

North Korea's Modern Theatre State

Heonik Kwon, London School of Economics

North Korea is commonly referred to as one of the world's most secluded and enigmatic places. There is no doubt that the country's state hierarchy is bent on keeping its society away from the gaze of the outside world and its population from discovering a way of life other than the one that is offered within. There is also no doubt that the country's leadership has a strong interest in maintaining an enigmatic appearance towards its twenty-three million citizens. The prevailing interest involves the state's willingness to go a long way to use coercive measures against individuals and their families who happen to fall out from the webs of extraordinary political and moral symbols and their enchanting meanings that are spun around the historical integrity of the North Korean way of life.

However, there is actually no mystery about the North Korean political system. The North Korean state is not an enigmatic entity and never has been. What North Korea had was simply a highly skilful political leader who knew how to build an aura of enchanting charismatic power around him. This leader understood the efficacy of this power for mobilizing the masses toward ambitious political goals, and he was committed to keeping the power not only during his lifetime but also beyond the time of his rule. Modern world history abounds with similar charismatic, visionary leaders and the stories about their rise and fall. The same is true in the history of the Cold War and in the political history of the communist world that constituted the moiety of the Cold War international order. This world was distinct from the other half of the Cold War global order not only in modes of regulating economic lives but also in ways of

pursuing the modern ideal of a secular, disenchanted society free from traditional beliefs and backward ideas. We know that the disenchantment of society pursued in revolutionary socialist polities involved much more explicit and conscious intervention by state power than in liberal capitalist societies. However, we know also that the performance of secular revolutionary politics, while aiming to demystify traditional religious norms and mystical ideas, nevertheless often involved the mystification of the authority and power of the revolutionary leadership.

The evolution of North Korea's postcolonial political system was not an exception to this well-trodden general evolutionary trend of modern revolutionary politics. North Korea imported foreign political ideas from other, more powerful states, particularly from the Soviet Union, and transformed them to their own uses, adding to them some creative indigenous elements and facades. Their political genesis is fundamentally no different from the experience of many other newly independent postcolonial state entities of the twentieth century, which, while consolidating a political community with the established techniques of state and nation building borrowed from the earlier European exemplars, typically claimed that the process was an exclusively indigenous, national art of politics. Therefore, the North Korean political system is just as modern and just as much a product of interaction with global modernity as any other political system existing in the world. In this respect, Bruce Cumings is right to claim that North Korea is nothing more and nothing less than "another country" in the modern world.¹

Whereas the character of the North Korean political system is not unique in history, however, North Korea is unique in maintaining this particular, historically

¹ Bruce Cumings, *North Korea: Another Country* (New York: The New Press, 2004).

constituted character for longer than any other state entity born in the era of the Cold War and way beyond the end of the Cold War's geopolitical order. The early North Korean political order was centered on an able and pre-eminent personality just as was the order of other revolutionary states known in the history of the Cold War. The identity of this personality, Kim Il Sung, was in substance and form no more extraordinary than other, better-known personalities of the twentieth-century social revolution—most notably, Joseph Stalin and Mao Zedong. These leaders all had a prestigious career background in emancipatory political movements and led a mass-based yet elite political organization which, harboring the principle of democratic centralism, was focused on the imperative of mass mobilization for radical social transformation. They all knew about the central importance of modern technology in modern politics, including the effectiveness of print technology, art, theatre, and drama for mobilizing the mass. They also knew very well that the elite revolutionary vanguard organization was not always an easy family to run and that at times the efficient functioning of this organization required an exceptional, charismatic leadership whose authority went beyond the realm of institutional politics.

The historical lives of these charismatic revolutionary leaders of the twentieth century can be discussed not only in the terms of comparative history but also according to the conceptual premises of historical sociology; most notably, those of the eminent theoretician of modern politics, Max Weber. Weber was interested in the typology of modern political power and authority including charismatic authority.² No matter how strange the phenomenon appears to rational eyes, according to him, the enchanting power of charismatic authority is a thoroughly intelligible historical and social

² Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, edited by Talcott Parsons (New York: The Free Press, 1947).

phenomenon, the nature of which is no more mysterious than the nature of traditional authority (i.e., the authority of a patriarch) or that of the modern bureaucracy and legal order. Weber understands that all these forms of human authority are imperfect, although all of them, despite their imperfect nature, aspire to be perfect and frequently make claim to be so. When an extraordinary-appearing charismatic authority arises on the horizon, according to Weber, the circumstances of its rise may be other than ordinary but, nevertheless, the nature of this authority is nothing but extraordinary. In Weber's thought, there is nothing miraculous about the miracle-claiming personal charisma. Weber makes it clear that charismatic authority exists because of the imperfection of other authorities. Charismatic personalities erupt in history in situations of radical social upheaval when the society's aspiration for change is no longer containable within the routine traditional order or no longer satisfied within the existing legal-bureaucratic order. Weber also makes it clear, however, that the historicity of charismatic authority, because its origin is in the extraordinary time of social crisis, is limited in time and that it eventually dwindles away as the society recovers from the upheaval and returns to a routine, everyday order. Most of the charismatic, cultic state personalities of the mid-century Cold War era underwent a dramatic rise and fall and therefore followed the historical destiny of charismatic authority envisioned by Weber at the turn of the twentieth century—except in North Korea.

The exceptional character of the North Korean political system is, therefore, not the specific mode of relationship between the state and the society anchored in what we commonly call the cult of personality. Rather it points to the fact that this particular mode of rule and form of politics has shown a remarkable resilience in North Korea, defying the contrary historical trend found in most other revolutionary societies. The

durability of this form of politics is an exception also in a theoretical sense, going against the historically impermanent nature of charismatic politics rendered in the Weberian exposition of modern political power and authority. The puzzle of the North Korean political system is, therefore, rather than the practice of an extraordinary cult of personality, the extraordinary continuity of this practice. In today's North Korean political literacy, the country's unique, protracted and cross-generational charismatic politics is called, among many other expressions, "legacy politics" (*yuhun jǒngchi*) or "politics of longing" (*gŭriumŭi jǒngchi*).³

It may require no less than the brilliance of a genius or a major technological innovation to change the existing course of nature. When the change is about altering the life cycle of a charismatic political authority, the power required to make this change must involve a major invention in the art of state politics. In North Korea, this invention came to fruition, above all, in the technology of mass social mobilization and mass political literacy. The importance of this technology is familiar within the existing literature of modern politics. For instance, the scholarship of modern nationalist ideologies has long highlighted the centrality of printing technology in the construction of national unity and common national consciousness.⁴ In the scholarship that focuses specifically on revolutionary socialist state politics, the investigation often extends to other technologies of mass politics: songs, drama and cinema, mass rallies and spectacles, and other similar instruments of display and the dissemination of ideas.⁵ North Korea describes these diverse modes and genres of display broadly as

³ Heonik Kwon, "North Korea's Politics of Longing," *Critical Asian Studies* 42 (2010): 3-24.

⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1991).

⁵ Christel Lane, *Rites of Rulers: Ritual in Industrial Society—the Soviet Case* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

“revolutionary art” (*hyŏkmyŏng yesul*).

Contemporary North Korean art history claims that the country’s revolutionary art underwent a major revolution in early 1970s and that this revolution thanks to the genius and guidance of the then future leader of North Korea, Kim Jong Il. It is a widely acknowledged fact among observers that the Kim Jong Il-led North Korea’s artistic revolution in the 1970s was in close interaction with the ongoing process of succession of power from the country’s founding hero to his eldest son. In regard to this development since the 1970s and in particular to the political process of North Korea since the death of Kim Il Sung in 1994, Wada Haruki, one among the most astute observers of North Korea today, coins the idea “theatre state,” following the anthropologist Clifford Geertz’s classical study of ritual politics and spectacles of power in an Indonesian historical context. Wada presents the idea as a paradigm for North Korean political process and development in the era of Kim Jong Il.⁶

(Explain briefly the theatre state idea and the related notion of politics as display. Also, introduce very briefly a few examples of the 1970s’ revolutionary art such as *The Flower-selling Girl* or *The Sea of Blood*; some key historical symbols appearing in the Arirang spectacles of the 2000s; Kim Jong Il’s on-the-spot-guidance trips to military locations; the organization of North Korea’s Daesŏngsan national cemetery; and the display of gifts to the leader at the Myohyangsan Hall of International Friendship).

⁶ Haruki Wada, *Kita Chosen: Yugekitai kokka no genzai* (North Korea’s partisan state today), (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1998); Clifford Geertz, *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth-Century Bali* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).

On August 26, 2010, Kim Jong Il's special personal train crossed the Tumen river, North Korea's border with China, and headed towards Jilin, an administrative and commercial center of northeast China. This was in the early hours and, the following morning, the ailing North Korean leader, together with a convoy of senior military and party officials, went to visit Jilin's Yuwen middle school located along the town's river of Songhua. This is where North Korea's founding ancestor Kim Il Sung spent a short period of his tender age in 1926-1927, a time that is depicted in today's North Korean national narrative as the origin of the Korean revolution. In the afternoon, Kim Jong Il proceeded to visit Linjiang Beishan Park, a popular place of recreation for Jilin's townspeople and a historic monument for the Chinese revolution. The place is also a site of memory of monumental value for the North Korean revolutionary heritage. Beishan Park contains several memorials dedicated to the heroes of the Chinese revolution and to the Chinese martyrs of the Korean War. For North Korea, the place is where the then fifteen-year-old founder of the North Korean revolution held secret study meetings with his schoolmates and thereby took his first step to the career of a professional revolutionary.

These events were part of Kim Jong Il's five-day informal state visit to China at a time of important transition for North Korea as well as for China. The destinations of Kim's sightseeing tour in Jilin included not only Beishan Park but also a garment factory. It is reported that during these visits the North Korean leader was escorted by Si Jinping, a former party secretary of Shanghai who, in the view of observers, stands strong to become a new leader of Chinese reform in the next generation. On October 18, 2010, Si was indeed elected to the powerful position of the vice-chair of the Chinese Communist Party's military commission, which is believed to have sealed his future succession to Hu Jintao's position as Paramount Leader of the People's Republic of

China. Shortly before this important decision was made in China, as we will see shortly, the North Korea's Workers' Party had also elected a new vice-chair to its party's military commission and a future successor to Kim Jong Il. After his visit to Jilin, the North Korean leader Kim Jong Il met the Chinese president Hu Jintao on August 27 in Jilin's neighboring town of Changchun. Then, Kim moved further northwards to Harbin, the provincial capital of Heilongjiang. In Harbin, Kim made further pilgrimage to the town's heritage sites of Kim Il Sung and his Manchurian partisans, allocating his time also to a tour of Heilongjiang's agro-industrial complex. On his way back to Pyongyang on August 30, his train made a stop at Tumen, China's small yet thriving frontier town bordering both North Korea and Russia. Several weeks later, when the election of Kim Jong Il's future successor by the Workers' Party was completed, North Korea began supplying hundreds of workers to the special China-North Korea cooperative industrial zones set up in Tumen, Dandong, and elsewhere along the Chinese side of the border.

The trip was a carefully staged pilgrimage combined with diplomacy. On the side of pilgrimage, most notable was Kim Jong Il's visit to the old school of North Korea's founding ancestor. The school keeps a bronze statue of Kim Il Sung as well as a modest museum of his relics; it also preserves the classroom where Kim studied in the late 1920s as a heritage site. According to a North Korean report, when Comrade Kim Jong Il entered the classroom, after laying a bouquet of flowers on the Kim Il Sung statue, he was "immersed in thoughts while looking at the precious historic objects that contain the bodily odor of our Supreme Leader from his school years some eighty years back."⁷ These relics kept in Jilin's Yewen school are not merely important for the national memory of North Korea, China's close ally, but they are also meaningful for

⁷ Broadcast from the Central News Agency of North Korea, August 30, 2010.

the political transition that the country is undergoing now.

In the contemporary North Korean version of Kim Il Sung's biographical history, it was during his brief school years in Jilin that the late North Korean leader first conceived of the military-first, army-as-revolutionary-vanguard political theory—the well-known paradigm of today's North Korean state politics. This narrative depicts the birth of the military-first theory as taking place when Kim Il Sung revealed to his schoolmates the gift that he had received from his father back home—a pair of pistols. These two pistols constitute one of the most prominent material symbols in the era of Kim Jong Il's military-first politics. The symbol defines both the content and form of these politics, that is, both the honorable revolutionary heritage that these politics are set to preserve, on the one hand, and, on the other, the principal means for their preservation, which is the revolutionary army and military power. Hence, among the most outstanding images of the North Korean revolution available today is the painting (which is reproduced in a variety of other forms) that depicts the young Kim Il Sung in a school uniform opening an object wrapped in red cloth and showing the meaning-loaded handguns he received from his father to his young-teenage comrades.

In current North Korean political literacy, the gun story (which includes a revolver that Kim Jong Il received from his father, then the Supreme Commander of the North Korean People's Army, on a battlefield of the Korean War in 1952) goes in meaning beyond a succession of revolutionary authority along Kim's patrilineal descent. They also embody the moral imperative and the collective will to preserve and defend the glorious tradition—the “barrel-of-a-gun spirit” (*ch'ongdae jöngsin*) that purports to keep the eminent genealogy of revolution with unwavering political-filial piety to the exemplary family genealogy and unfaltering patriotic-familial loyalty to the leadership

of military-first politics. The iconicity of these guns speaks of the supreme principle in the contemporary North Korean revolution, in the words of Kim Jong Il made in August 2005: “Our faith in revolution is, in essence, a faith in the leader who guides the revolution.” The “leader” in this context may mean the physically absent founding leader of North Korea or the immortal spirituality of this leader. It can also mean the leader who succeeded the founding hero and who follows his legacy in a faithful spirit, or the line of descent that connects these old and new leaders. Or the term may carry all these variant meanings simultaneously.

Kim Jong Il’s pilgrimage to the school was an important gesture to reclaim and renew the semantically multivariate concept of revolutionary leadership. It pointed to a place that kept the legend about the most important material symbol of his hereditary charisma and the country’s contemporary heritage politics under his leadership. In parallel with this vital historical meaning, the school visit clearly had an equally crucial proactive relevance. The pilgrimage was undertaken at a time of another critical juncture in North Korea’s political genealogical history that involves a new event of descent at the country’s exemplary center.

A new drama of succession of power is on stage in Pyongyang as I write this essay. Days after Kim Jong Il returned from his pilgrimage to Jilin and Harbin, Pyongyang hosted the Third Congress of the Workers’ Party on September 28, 2010—a rare event in North Korea that in the last instance was held in 1966, despite the fact that the congress represents the crystallization of socialist democracy at the highest institutional level. This historic meeting turned out to be a scrupulously staged political spectacle in which a new order of North Korea’s hereditary charismatic politics was to be set in motion publicly. Hours before the congress opened, Kim Jong Il had appointed

his youngest son, Kim Jong Un, to the rank of a military general, along with the young man's paternal aunt and her husband as well as three other notables, whom analysts see as together making up a core power circle in charge of a smooth transition of North Korea's absolute power to the next generation. At the meeting, the delegates elected Kim Jong Un to the powerful position of a vice-chair in the Party's military commission—a key organization within the Workers' Party in charge of overseeing all the country's military affairs.

Soon afterwards, on October 10, the anniversary day of the North Korean People's Army, the sixty-eight-year-old Kim Jong Il and the twenty-seven-year-old Kim Jong Un made the first joint *début* to the North Korean public. They inspected the military parades together, standing next to each other on the podium. For the large crowd of North Korean citizens assembled for this event, the meaning of the event was crystal clear: a decision has been taken on the country's future leader. The setting of the podium made it clear who the future "cerebral center" of the North Korean polity would be, to which the citizens and the army must continue to dedicate their unity of filial piety and political loyalty. A fairly large number of foreign diplomatic personnel and journalists were also invited to witness the spectacle. For them, the day's military parade had a lucid message: the North Korean state has decided to replicate the pattern of power transfer that had been put into practice a generation ago, and, from then on, the outside world would have to relate to North Korea on the basis of recognizing, accepting, and respecting this sovereign decision. The decision for succession was made "democratically," in the view of the North Korean state, involving first a gesture of endorsement by the country's singular exemplary authority (the entitlement of a high military position to the successor), which was followed by a unanimous gesture of

consent by the Party's general assembly and then by the demonstration of allegiance to the decision staged by the People's Army on the day of the army's anniversary celebration.

The spectacle at the country's capital city was soon followed by a multitude of other local events. The army units across the country began to brief the decision to the rank-and-file soldiers with an emphasis on the army's continuous, vital role to uphold and defend the emerging new leadership just as it had done for the existing center of North Korean revolution. At the same time, local party organizations held meetings with the rank-and-file party members in workplaces, universities, and residential groupings. Their briefings included the news that special gifts to citizens and families were forthcoming from the party hierarchy—small amounts of rice, cooking oil, and alcohol. People were told that the gifts were in celebration of the anniversaries of the People's Army and the Workers' Party. However, they had no illusion what these rare ration items, which they had not seen for the past ten years even on the birthday anniversaries of the Great Leader (Kim Il Sung) or the Dear Leader (Kim Jong Il), were actually meant for. In the subsequent weeks, more political literacy meetings were called for by the party and in the army. Notable among other important current affairs discussed in these meetings was the news about gifts from China. People were told that the Chinese state leadership had made tribute to the Dear Leader with the gift of a framed picture of Kim Jong Il and Hu Jintao shaking hands after their informal summit meeting in Changchun. Above all, the briefings highlighted China's gift to the Young General, North Korea's designated future successor of the heritage of Kim Il Sung: a picture of the Great Leader seated together with Mao that was taken during their comradely summit meeting in 1953. By the end of the year 2010, moreover, China will present

another significant gift to North Korea. This will be a real-life-size wax figure of Comrade Kim Jong Suk, the paternal grandmother of the Young General and the mother of Chosun, which, when completed, will be placed next to the existing wax-made statue of Comrade Kim Il Sung at the sacred inner chamber of the Myohyangsan Hall of International Friendship. It is also reported that China has promised North Korea to provide a crucial assistance in the vital realm of subsistence economy with the provision of a half-million tons of rice.

All these national, local, and international events took place within the short space of two months from August to October 2010. The unfolding of these events drew upon most of the elements of a modern “theatre state” (à la Clifford Geertz), including mass spectacles, new mass political literacy campaigns, and politics of gifting at both the domestic and international level.⁸ In the ensuing months and possibly years, we will surely see the mobilization of music, musicals, art, cinema, and literature for the making of the aspired real-life political drama of succession. We probably will witness also a new round of North Korea’s other important art of mass politics, the joint, on-the-spot-guidance once practiced by the Great Leader and Dear Leader together in the seventies and eighties. It is reported that the Young General has already made a number of field visits to unidentified military locations in the company of the Dear Leader. The contemporary art of North Korea’s theatre state has now a tradition that it can draw upon, different from the earlier era where the art of political succession had no preceding exemplars to make reference to and thus had to be invented from scratch. It is not certain whether ordinary North Koreans will experience much in the way of novel and innovative political art in the new drama of hereditary legacy politics; the new

⁸ Geertz, *Negara*; Heonik Kwon, “North Korea’s Theatre State,” *Korean Studies Forum* 4 (2010): 27-54.

succession art may invent some new elements or may primarily resort to the old pattern. It remains to be seen whether the future of North Korea's theatre state will have much that it can claim as formal artistic creativity in comparison to its past performance since the 1970s. In content, however, it is clear that the state's performance confronts great challenges and will require a great deal of creativity and innovative thinking to meet them.

The challenge is both structural and moral. North Korea's contemporary statehood is above all a product of the particular mode of succession of power that the country's leadership happens to have chosen. Although there have been many other factors and circumstances, some contingent and others historical, in the genesis of the North Korean polity, I believe that the most consistently preoccupying and determining question in this process, since the 1970s, was the routinization of revolutionary charisma, which in North Korean history turned out to be a hereditary cult of personality. It was, more than anything else, this singularly vital question of preservation concerning the historical life of the polity's founding charismatic, messianic authority that shaped the unfolding of North Korea's political and social history. The pursuit of perpetual charisma determined the changing relationship between the party and the army, and affected the state's increasing disregard of economic realities in proportion to its obsessive concentration on military power and military-led political security. It was also this question of hereditary charisma that played a major role in the evolution of North Korea's foreign policy towards its major allies and enemies as well as its approaches to South Korea and interaction with the postcolonial world. Above all, the question was the driving force for North Korea's determined construction of a self-image as a radically self-reliant, self-sufficient, and self-centered political system. At the center of

these developments was the singularly focused pursuit of a political mission that all other more powerful revolutionary states were unable to undertake—the realization of a historically transcendent charisma in the form of actualizing a hereditary succession of power.

The North Korean revolution achieved a spectacular success in the early state-building era of 1945-1950 and again in the postwar national construction drive from 1953 to the 1960s. It created a sturdy and independent state that effectively mobilized the war-torn society, leading it towards a rapid and strong industrial economic development. In the subsequent era, the revolution has written another monumental success story but, this time, in the particular domain of revolutionary politics that concerns mainly the look of the state rather than the actuality of the economic and political society. During this long era, the pride of revolutionary North Korea has been centered on a revolution in an extremely narrow sense, focusing primarily on questions relating to the formal integrity of the revolutionary state and to the historical durability of the state's exemplary personality. The North Korean state has been spectacularly successful in this constricted domain of political revolution, and it is very self-consciously proud of its unique, self-made achievement in defending the continuity of the country's revolutionary statehood. This achievement may appear to the outside world, including North Korea's traditional socialist allies, as being anachronistic, un-modern, and against modern revolutionary tradition. However, we must acknowledge the fact that the North Korean state's determination to defend its revolutionary heritage, no matter how apparently premodern the outcome may have turned out to be in the end, was, in its inception, nothing short of

a political revolution in meaning. It was an achievement akin to a political revolution, for no other revolutionary socialist states of the Cold War were able to make it. This is the case not only in terms of comparative history but also in a theoretical sense—in the sense that the achievement was a triumph against the supposition in modern political theory that charismatic power has a historically unsustainable, transient nature.

The story of proud success was, however, also a story of tragic failure. While driving itself to turn into a theatre state with the determination to battle against the natural mortality of charisma armed with a man-made, magnified, and mass-mobilized politics of art, the state of North Korea became increasingly alienated from the telos of its foundation, which was, like that of other revolutionary postcolonial states, to build a politically independent yet, at the same time, a socially democratic and economically prosperous community. The sublimation of charismatic authority came with an extreme centralization of political and executive power, which destroyed the democratic principle of socialist revolution. The centralization of power, because of its primary reliance on political cultural means and the mobilization of the population to this activity, came with an increasing negligence and inaptitude on the part of the state in the sphere of economic sustenance and growth. The cumulated effect of this failure in all spheres of state life other than the sphere of cultural production was made brutally clear in the tragic crisis of the mid-1990s, which devastated the only meaningful foundation of any modern state—the economic and moral integrity of the civil society.

The failure was both moral and structural. To put it in another way, it was a serious structural failure because it was a gross moral failure. In modern times, there is no viable state without a viable society. Clifford Geertz made it crystal clear, while coining the term “theatre state” in the context of Indonesian history, that a modern state

may not be only a theatre state. (He did so while making a critique of the theory of modern politics that is oblivious to the fact that a state can be made on the basis of an enchanting display of power rather than a rational exercise of power. Although he advanced this historical pluralism of political power, he had no illusion about the limits of the theatre state in modern times and, on this, his pluralistic approach to power closely followed Weber's conviction about the limits of charismatic power in modern politics.) The future of North Korea must come to terms with the limits of its theatre state. It must confront the fact that there is a clear limit in modern history to how far a community can assert radical particularism and radical exceptionalism. It must recover the wisdom that a community's particular authenticity is viable only to the extent that this authenticity is something that can be acknowledged and recognized by other communities in the considered modern spirit of plurality.

In order to perform this crucial confrontation with the self-identity, North Korea must recover the long-lost genuinely heroic spirit from the early foundational era. It is necessary for North Korea to return to the historical memory of the post-Korean War and to extract from this epoch the moral and spiritual strength of a unity of the state and society in the arduous march for national rebuilding. The rest of its national history is not a national history but only a history of a state imposed on the society in the guise of national history. The future of North Korea's theatre state has to make another political revolution. This time, the revolution will be a struggle to end the life of the theatre state, or at least turn its life from the substance of the state to a mere façade.

It is not impossible to undertake this revolution. The evolution of North Korea's theatre state has elements that can be positively brought forward for the purpose of this revolution. I hope that the future leadership of North Korea will make a strong alliance

of descent with the founding ancestor of the revolutionary state and only with this ancestor. I hope that the leadership will turn the representation of the age of military-first politics, both its short version from 1994 and its long version from early 1970s, to a sorry episode or at least an uncharacteristic era of the North Korean revolution. There are several encouraging signs. First among them is the slow recovery of the authority of the Workers' Party as against the power of the army. *Rodong Sinmun*, the Workers' Party newspaper, asserted on June 30, 2010 that the forthcoming Workers' Party Congress, which decided on North Korea's future leader, "has great meanings in thickening the people's confidence in our party and in strengthening the might of unity between the party and the people."⁹ In this respect, it is also notable that the Young General has been appointed to a high position in the army hierarchy, and yet also to a position that commands military affairs within the party organization. This move points to the hopeful direction that the relationship between the party and the army could recover its normality in socialist politics departing from the distorted military-first, party-second form that prevailed under the rule of Kim Jong Il. In relation to this, it is also encouraging to observe a possible turn from a military-focused political economy to an economic policy that returns to an emphasis on social economic integrity and moral economic principles. Although this may not indicate that North Korea will embrace an economic liberalization involving the decollectivization of agriculture, there are signs that the country's leadership, in parallel with the initiative to restore the party's authority, wishes to direct more attention to improving agricultural productivity and the capacity of light industry. The policy directive announced in *Rodong Sinmun* on the New Year anniversary in 2010 clearly states this change of orientation. The signs include the tour

⁹ *Rodong Sinmun*, July 30, 2010.

sites chosen by Kim Jong Il (or imposed on him by his Chinese counterpart) during his recent visit to China mentioned above, which included a textile factory in Jilin and a food-processing industry in Harbin.

It is also encouraging to find that North Korea has a strong foreign ally that understands some of this art of political descent. I hope that the future leaders will take two gifts from China seriously: the gift of a portrait of China and North Korea's founding heroes given to the future leader and the gift of a statue of the mother of Chosun given to the people of North Korea. The hope is that other future key allies of North Korea including South Korea, Japan, and the United States will also understand the meaning of these meaning-loaded gifts from North Korea's powerful present ally. If they will, then, the remaining thing to do for the upcoming revolution of North Korea will be to break the fantasy of the theatre state to recover from its fragments the single gem that is the only real pride of the real North Korean revolution—the achievement of a North Korean miracle in the post-war years, which was made possible with the intimate collaboration between a charismatic leader and the proud people of North Korea who were willing to endure hardship with a faith and dear hope for a better future. Moreover, the miracle was achieved not only with the hard work of ordinary North Koreans but also with generous assistance from the international community. True, the shape of the international community has changed dramatically since. Yet, North Korea's immediate international environment in northeast Asia is growing strong and is capable of giving assistance. North Korea may take this international assistance as a tribute or gift from the world given to it in acknowledgement of its stately majesty, if necessary, rather than as an aid or investment. Whichever it prefers, however, it has to accept this assistance and it must follow the necessary steps to do so by mending the

past mistakes of its military-first politics. The last includes, above all, aborting the army's nuclear armament programme and halting the brutal, immoral economic policy that privileges the power and integrity of the army over the survival and subsistence rights of the people. It has to recover the elementary existential and ethical principle of a revolutionary people's army, which, as is stated lucidly by the classical saying "Our army is the fish, and our people the water," dictates that no people's army survives in history without the support and integrity of the people.

Above all, the new North Korean leadership must confront the naked historical lesson and truth that there is indeed a clear limit to the power of man-made politics of art in resisting against the nature of modern political power and authority. It has to recognize the fact that this unwise and arrogant resistance against the natural mortality of charismatic power can have terrible consequences not only for the lives of the people but also to the dignity and heritage of the very historical authority that the political art sought to protect from fading into history. It must awaken to the fact that in modern times, it is through following the natural course of events and only through this humble attitude to the power of history that the dignity of the once-charismatic authority may be preserved as a meaningful heritage. Once again, the action that follows this awakening must be to end the political life of the country's theatre state. The action requires the courage to create a new North Korean revolution that can topple the fantasy of the theatre state to restore the order of the state to a rightful shape as a modern institution with a proud tradition, not a choreographer of mystic symbols that are neither grounded in Korea's tradition nor acceptable to the modern world. Now is the time to generate this revolution and make another North Korean miracle.