model. This places the enterprise party committee at the centre of enterprise administration, and thus (as in China in the Maoist phase) puts 'politics in command'. There is some evidence that in the mid-1980s North Korea began some experiments in enterprise reform. Although empirical study of possible cases is lacking, Lee Hy-sang has detected sufficient signs of them to refer to this phenomenon as a 'hidden opening' in the economy (Lee, 1988: 1264-79; cf. Merrill, 1991: 139-53).

If the predicament in the 1980s that generated this opening was serious, it has grown worse with the demise of the Soviet Union and China's reassessment of its Korea policies. The former has led to Russia halting all aid projects to North Korea, and insisting that trade should be conducted in international currency. In the mid-1980s the former Soviet Union was North Korea's largest trading partner, accounting for around 60% of external trade. This has now shrunk to about 5%, a development also having a considerable disruptive influence. Chinese policy has been more cautious, but at least some China-North Korea trade is now denominated in foreign currency, and Beijing has refused repeated request from Pyongyang for a cancellation or rescheduling of its debt. Given that recent North Korean plans have required an augmenting of foreign trade, and also that North Korea has long suffered from a shortage of convertible currency (leading to an international debt default in the 1970s) these developments have been a severe blow to the regime's economic objectives. In particular, they have generated energy shortages and difficulties with the supply

of foodstuffs.

At the present juncture, North Korea under Kim Jong-il has therefore been forced to pursue two policies which have been conceived to remedy these difficulties — deriving some new economic inputs from the international system on the one hand, and improving the quality of North Korea's one resource, labour, on the other. Thus, the first of these policies is to pursue capital and technology from the market economies through the opening of trading and investment relations. The second of these policies is to improve the skills of a proportion of the North Korean workforce in order for them to deal with advanced techniques in information gathering and processing. For the purposes of this paper it is important to note that both may have threatening consequences for the state's control over society.

Both of these policies can be reconciled at least in a general way with the regime's policy pronouncements — the 'intellectualisation' of the workforce was proclaimed as long ago as the 'three revolutions' era of the 1970s, and the most recent (third) seven-year plan places a significant emphasis upon the need to increase foreign trade. Both policies, however, threaten vital elements of North Korea's political architecture.

Since 1958 the notion of *Juche* has been central to North Korean ideology and rhetoric. In the 1970s it took on added importance, the exposition of its full meaning and significant being a component of Kim Jong-il's claim to be making new and significant contributions to the Korean revolution. With the evolution of an increasingly idiosyncratic political practice in North Korea, and with the decline of socialism as an international political model, *Juche* has become central to the self-image and self-legitimation of the North Korean system. In 1993 the Constitution was revised to delete references to Marxism-Leninism, *Juche* now being the regime's sole ideological beacon.

It is not immediately obvious, however, how such a reliance upon *Juche* can be reconciled with either of the policies

outlined above. The notion of *Juche* entails self-reliance and self-sufficiency, and it has been in pursuit of these objectives that North Korea has engaged in programs of import substitution and industrial innovation. The North Korean population has been told for many years that the country's agricultural and industrial sectors are almost entirely self-sufficient, and although the industrial sector in particular has received assistance at various times from the former Soviet Union and China, this has never been publicised. Enhanced trade with and investment from the market economies would seem to demonstrate that decades of sacrifice in the interests of self-sufficiency have been a failure. Even if an attempt was made to restrict such trade and investment to remoter parts of the country — a possible reason for establishing the Tuman River Free Economic and Trade Zone in the Northeast — family ties with those working with foreigners and the appearance of new and more sophisticated products would probably be sufficient to cause doubt and uncertainty in the population (Valencia, 1991: 263-71).

North Korea faces a related problem in its drive to enhance the skills of those of the workforce concerned with information processing and gathering. In this field hardware and software are all of foreign manufacture, and their use involves the appropriation of many foreign (usually English-language) terms and concepts. Moreover, facility in the necessary skills involved in information manipulation usually opens the way to the acquiring of information not formally sanctioned by the regime, as well as the means to store and reproduce information. The restrictions placed upon access to typewriters and photocopiers in the former socialist systems of Eastern Europe are an indication of the dangers perceived by the leaders of such systems when confronted even by the most basic of information hardware.

## VII. Conclusion

The Kim Jong-il leadership thus must face a major dilemma in its direction of society. So far, Kim has been responsible for the entrenchment of a new stratum of specialists and bureaucrats; at the same time he has maintained controls over the mass of the population, and refined techniques of manipulation involving the use of art forms and the media. In both respects, the Kim Jong-il state has acted as a gate-keeper between Korean society and the world outside North Korea. The privileged loyalists have been rewarded with foreign commodities and glimpses of the wider world; the masses have been manipulated by media techniques which derive from international practices.

Kim Jong-il's own predilections are evidently to keep affairs this way. His comments on the correct form that economic cooperation with the world economy should take are uncompromising. Similarly, his insistence upon the possession by all the population of the same 'monochrome' ideology leaves no room for independent thought. However, to survive, the Kim Jong-il state must loosen the restrictions it places upon economic activity; it must also facilitate the acquisition of advanced information-age techniques by the technically competent. Both these measures undermine the gate-keeping function performed by the state.

They also imperil the hereditary element that has been crucial to Kim Jong-il's rise. There is no doubt that some members of the new elite will adapt to the demands of these policies. Indeed, Kim Dal-hyun, formerly Vice-Premier, and Kim Yong-sun, formerly Party Secretary in charge of international affairs, may be identified as two members of this group who have been in the forefront of developing closer links with the international economy and the international system. Their demotion at the end of 1993 indicates that even the management of these policies is not without its risks in North Korea. The general point is that a

group chosen for their lineage and loyalty are not necessarily the best mediators between North Korea and the world. This task requires specialists with foreign experience and foreign knowledge. Their rise will impose new tensions upon the ruling structure.

Whether this relaxation of the regime will generate a true 'civil society' is unlikely. But the changes that are already being set in train will be enough to give rise to important differences of view in the management of foreign information, foreign capital, and foreign commodities. Through this avenue, society will eventually have a profound impact upon the Kim Jong-il state.

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