

A Comparison between North Korean and Chinese Communism

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This paper will seek to analyze the North Korean Communist regime in light of its neighboring nation China. As we note the similarities of the two cases we will focus on the unique relationship between the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and the People's Republic of China (PRC). First, we will visit North Korea as a kind of national Stalinism. Next, we will observe how, in retrospect, we can note Chinese fingerprints on the DPRK over the past 50 years. Finally, we will cover how these similarities have woven together an intimate relationship between the two nations and observe their current position today.

Though it can be said that general trends and similarities exist in all Communist nations, the similarities shared between the case of North Korea and China are unique in that not only has their relationship spanned centuries, but their political similarities have also been rooted in shared social and cultural similarities. "From its short-lived conquests of ancient Chosun before the time of Christ until the twentieth century, China has been the foreign nation with the greatest importance in the Korean World."¹

It is appropriate to briefly discuss the birth of the Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea as well as touch upon the creation of the Chinese Communist Party. In 1948, the Republic of Korea formed under Syngman Rhee, and a few weeks later the Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea was initiated by Premier Kim Il Sung. In Kim's desire to unify Korea by military force, he went forward with this decision, doing so with Mao's blessing. Following this move, Truman brought troops from the US to the South and China supported the north with 100,000 soldiers. This triggered the three year

¹ Bruce Cummings, *The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History*. Pg. 230

Korean War which marked the beginning of an over half-century division of Korea. Not long after, the Chinese People's Republic was founded in 1949. The Chinese borrowed from the former Soviet Union when in 1950, China used their model for legal codes. The legal system was made up of three institutions: a ministry of Public Security, a 'procuracy' at each level of government, and Court.

The DPRK can be characterized as a kind of an indigenized Stalinism led by Kim Il Sung, who ruled with arbitrary power for almost fifty years. We can attribute this indigenized Stalinism in North Korea to a desire to maintain its own identity as a nation, but there must also be weight given to the vacuum that is present in Marxism-Leninism. "But the political vacuum in Marxism-Leninism also opens the way to an assertion of indigenous politics; this may even be demanded by the very paucity of political models; in any case we see it in Russian, Chinese and Korean communism."².

Though North Korea, like China, borrowed from the former Soviet Union, the regime was shaped to fit a staunchly North Korean mold. DPRK leaders were steeped in the Stalinist dogmas of the 1940's and 50's and desired to form North Korea into a mature socialist society. North Korea followed Marxist-Leninist philosophy, but it was a kind of national Stalinism and by 1960, broke with the former Soviet Union and began an anti-Soviet, pro-Chinese campaign. This is where the *Juche ideology* of self-reliance was born. North Korea's version of the red book of Maoist China was followed religiously. As Kim Il Sung delivered his first *Juche* speech in December 1955 he spoke negatively about the former Soviet Union, saying that North Korea should follow the Chinese idea of the rectification movement. The three Cardinal Principles of *Juche* were for North

² John Bryan Starr, *Understanding China*. Pg. 398

Korea to be: politically self-reliant, economically self-supported, and militarily self-defensive.

For ten years after the establishment of the DPRK in 1948, Kim Il Sung consolidated his power and by the end of 1958 no party or individual could challenge him. “In 1957, Kim Il Sung was emerging from the crisis as an absolute winner who had nothing to be afraid of either within or outside the Party. This victory had profound consequences for the general situation in the country, and greatly influenced the everyday lives of all North Koreans.”³ The trend toward reconstructing society along Orthodox Leninism into a full-scale socialist society was birthed during this time and has continued to present day North Korea. The trend was toward complete government control over society and the economy, toward harsher persecution of real and imagined dissent and toward restricting the already minimal amount of international exchange.⁴

Today, North Korea is known in the international community as being part of the “axis of evil” and is infamous for breaking almost every human rights violation while the intense secrecy of the state is a source of complexity for the rest of the world. Kim Il Sung was able to rule with arbitrary power and the regime has been able to continue its acts of cruelty by wiping out all sources of possible opposition from the beginning of its formation in the 1950’s. This was accomplished through a series of intense purges from 1956-1960 annihilating all non-Communist parties in the country. “Marxist-Leninist theory stipulated that in a truly socialist society, only one party-the communist party, representing the interests of the working class-could exist. Judging by what happened in the early postwar years, North Korean Leaders no longer perceived any reason to tolerate

³ Andrei Nikolaevich, *The ‘Great Purge’ in North Korea, 1956-1960*. Pg. 103

⁴ Andrei Nikolaevich, *The ‘Great Purge’ in North Korea, 1956-1960*. Pg. 103

other parties in their midst.”⁵ Even by the standards of the Communist world in the 1950’s North Korea’s purges were unusually severe and the severity reflected the move in North Korea toward ‘national Stalinism’ which is an ideology that is entrenched to this day.

One notable similarity present in both the Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea and the Chinese People’s Republic was the worship of their leader, Kim Il Sung and Mao Zedong and the emergence of a cult personality. We will notice that Kim took much from Mao in implementing this cult personality in the DPRK, but Kim Il Sung’s cult has, for fifty years, outpaced both Stalin and Mao. “In city, town, and village there is Kim Il Sung; everywhere there is Kim Il Sung, staring down from a billboard or in the subway or on the apartment wall: offering here a maxim for industry, there one for agriculture... No leader in the twentieth century has stamped a nation with his presence more than did Kim.”⁶ In 1967, Chinese Red guards introduced the badge of Mao Zedong to Kim Il Sung. North Korea, wanting to make its own version of the badge made the Kim Il Sung badge and changed his name to Supreme Leader. Worship of the leader Kim Il Sung today, has taken on a more exaggerated form than at the height of the Maoist era.

In my own recent experience to North Korea during a study trip, I was astounded at the extent of worship and idolatry of Kim as it saturated every aspect of society. There were countless white statues of a smiling Kim Il Sung, sitting like the Lincoln Memorial wherever we went, including a gargantuan statue in the heart of Pyongyang. Guides and guards alike would not stop reciting great quotes from the Great Supreme Leader Kim Il Sung and of the god-like qualities that he possessed. The greatest impact of the

⁵ Andrei Nikolaevich, *The ‘Great Purge’ in North Korea, 1956-1960*. Pg. 8

⁶ Bruce Cummings, *Korea’s Place in the Sun*. Pg 396

trip to North Korea was visiting the deceased body of Kim Il Sung. The whole experience was surreal and a bit frightening. We were required to walk completely silent, and solemn for about 30 minutes until reaching the body, we had a number of body searches, strange propagandistic music in the background, finalized with a walk thru a corridor blowing powerful wind at us before entering into the room where his body lay. His body was encased in a clear white box, looking like a wax museum artifact. I also had the opportunity to visit Mao Zedong's body a few years ago. His body is similarly encased in a clear white box, but that experience was comparable to a tourist site, whereas in North Korea it was as though I was transported to another time and world.

It can be argued that in all Communist cases, a cult personality is present, but I would counter that argument by noting that the deification of its rulers present in North Korea and China stemmed as much from the oriental political ideology of the 'mandate of heaven' as it did from the fact that they were both communist states.

The idea that the imperial family had the 'mandate of heaven' as its source of political legitimacy dates from as early as the Zhou dynasty in the twelfth century BC. The idea of an anthropomorphic deity had been dominant and gave under the Zhou to the vaguer concept of 'heaven' as a 'supreme spiritual reality' as one student of Chinese philosophy describes it. It was heaven that bestowed the right to rule, and the ruler and his offspring retained that.⁷

The mandate of heaven meant that the ruler instated was chosen from heaven.

This belief rooted in Asia's history further intensified the growing trend of cult personality in both North Korean and Chinese Communism. Along with the oriental political ideology of the mandate of heaven, the DPRK and CCP were formed from deep roots in Confucian philosophy. The Hermit Kingdom was once under the rule of Chinese dynasty and both of these nations have a cultural background of Confucianism engrained in its philosophy and take on society and government. "The paradigmatic relationship in

⁷ John Bryan Starr, *Understanding China*. Pg 53

Confucius' mind was that between father and son, and he depicted it as a reciprocal. It is the responsibility of the son to obey and respect his father in all circumstances.”⁸ And in this way the cult personality was reinforced from both the Asian political ideology of the mandate of heaven and the presence of Confucianism in both ancient Korea and China.

Deriving its legitimacy from the Marxist-Leninist philosophy, both China and North Korea attempted to eliminate and render powerless competing or possible problems against the party. As mentioned earlier, this was accomplished through a series of intense purges during the 1950's and 60's which, for North Korea, continues to today. In China, millions of landlords, bureaucrats, dissenters, intellectuals, and finally Party officials were forced into hard labor or executed without regard to any laws. “Mao rejected the idea that the law is universally applicable, borrowing from Marx and Engels the idea that law is a tool that one social class uses to oppress another.”⁹ In North Korea, Kim similarly practiced this same type of arbitrary power and the fate of North Korea was sealed by 1960 as all opposition was annihilated and the destruction of opposing factions meant that unrestricted power was concentrated in the hands of Kim Il Sung.¹⁰ The implementation of these purges were developed in North Korea under a certain Maoist influence, especially two forms of public humiliation, ‘criticism meetings’ and ‘ideological examinations’ where dissenting Party cadres were subjected to public sessions where participants could criticize the victim. Physical measures of persuasion and severe beatings were not unusual in these sessions which could last many days and sometimes weeks in a row. This type of lawless system reached its notoriety in China

⁸ John Bryan Starr, *Understanding China*. Pg. 45

⁹ John Bryan Starr, *Understanding China*. Pg. 200

¹⁰ Lecture from Suh, Dae Suk 9-20-03

during the Cultural Revolution, but in North Korea it reached its peak of popularity in the late 1950's and it is around this time that public executions became a customary practice.

The developments in China during the late 1950's including the 'Hundred Flowers movement' in 1957 and the 'Anti-Rights Campaign' encouraged the harsher treatment of opposition in North Korea as Kim Il Sung himself was an ardent reader of the Chinese Press and was careful to monitor the activities there.

Another similarity between the DPRK and the CCP are the parallels found in the campaign mobilizations of Maoist China and North Korea. In 1957, Kim launched the Cho'llima (flying horse) movement which was influenced by and modeled after the Great Leap Forward in China. "The unusually intense propaganda barrage deliberately created in work-places an atmosphere of fervor, somewhat akin to battlefield mentality. The Cho'llima movement, with its distinctly Maoist flavor, indicated a shift to ideological, rather than material, incentives."¹¹ The Cho'llima movement was the most famous of the endless mobilization campaigns that later became so typical to North Korean society. The citizens were encouraged to work tirelessly in order to reach unrealistic production targets. During post-war North Korea, political leaders had to rely on ideological incentives rather than more conventional ones to encourage the people to work harder. This method proved, in the long run to be ineffective. Both China's Great Leap Forward and North Korea's Cho'llima movement were implemented to reach super-human results and, in the long run, unsuccessfully attempted to encourage its people to work more and more through ideological mobilizations and propaganda.

Following the parallels drawn to the purges and campaign mobilizations present in China and North Korea, a third and final similarity we will observe is how both

¹¹ Andrei Nikolaevich, *Kim Takes Control: The 'Great Purge' in North Korea, 1956-1960*. Pg 99

followed the Marxist-Lenin model of categorizing the whole population into ‘good class’, ‘bad class’ labels. China’s labels based on perceived political ideology lasted existed only a short time during the Maoist period, but in North Korea this practice has once again continued to today’s social structure. “In the years leading up to and during the Cultural Revolution, Mao resumed the use of class labels, talking of a renewed class struggle. The defining criteria were attitudes toward ideological principles, not economic or social relationships.”¹² One interesting difference in classification is the inclusion of intellectuals in North Korea and an exclusion of intellectuals during the Maoist era. “”The unique symbol of the Korea Workers Party (KWP) places a writing brush across the hammer and sickle, indicating an inclusive policy toward the educated and the expert: Kim rarely if ever denigrated them, in contrast to Maoist China.”¹³ In North Korea, this classification has effected generations of citizen and the existence of these groups has become the hallmark of North Korean social structure. On May 30, 1957 the Korean Workers Party issued a decision titled ‘On Transforming the Struggle against Counter-Revolutionary Elements into an All-Party, All-People Movement.’ “This document was of singular importance, since it laid the foundations for the classification of the entire North Korean population into a few dozen hereditary groups. Every North Korean was to be designated as belonging to one of these groups, depending on his or her origin, political behavior, and perceived political loyalty.”¹⁴ The impact that the Chinese model of Communism had on North Korea is evident when we analyze Kim’s policies of following and patterning the intense purges, campaign mobilizations and classifications of Mao.

¹² John Bryan Starr, *Understanding China*. Pg. 200

¹³ Bruce Cummings, *Korea’s Place in the Sun*.Pg. 397

¹⁴ Andrei Nikolaevich, *Kim Takes Control: The ‘Great Purge’ in North Korea, 1956-1960*. Pg 99

With an understanding of the similarities between the Korean Workers Party and the Chinese Communist Party, let us now move on to a short analysis of their deep, interwoven relationship which has lasted over a thousand years. Before the invention of the Korean alphabet (hangul) in the 15th century, Chinese characters formed the basis of the Korean written language. And as discussed earlier Korea not only adopted Buddhism, but also Confucianism which remains at the heart of many Korean relationships, public and private. For several centuries Korea has played the role of tributary vassal state. “Throughout most of its history, Korea paid tribute to its giant neighbor at the court of the Middle Kingdom and Koreans called China *daeguk*, ‘big state’ or ‘elder state’.”¹⁵ With this type of rooted ancestry it can be expected that China and North Korea have had an intimate alliance leading up to the time of Communist rule.

China, historically referred to the relationship with the DPRK as ‘sealed in blood’, because of the 900,000 Chinese lives that were lost during the Korean War. In fact China’s intimate alliance with North Korea dates back to the Chinese Communist sponsorship of Kim Il Sung’s rebel bands against the Japanese in WWII. Then, during the 1960’s and 70’s a common title given to the relationship of the CCP and DPRK was that of ‘lips and teeth’. But, this kind of intimacy always comes with a bit of stress and strain and the Communist love affair was not an exception. Though historically, they have shared a sort of ‘lips and teeth’ relationship, since Kim Il Sung’s forces invaded South Korea, China has repeatedly found their own national security and interests affected by confrontational policies of the Kim dynasty and Pyong Yang regime. As we have observed, Kim Il Sung modeled the CCP in many ways, but it is important to note that the DPRK was clearly a national Stalinism as Soviet and Chinese factions were

¹⁵ Bruce Cummings. *The Two Koreas*. Pg. 230

purged early on during the DPRK's formative years and Kim stubbornly went forward with policies that strained even its closest ally, the China.

Close ties between the DPRK and the PRC are linked personally also as Kim Il Sung, himself was educated in China and once a member of the CCP. It is true that China probably has a better relationship with the DPRK than any other nation on earth, but despite these facts, especially in recent times, the relationship between the DPRK and China have been strained since Kim Jung-Il succeeded his father in 1995. As China has been moving towards a socialist market economy and North Korea continues to digress economically with a desperate per capita income of \$714, on the verge of famine, North Korea has become somewhat of a headache to China in more ways than one. "China's aim to sustain the DPRK regime in no way suggests that Beijing likes the regime in Pyongyang. Quite the contrary, Chinese officials and North Korea analysts in Beijing and Shanghai sometimes speak with disdain, despair, and heightened frustration when discussing the DPRK and China's relations with it."¹⁶ Today, China's role continues as a big brother, giving aid totaling around \$740 million in 2001. China's aid and trade has been keeping the North Korean economy from total ruin and destruction. Also, when viewing the international community, China has played a crucial role as facilitator and mediator to nations such as the US who have found it difficult to establish peaceable relations.

Today, the disparity between the two nation of North Korea and China are more identifiable than its similarities. China is now a rising regional power with steadily growing economic and military capabilities. And no longer is it as monolithic or harshly ideological as during the Maoist era. In contrast, North Korea has suffered continuing

¹⁶ David Shambaugh, *China and the Korean Peninsula: Playing for the Long Term*. Pg. 2

political repression and severe economic decline with a staggering hyper-militarized economy, since the early 90's. And even with the breakdown of Communist solidarity especially the Soviet experiment, it is surprising and curious as to why the DPRK continues to be even more illiberal. "In the 1990's, despite a worldwide wave of political liberalization, the DPRK stubbornly resisted all pressures for a relaxation of its internal controls-and if anything appeared to grow even more illiberal."¹⁷ It is obvious that China's support and assistance are crucial to the economic survival of North Korea, but the disparity between the economic standing of China and North Korea continues to grow and as the DPRK hesitate to follow China's model of economic modernization, the future of North Korea lies in a questionable state.

From the height of Communist Solidarity, through the 50's,60's and 70's, until today, the North Korean Communist regime, while borrowing much from the Chinese model, has remained a distinctly indigenized Communism. The vacuum left by the Marxist-Leninist model leaves room for Communist nations to develop an indigenous Communism. This being so, it has been shown that while North Korea can be described as an indigenized Communist nation state, the shared similarities between the DPRK and the PRC run deeper and are unique from other Communist nations, similarities such as the cult personality which have been amplified both in North Korea and China, by the cultural philosophy of the 'mandate of heaven'. We also observed how the Kim regime borrowed from the Maoist period of campaign mobilizations and ideological propaganda. Lastly, the DPRK and the PRC both have classified its citizens according to ideological loyalty, lasting only thru the Maoist period in China, but continuing to present day North

¹⁷ Nicholus Eberstadt& Richard Ellings. *Korea's Future and the Great Powers*.Pg. 8

Korea. The North Korean case stands as an anomaly in following the ideological philosophies abandoned by most of its communist brothers decades earlier, becoming even more illiberal and following a more national, isolationist policy than ever before. “Over time a unique political system evolved within the Marxist-Leninist crucible and is fully in place today. It can best be compared to varieties of corporatism around the world or in the past, a kind of socialist corporatism. It is a tightly held, total politics, with enormous repressive capacity and many political victims.”¹⁸ It is a challenge as we are not sure whether to consider the determination and stubbornness of the Kim dynasty and the North Korean regime to refuse to follow the pattern of China towards political and economic reform as national strength or political suicide.

¹⁸ Bruce Cummings, *Korea's Place in the Sun*. Pg. 398

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