

On Some Traditional Elements in the North Korean Mass Consciousness

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Introduction

During the last several decades a unique, very peculiar type of culture has developed in North Korea. For almost half a century only a limited number of people from not so many countries of the world were allowed to visit this secluded state and observe its life. The lack of reliable materials became one of the main reasons why the cultural aspects of North Korean social development have not attracted proper attention of researchers.

We cannot deny that North Korea achieved a relatively high level of modern development, especially in the economic field, following the establishment of the DPRK in 1948. That is why some facets of the cultural development of North and South Korea are surprisingly comparable: the industrialization of economy resulted into a rapid urbanization, transformation of large families into nuclear ones, and an abandonment of the traditional way of life. The institution of arranged marriage in North Korea was gone together with parental authority. The DPRK has been showing a near-universal enrollment within the grade-school and secondary-school systems, and relatively high proportions of graduated or attendees of higher educational establishments. However, social and cultural development of North Korea also shows many specific features.

If we search for the origins of the cultural changes that North Korea experienced during the last five decades, we should try to understand the mentality of the people who formed the patterns of the cultural development of the country from the very beginning.

Born under a strong Soviet influence, the DPRK first followed the patterns of Stalinist ideology imported from the Soviet Union. This situation changed after the establishment of the extremely nationalist *chuch'e* regime in the early 1960s, when North Korea started to resemble Maoist China more than the USSR.

As soon as the North Korean leader and people from his entourage removed other factions from power in 1956 and freed themselves from the dependence on the Soviet directives, they obtained an opportunity to lead the country the way that reflected their ideas of governing a state. It is believed that members of the so-called "partisan faction" (to which Kim Il Sung belonged) were less (not to say very poor) educated than those of three other factions that constituted the Korean Workers' Party before 1956. Although this feature was not obvious at that time, their activities in Manchuria mountainous regions seem to have made them more traditionally oriented, than, for example, members of the Korea Provisional government in China or Koreans who had got an education and worked in the Soviet Union.

The result was that the social and cultural development of the DPRK appeared as a mixture of traditional mentality (which was influenced by the Confucian political culture) and "socialist" rhetoric.

This article will be an attempt to analyze some features of the mass consciousness in North Korea, including those influenced by its political culture, paying special attention to those peculiarities that may have emerged as a legacy of the traditional society.

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The problem of formation of a phenomenon that we define as “mass consciousness” is rather a complicated one. There is a relation between the mentality of “generators” of propaganda – those people who, sometimes pursuing completely different goals, formed the patterns of modern North Korean culture, and ordinary people, whose minds act as “accumulators” that preserve the information and pass it on to future generations. Under certain circumstances ideas that are being proclaimed transform into those that are being accepted as truth and blended into a complex of notions of life and universe. These perceptions become the basis, upon which further ideas are generated. The process of mutual influence of these two streams is a constant one.

In this respect, we should divide ideas that have been already accepted by the people’s consciousness from those that haven’t. In the case with North Korea, this task is not an easy one because of certain specifics in North Korean mentality.

Researchers notice that in North Korea almost no apolitical or unofficial culture can be found. The contents of the mass culture coincide with official propaganda, and all aspects of people’s everyday life are deeply influenced by the state – a phenomenon which is only possible under conditions of almost “hermetically sealed” society and overall control. As a result, two or perhaps three generations have already grown up under the extremely intense influence of essentially the same brand of propaganda. It is believed that at present the North Korean propaganda system is fairly effective mainly because of the absence of alternative sources of information. The question whether the situation can change in the future deserves special consideration.

The majority of people in the DPRK believe (or, at least, had believed until the food crisis of 1995) that the living standards in their country are quite high. North Koreans obviously respect Kim Il Sung, although his son is much less popular. There is no way to check the reliability of this information, but defectors from the North say that only some 30 or 40% of the North Korean population trust in Kim Jong Il.

The “personality cult” of Kim Il Sung can be viewed as a basis of North Korean political culture, and it seems to be deeply rooted into the consciousness of ordinary people. The formation of the “personality cult” in North Korea can be analyzed from two different standpoints. On the one hand, a special type of behavior is typical for almost all authoritarian states, where emotions of big masses of people cannot be freely expressed in everyday life and therefore reveal themselves in veneration of the leader and in critical situations – an example is heartbreaking scenes of people crying in despair, tearing their hair and beating their heads on the stone blocks of Kim Il Sung monuments during his funeral. However, the “personality cult” in North Korea seems to be much more developed than the cult of Stalin in USSR or the cult of Mao Tse-Tung in China used to be. One of the reasons is the elaborate propaganda system, which, together with a relatively small population and territory, allows maintaining the ideological isolation of North Korea. The combination of three factors – the intensity of the propaganda, the decades-long

stability of its basic ideas, and a self-imposed information isolation – makes people very much receptive to the official slogans.

On the other hand, however, it's obvious that Korea, where the Neo-Confucian tradition had played the role of official ideology for more than 500 years, could not at once abandon the legacy of the Confucian political culture, where the supreme ruler was being compared to a father of a family.

Paternalist ideas about "the ruler – father of the nation" are usual in North Korean propaganda. Kim Il Sung is depicted as a wise and attentive parent caring for his people. Many of the propaganda stories are dedicated to the theme of him inquiring about living conditions of the people. This kind of concern was also believed to be one of the important functions of Korean monarchs.

Kim Il Sung is not only a father figure, but is being described as a model filial son in his childhood. An article entitled "Kim Il Sung Termed Model for Revering Elders" tells of how he warmed his mother's cold hands with his own breath after she returned home from work everyday in winter and gave up the pleasure of playing on a swing because it tore his pants, which his mother then had to mend. "When his parents or elders called him, he arose from his spot at once no matter how much fun he had been having, answered "yes" and then ran to them, bowed his head and waited, all ears, for what they were going to say."

Some of the stories about Kim Il Sung are taken from the Confucian mythology. For instance, it is told that in 1945 the Great Leader was so busy with state affairs that he went twice by his home village without calling in because he hated to waste a minute of his time on anything other than caring about his people. Only on the third time did he agree, on the insistence of his comrades, to visit his native Mangyongdae. A similar story had been told of the famous Silla general Kim Yu-sin, although the original source is believed to be the story of the Chinese legendary emperor Yu.

The idea of "classless society" created in the DPRK and social harmony is strongly emphasized by the media. According to Kim Il Sung, "Communists love their own parents, wives, children, and their fellow comrades, respect the elderly, live frugal lives and always maintain a humble mien" .

Filial piety ? one of the basic features of the Confucian tradition ? remains a part of the official education. However, it plays a secondary role in relation to loyalty to the state, Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il. Special attention is paid to the theme of the Great Leader's benevolence and the idea that North Korean citizens must repay it with unquestioning loyalty and devotion, recalling old Confucian values of repaying debts of gratitude. It is believed that this theme was borrowed from the Japanese imperial propaganda. The North Korean press constantly repeats that the country's achievements are immense, and all that it all was achieved due to the wise leadership of the Great Leader and his heir. In kindergarten, children are taught to say "Thank you, Great Marshall Kim Il Sung!" every time something to eat is given to them and in this way learn to be grateful and loyal to the regime from the very beginning of their lives.

Some features of the "personality cult" in the DPRK make us believe that in its development it went far beyond the traditional Korean patterns. For example, the

importance of the Great Leader for the country was once again underlined by adopting of the *chuch' e* chronology, which starts not from the year when the state was founded, but from the one when Kim Il Sung was born.

The tradition of worshipping the Emperor in China and Japan found realization in assuming his divine origin. In North Korea, the head of the state is not only viewed as a most sacred figure, but is also defined as a divinity. The word "god" used toward Kim Il Sung first appeared in 1987 in official slogans praising his achievements in liberating the country. Some of them run as following: "Our Leader Kim Il Sung is the god of Korea, let us all (20 millions of people) treat General Kim with reverence (worship him)!" , "The Leader Kim Il Sung is the god of our whole nation!". An article entitled "Kim Il Sung is the God of Korea" published in the "*Ch'ollima*" magazine says that while since ancient times Jesus was called the benefactor who rescued the people from mischief and pain and offered them a paradise on earth, Kim Il Sung plays the same role towards North Koreans. The article runs: "Koreans, who could not overcome their ignorance for several thousand years, also prayed to God and worshipped him, believing that it was only him who would bring back to them their country which had been taken away by Japanese imperialists, and rescue them from the destiny of a ruined nation. However, the God couldn't bring them independence; it was Kim Il Sung who appeared in front of the 20 millions of Koreans who were waiting for a leader to save the nation which had fallen into great misery."

Kim Jong Il's divine origin is now being also actively emphasized. Thus, in 2000, in a congratulatory letter which Kim Jong Il received on the occasion of his birthday from O Ik Je, vice-chairman of the Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of the Fatherland, the author noted that Kim Jong Il was born, "endowed with the spirit of Mt. Paektu, the holy mountain of Tan'gun nation, and this was not only a great fortune for the sun's nation, but a happy and auspicious event for humankind in which they greeted the rise of a brilliant sun over the horizon of their new history" , and praised Kim Jong Il as a mythical hero.

As an important step toward further legitimization of Kim Il Sung's power, his supporters also glorified the "revolutionary spirit and deeds" of his grandparents, parents, and other relatives. Kim Il Sung's birthplace, Mangyongdae, was transformed into national shrine, to which millions of people make annual pilgrimage.

As we can see, North Korea cannot be viewed as an "atheistic" state ? the official religion is the cult of Kim Il Sung. North Korean Christians attending overseas conferences claim that there is no contradiction between Christian beliefs and the veneration of the Great Leader or his *chuch' e* philosophy.

The honorific language and its grammatical forms have also become a part of the "personality cult" . Thus, people are taught a special way of speaking towards Kim Il Sung, in terms of pronunciation, speed, and attitude. At school, when students read Kim Il Sung's writings, they are expected to do so "loudly, and slowly and with a feeling of respect" . The names of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il along with any quotation from their writings are always printed in a special bold font. Starting from the primary school, North Koreans are taught how to make correct sentences in which the leader and his son are mentioned. According to this "court grammar", these two sacred names must not be put in the middle or at the end of a phrase, but always at the beginning. ys at the beginning

North Korean TV broadcasting also has some special features of which the most conspicuous one is its artificially actuated intonation. To foreign listeners, this intonation is so strange and unnatural that it sounds as if the message on the air were appealing to God or some supernatural power. There are specific instructions for the occasion of reference to Kim Il-sung: a special honorific style of speech is recommended which covers a series of elaborate paradigms of affixes, such as honorific subject marker /-kkeso/ (-께서), a general honorific title /-nim/ (-님), etc. Above all, the speech tone must be modulated to one of solemnity and slower, precise when delivering Kim's teachings or directives (*kyosh*). Even the speech rate is specified differently: when Kim is quoted, it is encouraged that 250–260 syllables are to be spoken per minute while 260–270 for other messages. On the other hand, rules formulated on the basis of Kim Il Sung's style of speech and writing were advocated as the norm.

The reverse side of this extreme veneration of leaders turns out to be a complete obedience to them, which is demanded of every single citizen of North Korea. It is rather noteworthy that Hwang Chang Yop, former secretary of the KWP, defined the North Korean political system as slavery. This "inner slavery" is being offset and justified by stressing the danger of being enslaved by outer forces. One of the recent trends in social education can be characterized by following claims: "We should be free, not enslaved, which happens if we get occupied by Americans. If we lose socialism, we'll become American colony. Shall we live this way or shall we be poor, but strengthen national power and maintain our freedom?"

Closely related to Kim Il Sung's cult is the *chuch'e* ideology. It is believed to be a product of Kim Il Sung's thinking developed during the period of guerilla war against the Japanese. *Chuch'e* emphasizes the importance of developing the nation's potential using its own resources and reserves of human creativity and thus legitimizes cultural, economic, and political isolationism.

North Koreans themselves perceive the *chuch'e* ideas simply as a collection of thoughts and remarks by Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il. Their writings are extensively published, constantly commented upon and faithfully studied by the whole population during compulsory meetings. According to an old Confucian tradition, the crude memorising of long and boring texts is the main form of such study. It is said that students at Kim Il Sung University spend about a third of their time reading and memorising the works of the Kims.

The isolation of the DPRK reminds us of Korean foreign policy in the 19th C. and its consequences. The main reason why the Chosun dynasty came forward with the isolation policy was the understanding of the threat which Western powers represented to Korea. The rulers of Chosun were aware of the fate that had befallen China in consequence of continuing clashes with those nations. However, we shouldn't overlook another important reason – the fear of the spread of Catholicism, which was proclaimed a heterodox doctrine opposed to traditional Confucian teachings. Sometimes one gets an impression that North Korean policy-makers still have the same mode of consciousness as Taewongun did: surrounded by alien forces, they are trying to keep the status-quo and prevent public opposition by tightening control and cutting off relations with the outer world.

Chuch' e ideology allows North Korean authorities to effectively maintain political power by stressing the superiority of the state on the one hand and keep people ignorant of what is happening in the rest of the world on the other hand.

Nationalist propaganda was especially intensified in the 1990' s, after the collapse of socialist states in Western Europe and USSR, when the claims to be the only legitimate heir to the Communist tradition became a very important part of the official ideology. It seems that similar trends in the Confucian ideology prevailed in Korea were to be seen after the conquest of China by Manchurians and the fall of the Ming dynasty. The literati started to call Chosun "a small China" , by this meaning the importance of preserving the true teachings of Confucianism, since China itself was ruled by barbarians.

The claims of superiority of the North Korean state encouraged by *chuch' e* ideas lead to development of nationalistic theories in historical and other sciences. Any foreign influence is rejected by North Korean historiography. Starting from the early 1990s official historians began to insist that Korea was among the few places on earth where the humankind originated. Archaeologists even claimed that they had found the remnants of king Tangun and proved that he did establish the Old Chosun kingdom in 2333 BC. The fact that the tomb was discovered in Pyongyang had to prove the idea that it had always been the capital of the country.

In Confucianism, the cult of ancestors (dynasty founder and his successors) played a great role in legitimising of the supreme power. The king originally acted as master of rites for all national rituals, and government administration and religious rituals were thus part of the same social institution.

In North Korea, the state ancestors' cult has been transformed into worshipping Tan' gun, who was proclaimed the ancestral father of the Korean nation. On October 3, ceremonies for commemorating the foundation day of Korea by Tan' gun are held at the mausoleum of Tan' gun in Kangdong County, Pyongyang. The ceremonies are usually attended by high officials, which has to underline their importance. On other occasions praying ceremonies also take place with ritual prayers being read out. For instance, according to the KCNA, on August 19, 2001, a prayer was made which hoped that Tan' gun would open wide the door of reunification, the cherished desire of the nation, and bring eternal prosperity to it.

It has been noticed, however, that the family ancestors worship (*chesa*), which still plays a visible role in South Koreans' life, was abolished in North Korea. We can come to a conclusion that it was replaced by the cult of the Great Leader. Thus, on the main national holiday in the DPRK – 16 April (Kim Il Sung' s birthday), all North Koreans are obliged to attend the Kim Il Song monument closest to their home, where they carefully execute several full bows and place flowers on the statue's pedestal. These same rites are also performed during certain other holidays.

In everyday life, traces of Western influence in culture are also being gradually eliminated. For example, the KWP organ "Nodong Sinmun" in an article discussing etiquette when people greet each other recently recommended that North Koreans exchange greetings by bowing the head or the waist, avoiding handshakes as much as possible. Greeting by bowing one' s waist represents "Korean traditional style of etiquette, while handshakes, "originating in the West have nothing to do with our noble traditional etiquette" .

Handshakes, furthermore, the daily says, is unsanitary because of possible germ transfer through physical contacts.

In North Korea, total control over the lives of people is achieved through the institution of collective responsibility ? also a deeply rooted in the East Asian political culture, but now unique for North Korea, feature. The entire population is divided into so-called "people's groups" ? *inminban*, and each of these groups is headed by an official who is responsible for every event under his control. That is why the *inminbanjang* carefully monitors the loyalty and morality of those under his responsibility. It is rather noteworthy that a similar institution with same functions existed in Korea during the Japanese rule period.

North Korean authorities also keep surveillance over the population by means of mobilizing informants. The organization tasked with constant monitoring of the moves of North Korean citizens and preventing and eliminating dissident elements is the State Security Agency (SSA), the flagship of which is the Counterintelligence Division (CID) that conducts both investigation and intelligence functions. The SSA also has a separate Investigation Division, which, however, deals only with the so-called "incidental cases" such as graffiti and leaflets denouncing Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il and damage to their portraits. According to Song In-song, who served with the SSA before he defected to the South late in the 1990s, the basic duty of the CID (Counterintelligence Division) is to thwart and clamp down on what is called anti-revolutionary offenses. To fulfill this task, the division monitors residents day and night by recruiting informants from among the public. For this surveillance, a State Security Agency officer (normally a security guidance officer of the CID) directs 50 informants, each of whom is responsible for watching 20 people. This means that each SSA officer watches the moves of 1,000 residents. It may be said that 20,000 SSA officers and 1 million informants under their direction conduct surveillance over an estimated 20 million North Koreans. The number of such informants could be even larger because some of them may overlap with one another, while some of them keep on doing the job life long. Some sources say that about half of the entire North Korean population may have experienced working as an informant at one time or another.

Another (and maybe the most effective) means of political control in North Korea – the system of collective guilt, when persons, who committed a crime, are punished together with their families – also seems to be originating from the Chosun dynasty political culture. In North Korea, families of people who fled to the South during the Korean War, families of prisoners and families of people punished for political crimes are defined as "hostile forces". It is believed that now not a few people in the DPRK would be ready to give up their lives and fight against the regime, but do not dare to risk the lives of their family members.

Obviously, under such conditions activities of any organized opposition groups are impossible.

Specifics of the North Korean social life (the phenomenon of total obedience, for example) can also be scrutinized from a different point of view.

In South Korea, mass behavior of North Koreans has also been studied by theoretical means, possibly due to the lack of sources and available material. Describing the phenomenon of the mass obedience of citizens, scholars have used the human needs

theory by Abraham Maslow (1908–70), who created his famous hierarchy of needs, putting the five layers of all human needs into following order: the physiological needs, the needs for safety and security, the needs for love and belonging, the needs for esteem, and the need to actualize the self. He insisted that each of the upper needs appeared only after the previous one had been satisfied. Taking this into consideration, we can have one of the reasons of North Korean population's low social activity. Especially during the last decade, when hunger persisted in Korea, people, who were reported to be starving to death, had to concentrate on the survival problem. One could argue that even during the years of relative prosperity in North Korea, the situation wasn't different. The answer within the frame of Maslow's theory is that needs of the second level – safety and security – remained unfilled because of the high activity of the repressive system and the official propaganda, which created and carefully nourished the image of enemies of North Korea. The feeling of insecurity stimulated by authorities not only made people indifferent to the needs of upper layers, but also allowed the government to lay the blame for its own failures on South Korean and American spy activities. For example, in 1997 former KWP agriculture secretary Suh Kwang Hi was executed for his alleged responsibility for the North's agricultural fiasco. At the same time authorities exhumed and punished the buried body of Kim Man Kum (died in 1984), Suh's predecessor, who recommended Suh as his successor in 1973. The exhumation of the remains of Kim from the Patriots Cemetery and shooting at them can be viewed as a modern version of the ancient practice of exhuming and decapitating the dead body. As more and more people starved to death due to food shortage since Kim Il Sung died in July 1994, the KWP, in an attempt to placate the public, trumped up an accusation that Suh Kwang Hi and Kim Man Kum were "spies of the American imperialists".

Little pieces of the Confucian cultural tradition can easily be found in everyday life of the North Korean state. Even if they don't reflect any trends in the masses' mentality, we can regard them as a proof that North Korea has not only retained ancient Korean traditions, but also modified and hyperbolised them. Sometimes the forms that they took are rather strange: an example is huge inscriptions of official slogans in such beautiful mountains as Kungangsan. It is said that Kim Il Sung himself once remarked that "it would be nice to carve out some good inscriptions on the rocks for future generations". Although carving out poetry (or just travellers' names) on a suitable rock has long been the norm for rich travellers in traditional Korea, these old inscriptions were quite small, and blended with the environment, especially since they were essentially unofficial in nature. Kim Il Sung's modern propaganda art seems to be an ugly exaggeration of old Korean traditio

Although traditional values play a great role in the life of South Koreans, too, in the way of life and mentality of the people in the South and North we can see sharp differences. The facts that South Korea's population is 2 times larger than that of North Korea, and the living standard is about 5 times as high, that the RK joined the world's economic and information systems and the DPRK remains an isolated country, had a great impact on the mentality and life of Koreans. The intensity of personal and social life in the North is much lower than that in the South. Life in South Korea is quiet and slow-going, people are used to moderate consumption and not used to expressing their emotions, they look concerned and seldom smile. They are law-abiding, hardworking, with a well-developed spirit of collectivism and patriotism. Some researchers believe that this observation partly explains the fact that there haven't been any mass uprisings like revolts, demonstrations, religious or social protests on a large scale during 50 years of North Korean existence,

while in South Korea emotions of large groups of people (like university movement in April 1960, Kwangju uprising in 1980 or student demonstrations in the end of 1980s) played a great role in the political life of the country. These scholars insist that 2 ethno-psychological branches of Korean nation have started to develop on the Korean peninsula: they have special features of language and culture, different ways of life, values and interests, and the inherited differences in behavior are very likely to keep existing even in case when life standards become similar in both parts of Korea.

The question whether any changes are possible to appear in the mentality and behaviour of North Koreans can be answered positively if we take a look at the life of such border cities as Sinuiju and Hyesan. The life there seems to be quite different than in the rest of the country. The main reason is that the population, disregarding government prohibitions, has economic relations with the continent. These cities are not as tidy and clean as Pyongyang, but their population is being described as more lively and rich. Their way of thinking is also reported to be much more liberal. Young couples speeding on motorcycles and ordinary citizens criticizing ranking party officials are often seen there. Many people who have quit their normal jobs are engaged in commerce. Young women follow the latest fashion so much that they are said to influence even those in Pyongyang.

Evading surveillance by authorities, some border area residents watch Chinese television. Among the people a perception prevails that “becoming a KWP member is no use. Money is almighty.” The economy-first way of life, to an extent of giving rise to an impression that everyone is bent on commerce, confronts the solid wall of politics in the North. Such perceptions spread inland aboard trains and influence a shift in the consciousness of North Koreans. That is what made Kim Jong Il make the following remarks that are widely circulated in the North: “I would rather see Sinuiju disappear from the map” and “Even without Hyesan, we can carry out the social revolution” . Due to discord with the central government the border area suffers from no small amount of disadvantages. The residents of this area are liable to be labelled as “subversive” . Open executions take place most often in the border region, purportedly as a means of rooting out rampant crimes involving wanderers and smugglers. Despite of these measures, however, the population of these regions seems to prefer the capitalistic way of life to that of their fellow citizens in Pyongyang.

Conclusion

Taking into consideration the above examples, we can conclude that despite of the fact that Confucianism in North Korea does not serve as formal ideology of social ethic, its most totalitarian and hierarchical themes have been adopted by the Communist regime and indoctrinated into the political culture of the DPRK. As time goes by it is becoming more and more obvious that the development of North Korean society into what we can observe today took place under a very strong influence of Korean cultural tradition, which also became transformed by decades of development during of the Japanese colonial rule.

Several generations have already been born and bred inside a society of this specific type. Mutual isolation and different development patterns produced considerable divergences in mass consciousness of South and North Korea

That is what makes the study of North Korean mass consciousness not only interesting by itself, but also gives a practical meaning to it. As soon as Korea becomes unified (no

matter when it happens), the task of cultural assimilation of the North and South will stand as a most vital one. There is no need to say that cultural differences in people's mentality will create a tense social atmosphere that will last for many years. Social turbulence leading to economic and political chaos is very likely to appear unless more attention is paid to cultural and psychological issues.

The lack of reliable information remains the main obstacle in studies of North Korean society and mentality, so that exploration of this field still lies ahead.