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IN SEARCH OF A NEW IDENTITY:
REVIVAL OF TRADITIONAL POLITICS AND
MODERNISATION IN POST-KIM IL SUNG
NORTH KOREA

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Since the disintegration of the communist camp the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea has undergone a profound change in interpreting its raison d’être in the world. Its leadership strongly believes that it has a mission to carry forward by itself the ‘true’ civilisation of communism abandoned by its former allies. This new sense of mission has sharpened the regime’s insecurity, leading it to explore a nuclear option and redouble its efforts to militarise. It also sparked domestic debate within the ruling class regarding ideological orthodoxy, what was and what was not the legacy of the Great Leader, and what the scope of authority of his successor ought to be. This in turn led to the re-emergence of latent factional disputes within the Korean Workers’ Party along ideological and personalistic lines.

In addition, with the demise of President Kim Il Sung, the North Korean political world came to witness a new kind of politics practised by his heir, son Kim Jong-il: instead of the politics of patriarchy he was compelled to engage in the politics of filial piety. Lacking impeccable and long-standing credentials and the leadership qualities of his father, Kim Jong-il had to strengthen his own legitimacy by resorting to time-honoured Korean traditions—preaching traditional Confucian values to the public, and establishing that he was a man of virtue by performing all the required filial rituals at the court.

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Introduction

Today the paramount fact of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea’s (DPRK) political life is that almost nine months after the Great Leader Kim Il Sung’s demise the people, the party, and the state he left behind do not have a formally pronounced and fully legitimised ruler. The official mourning period continues and there is no end to it in sight. Commemorative rallies are held and other proper rituals are performed when due according to the ancient codes for mourning the ancestors. The filial piety of his son, and still widely recognised heir apparent, Kim Jong-il, seems to know no boundaries. It is as if he were competing with the sage kings of the past for virtue, honour, and recognition. He appears still to be reluctant to step out of the mighty shadow of his father into the leadership limelight and to take over the late Kim Senior’s duties. One cannot help wondering whether bureaucratic rationality gives way to tradition which appears to reign in Pyongyang.

Against this background, the persistent focus of North Korean studies on the sole question of who runs the show in Pyongyang, albeit important, seems to be missing a whole new reality developing in North Korea. It is not an exaggeration to say that in the last nine months the country has experienced much more subtle, and not so subtle, changes in its perceptions of itself and its place in the world order, in its belief system and its élite’s action program, in the values, attitudes, and orientations of its leaders and common folks toward the polity, the government, and its policies, in the way the political game is played in town, than it has ever seen in its post-Korean War history.

The purpose of this paper is to address this unnoticed new reality and to analyse some of the ideological, political, economic, and psychological phenomena lying outside the ‘realm of succession politics’ that have been occurring in North Korean society since Kim Il Sung’s demise. This research effort incorporates the rich history of traditional politics in Korea in an attempt to identify in what direction the search of a new identity is going and how it affects the politics and government policies and reshapes state-society relations in the DPRK.

Rediscovering a new mission: old wine in new bottles?

The DPRK enters a new era in 1995. No more the autarchy and populism of 1991–92, when the communist camp was collapsing all around it and the regime in
Pyongyang attempted to shut its borders tight to potentially subversive influences from its former allies while introducing a number of economically-populist measures at home.

Gone is the virulent nationalism of 1993 and most part of 1994, when the country was in almost total diplomatic isolation and under heavy international pressure caused by its attempts to develop an indigenous nuclear capability. The year 1995 is likely to become a year of the revival of traditional values in politics and more persistent efforts at modernisation and a gradual opening up of the economy. Among others, one of the reasons for this is a deepening national and political identity crisis in Pyongyang, which, since the demise of the Great Leader Kim Il Sung, seems to be conducting an intensified search for a new identity. There are already some profound changes in the behaviour of political actors in North Korea.

I believe that the magnitude of the current identity crisis in the North is such that it can be compared only to the predicament in which the Yi dynasty found itself when its official sponsor and benefactor—the Chinese Ming—collapsed under the attacks of the ‘barbarian’ Ch’ing in the middle of the seventeenth century.

The Yi kings espoused the Confucian value system which justified their ‘mandate of heaven’ to rule Korea. But the Confucian world view also placed China at the centre of the world order. The Yi adoption of Confucianism led to the acceptance of this Confucian world order in which Korea was placed in a peripheral and subservient position to the central kingdom. Thus, the investiture of the Korean ruler by the Son of Heaven (the Chinese emperor) came to acquire both real and symbolic importance. On the one hand, the founding of the Yi state was based on commitment to the Confucian ideal, and the founders took their inspiration for the Yi polity from the classical model. Things Chinese were emulated, the Ming reign year and Ming court dress were voluntarily used by the Yi court. On the other hand, the investiture symbolised the tributary status of Yi Korea to China. Investiture also symbolised peace and good will between two countries, and mutual protection against foreign invasions. Most importantly, it symbolised a definite and secure place for the Yi monarchy in the hierarchy of an orderly universe. Not only did it give Yi Koreans a sense of security in knowing that the world order was intact, it literally provided them with military security.¹

That is why, according to JaHyun Kim Haboush, the demise of the Ming dynasty in 1644 was a truly traumatic event for Yi Korea.² The replacement of a

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¹ When the Japanese invaded Korea in 1592-1598, Ming China sent a large and badly needed military contingent and saved the Yi dynasty from the brink of collapse. This military assistance sealed spiritual bonds between the two countries in blood.

² In this historical account I rely on Dr Haboush, A Heritage of Kings: One Man’s Monarchy in the Confucian World, Columbia University Press, New York, 1988.
Chinese ruling house by the barbarian Manchus in the central kingdom disturbed their sense of the Confucian world order. This was tantamount to the disintegration of civilisation, and thereby it threatened the Korean political and cultural identity. This was accompanied by a sense of anxiety over the survival of the Yi monarchy, which might be challenged by the rise of a pro-Ch'ing group. Though this did not happen, the political and intellectual repercussions of dealing with this event lasted almost a century.

Three hundred and fifty years later, in the 1990s, the Kim dynasty and socialist regime in the DPRK find themselves in a strikingly similar predicament. For fifty years, Kim Il Sung and the DPRK's ruling class have espoused the communist value system. Kim Il Sung was installed in power by the Soviet Army that liberated the northern part of the Korean peninsula from the Japanese colonial rulers in August 1945. Communism in its Marxist–Leninist form was imported to North Korea primarily from the Soviet Union and to a lesser degree from People's Republic of China (PRC) and the southern part of Korea. The adoption of communism led to the acceptance of the Soviet-dictated and China-shared communist world view, with the USSR being the heart of the world-wide communist movement and the DPRK being its loyal satellite at the socialist periphery. The founding of the DPRK was based on commitment to the imported communist ideal. From early on, the DPRK emulated the classical Soviet model of development. Belonging to the Soviet-led socialist camp also meant peace and good will between the two countries and mutual protection against foreign invasions. It provided the North Korean ruling élite with a sense of domestic and external, including military, security. In addition, it symbolised a definite and secure place for the Kim dynasty in the hierarchy of the socialist camp and the international world order.

That is why the demise of the communist system world-wide, especially the breakup of the USSR and economic reforms in the PRC, was such a catastrophic event for the North Korean political psyche, comparable only to the trauma experienced by the Yi kings after the collapse of the Ming dynasty. The overthrow of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) by ‘bourgeois political forces—remnants of the evil capitalist past’ and the disintegration of the political centre of communist civilisation undermined their view of the communist world order. This was tantamount to the disintegration of civilisation itself, and thereby it threatened Korean political and cultural identity based on communist values and alliances with its communist big brothers. This is accompanied by a sense of anxiety over the survival of the Kim regime itself, which might be challenged by the rise of a pro-Western group or the threat of a South-led absorption-style unification. Certainly, the political and intellectual repercussions of this event are likely to be enormous and will last for many years.
Furthermore, what emerged from the Korean recognition of Ch’ing China as a permanent reality was the perception shared by kings Hyojong (1649–1659) and Hyonjong (1659–1674) that Korea was now the only bastion of true Confucian civilisation and that, as the sole custodian of the civilised tradition which was lost in China, the Yi monarchy had to be guarded with an even greater zeal. In this sense, the Yi state was now equated with civilisation, and the fate of the world order was deemed dependent upon it. Historical records indicate that the majority of the political and intellectual élite shared this new sense of mission. However, this new missionary identity also caused the emergence of three serious problems in the Yi political world. First, their sense of insecurity in this emerging new world grew dramatically, especially given the devastating defeats suffered by King Injo’s armies in 1627 and in 1636–37 from the Manchu invasions. This made his successor, King Hyojong, obsessed with military security issues and forced him into a defence build-up and partial militarisation of Korean society. Second, this new missionary vision was followed by an extreme concern with orthodoxy in the seventeenth century, causing ferocious factional clashes within the ruling élite. Third, the dramatic demise of the Ming dynasty created an insurmountable legitimacy problem for the Yi dynasty. The Yi king had to continue to receive investiture from the now ‘illegitimate’ Son of Heaven, the Ch’ing emperor. Despite the Koreans’ contemptuous view of the Ch’ing dynasty as barbarian usurpers, it still was the powerful de facto ruler of China, and the Yi dynasty was its tributary state. Since the Korean capitulation in 1637, the Yi court had to transfer to the Ch’ing all the rituals that it once performed to the Ming. The contradiction in this was obvious—the Yi monarchy needed Ch’ing investiture for its legitimation and survival, but its survival was perceived as the preservation of a civilisation of which the Manchus were the antithesis. In the eighteenth century, it became a progressively more intricate task to draw symbols of authority from the past and present Chinas.

In the same vein, what emerges from the North Korean recognition of a bourgeois Russia and a rapidly capitalising China as a permanent, not temporary, reality is the perception that Korea is now the only bastion of the true communist civilisation and that, as the sole custodian of the civilised tradition which was lost both in Russia and, apparently, in China, the Kim regime has to be guarded with an even greater zeal and skill. In this sense, the North Korean state is now equated with civilisation, and the fate of the world order is officially proclaimed to be dependent upon it. Reportedly, this new sense of mission is shared by the entire political and intellectual élite in the DPRK. This élite does its best to project an image of absolute unity and total solidarity within its own ranks. However, as in the case of their predecessors, the current rulers in Pyongyang, obviously, have a growing sense of insecurity in this emerging new world and make every attempt to keep external and domestic matters under their firm control. It is no wonder that
after the abandonment of the DPRK by its Soviet ally in the late 1980s the
Pyongyang government decided to explore a nuclear option in order to eliminate its
emerging strategic vulnerability and to ensure its military security.

In seventeenth century traditional Korean society, the new sense of mission
effectively eliminated the possibility of the rise of a pro-Ch’ing group. However, at
the court there were differing opinions on the question of how best to fulfil this
mission and the respective roles the king and the bureaucracy should play in it.

According to Professor Haboush, two groups, the Namin and the Soin,
emerged and engaged in intensive factional conflicts. The Namin, headed by Yun
Hyu, essentially saw civilisation as the entire span of human experience, at least
from the era of sage kings. Viewing civilisation as constantly evolving and seeing
the Chinese centre of civilisation defeated, they insisted on sufficient scope for Yi
Korea’s role as the perpetuator of civilisation. Yun Hyu held that one should only
keep the spirit of previous sages such as Confucius or Chu Hsi, but should not
necessarily remain bound by their precepts or doctrines. However, the Soin, headed
by Song Si-yol, maintained a more rigid position. Regarding the Chu Hsi
philosophy as the peak of human achievement and Chu Hsi orthodoxy as the
essence of civilisation, Song Si-yol held to the view that the best way to perpetuate
civilisation was to adhere to Chu Hsi orthodoxy as closely as possible. The entire
scholarly establishment was embroiled in the issue of what orthodoxy should be.

In addition, these two camps had contrasting opinions of the scope of
monarchical authority. Yun Hyu took a royal supremacist view: the king’s
authority should not be called into question and whatever moral counselling and
advice officials might offer him they should adhere to his own judgement at the
end. On the contrary, Song Si-yol, considering scholar–officials as the rightful heirs
to Chu Hsi philosophy, saw them as guardians of this tradition, and, therefore,
believed that they should have the right to evaluate the king’s credentials in every
disputable issue. This contest was never resolved, and different kings used it
differently according to their liking and ability.

Against this historical background, it is not surprising that the newly-
discovered missionary zeal of the Kim dynasty aimed at proselytising Korean-style
communism world-wide is accompanied by an extreme concern with communist
orthodoxy in the DPRK. Although this new sense of mission seems to somewhat
decrease the possibility of the rise of a pro-Western factional group within the
framework of the existing political regime, one can safely argue that there are
differing opinions on the question of how best to fulfil this mission and the
respective roles the leader, the party and the bureaucracy should play in it.

The existence of two groups at least is evident, and they seem to be engaged
in intensive factional debate. The pragmatic wing, headed by the Korean Workers’
Party (KWP) Secretary Kim Yong-sun (who is known to express the views of Kim
Jong-il himself), essentially sees civilisation as the entire span of human experience, at least from the era of the mythical founder of the Korean nation—Tangun. Viewing civilisation as constantly evolving, they give sufficient scope to the post-Kim North Korean role as the perpetuator of civilisation, leaving plenty of room for themselves for experiments in domestic policies and advocating multidirectionality in foreign policy. They seem to maintain that one should keep the spirit of the late Great Leader alive but, with all due respect, should not remain bound by his prescriptions or doctrines. However, the orthodox wing, apparently led by the KWP Secretary in charge of party ideology, Hwang Chang-yop (known to express the opinions of a more conservative elder generation), advocates a more rigid position. Regarding Marxist–Leninist philosophy and Kim Il Sung’s interpretation thereof as the peak of human achievement and Kim Il Sung’s orthodoxy as the essence of civilisation, the orthodox wing hold to the view that the best way to perpetuate civilisation and KWP rule is to adhere to Kim Il Sung’s ideas as closely as possible.

In addition, these two camps seem to have differing opinions on the scope of the leader’s authority. Kim Yong-sun takes a leader supremacist view—Kim Jong-il’s authority, as his father’s in the past, should not be limited or called into question and whatever recommendations and advice party and state officials might offer him should be offered in this context. On the contrary, Hwang Chang-yop and most of Kim Jong-il’s former tutors, regarding the KWP Central Committee members as the rightful heirs to Kim Il Sung philosophy, see themselves as guardians of Kim Il Sung’s traditions by whom his successor’s credentials should be evaluated and his aspirations held in check. Not only do they want Kim Jong-il to rely on the collective leadership and advice of his fellow KWP Central Committee members in his policies, but also, paradoxically, they would want to make some major institutional changes, in reality emasculating the Dear Leader in regard to the powers his father used to have and at the same time elevating his symbolic status and insulating him from potential public criticisms. In this regard, despite some deeply-seated historical animosities, the role of the emperor in the Japanese political system is sometimes cited by some North Koreans as one of the ways to resolve their dilemma.

These debates today, however, are clearly placed in a broader context of the juch’e ideology, which might be seen as leaning increasingly toward neo-Confucianism which is reintroduced and interpreted presumably by Kim Jong-il himself. The ancestral tradition is used by him as a source of authority and a blessing for his own legitimacy. In this regard, he seems to follow the example of some individual Korean reformers of the past who were known for their appeals to the authority of the classical era or its texts in order to bypass the imperfect present.
The politics of patriarchy versus the politics of filial piety

Kim Jong-il seems to be inclined to adopt a new rallying cry in this post-Kim Il Sung era. As we will see below, he has recently mobilised some symbols—family, patriarchy, filial loyalty, honour, and benevolent love, and so on—which we can see as Confucian in origin. To be sure, he is not identifying them as Confucian because *juch'e* ideology would prohibit it. He may be even doing it unconsciously. But these traditional Korean values have such deep roots in Korean behaviour and the Korean psyche that almost anybody who would try to invoke them is likely to hit a homerun in Korea. Moreover, with the demise of the world socialist system abroad, the gradual natural disappearance of the revolutionary generation of Communists and the continuous failure of communist economics at home, the grip of Marxist–Leninist ideas and practices in the DPRK is being eased and weeded out. Correspondingly, this gives way to a revival of traditional values in the North Korean polity, especially those frequently found during the Yi dynasty, revolving mostly around Confucian themes.

One of the most remarkable features of contemporary North Korean politics is a dramatic shift from the politics of patriarchy to the politics of filial piety. This transition was caused by the demise of the Great Leader Kim Il Sung and consequent succession by his son Kim Jong-il in July 1994. One can detect the following differences between these two traditional modes of Korean political life.

At the symbolic level, Kim Il Sung was unanimously recognised as the almighty patriarch of the North Korean people with unchallengeable and limitless authority and rock-solid and impeccable legitimacy to rule. Kim Jong-il, in contrast, has yet to prove to the people and the ruling clan that he is flawless in regard to his filial duties and reverence for his late father, as well as he is well prepared to handle affairs of the state and is aware of the concerns of the people, in order to establish his own legitimacy and gain their acceptance as an appropriate ruler.

Nowadays, a new significance is assigned to the ritual aspect of politics. In particular, Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong-il differ remarkably in how they relate to the question of their respective attitudes toward, and the importance of, one’s ancestors in determining one’s future prospects as a legitimate and successful ruler. Kim Il Sung did not owe his accession to his parents; he owed it to himself and his Soviet handlers. Nevertheless, later in his rule he did pay tribute to his father Kim Hyon-jik, and his mother and his great-grandfather. But he began to develop their mythology, to confer upon them posthumous honorary titles and build their cults only after he consolidated his own grip on power and in the context of rewriting Korean history and promoting his own revolutionary and nationalist credentials. Later, as a patriarch himself, he made sure that the newly established fame of his ancestors would not outshine his own star and greatness. That is why he was well-
measured and very reserved in staging and performing all the necessary rituals required to honour his ancestors.

In contrast, Kim Jong-il owes his crown to his father. Therefore, for him the ritual side of the succession is extremely important. For he knows that he will be judged as a genuinely legitimate heir to his father by the ruling clan and upholders of tradition on the basis of how properly he pays his dues and how much respect and filial piety he shows to the late Kim Il Sung. Korean history teaches to never underestimate the power of rituals. In Korea, rituals are the place where problems arise and are ultimately resolved. In particular, Kim Jong-il is faced with two controversial issues.

First, he has to identify a place for his father in a long and outstanding row of Korean rulers and in Korean history in general. This is not easy because he has to make it acceptable for his contemporary audience and at the same time make sure that despite inevitable political and ideological changes to come it will last long enough into the future to outlive his political opponents who would like to see his cult demolished.

The status of the ruler in the ancestral hierarchy is an extremely important issue because traditionally in Korea these authoritative judgements on the father did affect the legitimacy of his successor. Interestingly, Kim Jong-il does not seek to eternalise his father amongst that row of the classics of communist ideas such as Marx, Engels, Lenin, Mao Zedong, Gramsci and so on, which would appear only natural in a society adhering to communist ideals and principles. Nor does he attempt to place the Great Leader among famous monarchs of pre-revolutionary Korea. What he seems to be inclined to do is to put his father—‘the father of the Korean nation’ who ruled it for almost half a century from 1945 to 1994—at par with the widely-recognised mythical father of the Korean nation—the founder of Old Chosun, Tangun, who is said to have lived 5000 years ago.

Obviously, the recent obsession of Kim Jong-il and some of his close associates with building a cult of Tangun alongside the Great Leader’s personality cult is part of intra-Korean legitimation politics. But it enhances the legitimacy of Kim Jong-il in domestic politics too, because, apparently, in this way he obligingly fulfils one of the last wishes of Kim Il Sung who wanted himself to be compared to, and remembered in history as a ruler of Korea as significant as Tangun—the mythical founder of the first Korean state, Kochosun. As the KCNA has revealed recently, ‘on July 6, 1994, two days before his death, President Kim examined the final design of the tomb [of Tangun]...and instructed officials concerned to rebuild the tomb of the king “in a short period”’. Consequently, after his death, the Tangun’s Tomb Restoration Committee, headed by Prime Minister Kang, was set up, and on 11 October 1994, an official ceremony was held to celebrate the completion of the reconstruction of the Tomb of Tangun where Premier Kang Song-
san delivered an address which emphasised that ‘this is a precious fruition of the noble intention and wise guidance of the respected leader Comrade Kim Il Sung and the Dear Leader Kim Jong-il’. On 30 October 1994, Kim Jong-il ‘inspected himself’ the Tomb and ‘expressed his deep satisfaction with the successful survey, design and splendid construction of the tomb as instructed by the late President Kim Il Sung’. If it were not for the purpose of legitimising Kim Jong-il’s filial rule on the grounds of his being an heir of virtue striving to elevate his father’s status even after his death, I cannot imagine any other reason why this issue of the reconstruction of Tangun’s Tomb should occupy so much time and government agenda during the official mourning period and amidst very complicated and hard-nosed US–DPRK nuclear negotiations.

The second issue appears to be symbolic but has a close relationship to the first one and has a heavy bearing on Kim Junior’s chances of succeeding in establishing himself as a virtuous leader deserving of his father’s seat. It is the question of the length of the mourning period and how soon he can officially assume the titles and duties left by his father. Again, this is not a new issue in Korean history. When King Hyojong passed away in 1659, a severe dispute erupted between the Soin faction and the Namin faction, with the former advocating a one-year long mourning period whereas the latter pushed for a three-year long mourning period. This dispute lasted for months, led to factional warfare, virtually paralysed the government, and ended up in bloodshed at the royal court. Similar factional disputes over ritual matters, resulting in bloody confrontations, erupted after the alleged fratricide poisoning of King Kyongjong in 1724, and filicide by suffocation of Prince Sado in 1762 and so on. Given such a violent history and the explosive potential of the mourning rites issue, including the length of the official mourning period, it is very important for Kim Jong-il to play his filial role correctly this time.

How is he doing in this respect? Not very well. Against a background of incessantly-performed mourning rituals, like commemorative mass rallies, official wreath-laying ceremonies, continuous praise in the news media and so on, paradoxically, there seems to be no consensus among Kim Jong-il’s advisers as to how long the mourning period should last and what Kim Jong-il should to do in the meantime to prove his filial virtues and loyalty to the memories and the cause of

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5 Although a colleague of mine in Moscow sarcastically taunted last October that the real purpose for ‘reconstructing Tangun’s Tomb’ might be to construct a Mausoleum inside or nearby where Kim Il Sung himself could be buried later. I have no comment.
6 In 1659, Song Si-yol’s faction won and Yun Hyu’s faction was purged. In contrast, in 1674, when the same dispute arose again, following the death of King Hyonjong, Yun Hyu’s faction won and Song si-yol’s faction was purged.
his late father. First, the official North Korean press suggested that the mourning period was over when Kim Jong-il sent a Letter of Thanks to the entire Korean people on 28 October 1994, expressing his appreciation for their unanimous mourning and heartfelt condolences and vowing to remember this for ever. Three weeks later, on 19 November 1994, the same central newspapers published Kim Jong-il’s instructions to the Korean People’s Army and the Administrative Council dated 9 November and asserted that ‘these are the first public orders ever issued by Secretary Kim Jong-il since the passing away of the late President Kim Il Sung on July 8. The decision indicates the mourning period for the father of the nation is over and the country is now ready to resume its full-scale socialist construction’. However, in late December 1994–early January 1995, North Korean diplomats in European capitals, Moscow and Beijing used the same mourning period argument to justify Kim Jong-il’s failure to assume the top posts in the state and the party and to deliver the annual New Year Address to the Nation. In the meantime, the Republic of Korea’s (ROK) Chief of Intelligence has suggested lately, on the basis of confidential information at his disposal, that the mourning in the DPRK might last until May or even October 1995. Does history repeat itself, and could we be witnessing another potentially politically disruptive dispute in the making?

At the political level, the major difference between the politics of patriarchy and the politics of filial piety lies in the respective relationships between these two rulers and the state and party bureaucracy in the North Korean polity. Traditionally, as early as the Silla unification in 668 AD, the Korean polity had been characterised by intense rivalry between royal and bureaucratic power. In the second half of the twentieth century, in the beginning of his rule, Kim Il Sung did not have to compete against the bureaucratic machine: it was all but dismantled by the Soviet occupational forces after the Japanese surrender in August 1945. Hence, for some time there even existed a bureaucratic power vacuum in the North. Consequently, Kim Il Sung had the luxury of assembling a bureaucratic apparatus to his own liking. Later, as a paramount leader, he managed to subdue and stand above the newly rebuilt North Korean bureaucratic power. Throughout his rule he was feared by all the state and party officials of any rank. His personal vision was at the foundation of national development, and his thinking determined the daily

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7 First, in an interview with the German daily Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, held in late December 1994, Foreign Minister Kim Yong-nam stressed the ‘traditional three-year mourning period’ in Korea when explaining the reason for the delay in Kim Jong-il’s assumption of the top offices of the KWP and the state. ‘Because the entire country considers itself to have lost a parent with the death of Great Leader Kim Il Sung’, he said, ‘it is impossible therefore to hold large political rallies at the moment’.

Second, on New Year’s eve, the DPRK Ambassador to the PRC, Chu Chang-jun, said that his country ‘remained in deep mourning’ for the late President Kim Il Sung and was not ready to appoint his son officially as his successor, according to the French News Agency AFP. Chu also denied reports that a regular session of the SPA, which nominally elects the president, was at hand.
course of domestic and foreign policies in the DPRK. He cleared policy proposals for
the government’s implementation. He was the arbiter of high-level bureaucratic
disputes and the prophet and teacher of the ideological orthodoxy. His judgement
was final and mandatory for prompt execution.

However, at present, with the demise of the strong patriarchal leader, one
can witness a new resurgence of the bureaucratic power in North Korean politics.
Bureaucratic autonomy is clearly on the rise. In part, this may be due to a special
relationship which exists between Kim Jong-il and some state and party officials
surrounding him. Many of them, including Defence Minister O Jin-u, Vice-
Presidents Kim Yong-ju and Lee Jong-ok, Foreign Minister Kim Yong-nam, Prime
Minister Kang Song-san, National Security Chief Paek Hak-nim and others, were
at various times his tutors before his accession to power. Moreover, they are all in
one way or another related by kinship ties to Kim Il Sung. As a result, although
they still emphasise bureaucratic loyalty to Kim Jong-il, their counsel, as policy
and moral advisers to the leader, seems to become more pervasive and persistent
and gain in frequency and strength. In a way, the period of tutelage still continues
for Kim Jong-il.

He has little choice, therefore, but to try to elevate his own authority by
being a virtuous student. In order to enhance his own claim to power, Kim Jong-il
has also to resort to invoking some native traditions, in particular those established
during the rule of sagacious kings. For he is faced with an enormously hard task
which has preoccupied each monarch in Korean history—‘to be a virtuous king by
bureaucratic standards while cultivating his own power’ (Haboush).

Especially telling from the standpoint of establishing Kim Jong-il’s
credentials as an enlightened ruler and virtuous student and scholar is his latest
rather creative treatise ‘Socialism is Science’ which was published in all major
newspapers in the DPRK on 1 November 1994. It went almost unnoticed in the
West. But in North Korea it made a great impression and was broadcast over the
radio seven times a day for several weeks in a row. Such enormous attention was
given to it not only because it was another work of the Dear Leader but, more
importantly, because under the same old name of juch’e Kim Jong-il, arguably,
iroduced a new system of thought, with accompanying changes in morals and
customs, by way of ‘the restoration of a right or legitimate tradition’, namely,
traditional Korean Confucian values. I would even go so far as calling it Kim Jong-
il’s post-Marxist Manifesto which states his political and moral credo to the public
for the first time after his father’s demise and without the latter’s clearance but
with implicit consent from his elder tutors.

8 I cite Kim Jong-il’s treatise from (Tokyo), no. 1, vol. 672, 5–12
November 1994.
Following the general thrust and main premise of all socialist and Confucian ideas, Kim Jong-il states up front that ‘the transition of a society based on individualism to a society based on collectivism which is man’s intrinsic need is an inevitable demand of historical development’ (p. 2). Then, stressing his differences with Marxism, he moves on to formulating his own ideology which obviously is rooted in a neo-Confucian value system. In his view, state–society relations ought to be built on a patriarchal basis, embedded in inter-human harmony: ‘in our country (DPRK), everyone regards and supports the leader as they would their own father. They trust and follow the party, regarding its embrace as that of their own mother...If politics of love and trust is to be exercised in a socialist society, the socialist party in power must be built into a motherly party...It is a true feature of our society that all its members form a large harmonious family. They trust, love and help each other, and enjoy a worthwhile and happy life together’ (p. 5).

The character features that in his opinion have been known to the Korean people ‘since olden times’ and that should be possessed and displayed by the common folks, include some of the Confucian norms of proper behaviour such as diligence, courage, a strong sense of justice, a noble sense of obligation, propriety, and a high sense of decorum (p. 5). He maintains that a man’s life ought to be ‘honourable’ (p. 3) and ‘noble’ (p. 4). As for a profile of the ideal leader, Kim Jong-il stresses virtue over competence and introduces the Confucian man of virtue into the debate about the future of socialism in Korea: ‘a political leader of socialism should be a master in leadership but, first of all, he must be a man of virtue who loves the people boundlessly...An incompetent political leader of socialism may bring about a delay in the development of socialist society, but one who has no virtue may betray the people and even lead socialism to ruin’ (p. 5). The leader by virtue is expected to rule in a benevolent fashion. Therefore, in his view, ‘love and trust constitute the essence of politics in socialist society...We call the politics of love and trust benevolent politics’ (p. 5). This benevolent attitude allows him to preach the idea of inclusivity: ‘we call our party’s benevolent politics all-embracing politics...Our party is responsible for everyone’s socio-political integrity and guides this’. And in a typical Confucian fashion emphasising the benefit of education he states that ‘even when a man has committed an error, our party doesn’t put him in the cold, but re-educates him to lead him onto the right track’ (p. 5).

Following his father’s earlier dictum, Kim Jong-il expects that state–society relations in the DPRK be characterised by the ‘single-hearted unity of the leader, party and the people, based on love and loyalty’ (p. 6). However, what is new in the treatise is Kim Jong-il’s reference to the people as ‘Heaven’. He twice quotes his father who, reportedly, ‘regarded the people as “heaven”’ and once even said that ‘the people are my God’ (p. 4). From the context, it is evident that Kim Jong-il implied reliance on the idea of the ‘mandate of heaven’ as a legitimising mechanism for post-Kim Il Sung Korea. People install rulers in power and people take power
away from them as happened in the former socialist countries. Therefore, heed the people's will and do not play with fire—that is the lesson Kim Jong-il seems to have drawn from the recent dissolution of the international socialist system and the abandonment of communism on a world scale.

To sum up, Kim Jong-il states that 'benevolent politics is a traditional mode of politics' (p. 5). What tradition does he refer to? Not once does he mention the 'glorious revolutionary traditions of the anti-Japanese struggle' or 'the magnificent traditions of the socialist construction', propaganda clichés of the Kim Il Sung era, as reference points for his ideals. Kim Jong-il was not part of most of them. Therefore, these may and should be ignored. In the meantime, he takes a higher moral ground and appeals to the ancient tradition of political life in the Yi Korea.

To be precise, he never mentions Confucius, nor Mencius, nor Chu Hsi, nor any of their Korean adaptors by name. But in essence, he preaches Confucian values and attitudes and wants the élite and the general public to accept them and follow his standing native Korean traditions.

At the institutional level, the politics of patriarchy under Kim Il Sung was extremely hierarchical and characterised by well-defined, albeit obscure for the outside observer, decision-making procedures followed by formal institutions of authority in the pursuit of their bureaucratic goals within the meticulously-defined scope of their responsibilities. On the contrary, the politics of filial piety seems to be somewhat egalitarian in structure: Kim Jong-il still cannot command or show disrespect to his former tutors and current counsels. The decision-making processes appear to be very informal, 'privatised', and occur outside the constitutional and legal framework of the DPRK political system. Serious matters of North Korean state seem to be deliberated and decided upon at informal gatherings of Kim Jong-il's in-laws and close associates rather than in official meetings of formal institutions of power with appropriate authority.

The institution of the Presidency appears to be dead for now. The Central People's Committee has not been convened since Kim Il Sung's demise. The KWP Central Committee did not convene its regular session at the end of 1994 as it used to do at the end of every previous year. The KWP Politburo has not been in session for more than a year. Nevertheless, such crucial decisions as the conclusion of the nuclear deal with the United States, the halt of the DPRK nuclear program, and the DPRK budget for 1995 have been made already by somebody, apparently, in a very private and informal setting. This situation, by the way, resembles another period in Korean history of the first half of the nineteenth century. Under kings Sunjo (1800–1834) and Honjong (1834–1849), who ascended to the throne when they were respectively eleven and eight years old and had to be closely guarded and intensively tutored in matters of the state, the so-called 'generational politics' prevailed when the powerful Andong Kim clan, through the authority of dowager queens who were Andong Kim women, intermittently ruled Korea for decades. This was a period also
characterised by the breakdown of traditional patriarchal government, informalis-
tion and ‘privatisation’ of the decision-making processes, as well as extra-
legalisation of the governmental process as a whole, and with wide-spread
corruption within the government.

Another feature distinguishing the politics of patriarchy from the politics of
filial piety is the relationship between the ruler and his people. In both cases it is
based on the Confucian premise that it ought to resemble the harmonious
relationship between parents and children. However, Kim Il Sung never sought a
mandate to rule from his people. Instead, he forced them to accept and worship him
the way he was. On the contrary, as I showed above, Kim Jong-il recognises the
need to receive a ‘mandate of heaven’—that is, a blessing from the people—for him
to ascend to the supreme authority in the land, whatever form it may take.

In addition, Kim Il Sung never shied away from direct contact with the
people. Unlike most of the Yi kings, he used to make frequent ritualistic inspection
tours, or ‘on-the-spot guidance’ of farms, plants, factories, and offices, which were
one of the institutionalised devices with which the ruler could express his concern
for the people. Also, it was a well-established tradition that on the eve of a new
year Kim Il Sung personally delivered a New Year Address to the nation before a
joint session of the DPRK Supreme People’s Assembly, Administrative Council, and
the KWP Central Committee. He did it every year from 1946 on with exception of
1966 to 1970. He often appeared at mass rallies in the capital to greet the masses
in person and to show that he was alive and well and sharing his people’s concerns.

In contrast to his patriarchal father, Kim Jong Il seems to avoid direct
contact with the people by all means. Although he continued the practice of
inspection tours, he failed to attend all but two (on 20 July 1994 and 16 October
1994) mass rallies held in Pyongyang, or anywhere else on more than two dozen
important occasions. More significantly, he did not deliver the annual New Year
Address of the leader to the nation, nor did he even show up at a corresponding
joint session of the three supreme political institutions of the DPRK. Instead, all
major newspapers ran last year’s Kim Il Sung New Year Address, followed by an
-word personal message to the Korean people’ from
Kim Jong-il—‘Happy New Year’. The big question is whether this pattern of
escapist behaviour reveals simply Kim Jong-il’s personal traits, for instance
demophobia (as some Russian Korea-watchers argue) or his reportedly poor health
(as some ROK North Korea-watchers suggest). Or does it reflect some latent
political undercurrents that prevent him from stepping into his late father’s
limelight? Or is it simply good politics designed to project him as being in firm

9 On 30 October 1994, he visited the Tomb of Tangun in Pyongyang; some time in late
October 1994 he visited the construction site of the Chongryu bridge in Pyongyang;
and on 31 December 1994, he inspected military unit no. 214.
control, and, therefore, as in no rush to take on all the publicity and glamour of official power? Or is he reluctant to do so out of his filial piety and his desire to convince everybody that he is a man of virtue because he knows how to honour his late father according to the centuries-old traditions? Kim Jong-il’s in-palace isolation and avoidance of direct contact with the public remains in stark contrast to his predecessor’s behaviour and is a characteristic feature of the politics of filial piety begging for explanation.

Lastly, what distinguishes the palace politics under patriarchal rule from one under filial rule is the role of senior women at the court. Simply put, when the king is strong and of the patriarchal type, the queen tends to be invisible and not heard from. When the king is weak and of the filial type, the mother queen, his own spouse, and other senior women gain prominent roles in the court decision-making process. Historically, in the ancient Korean kingdom of Silla (356–936) the female power of the king’s wife or queen dowager was very important and pervasive, and it was accepted as normal and appropriate by Korean elites. With the introduction of Confucian values at the court after the founding of the Yi dynasty in 1392, this pattern of maternal dominance was broken and Korea had almost five hundred years of paternalistic rule. However, in the late eighteenth to nineteenth centuries the rule of the maternal line returned to Korea. According to William Henthorn, from the latter half of the eighteenth century ‘the Korean monarchs were turned into figureheads. The authority and power of the state was exercised by royal relatives, usually the queen’s clan, who filled important government ministerial posts with their brothers, cousins, and uncles while striving to control the succession to the throne by marrying daughters to the crown prince.’

More importantly, whenever the succession was in doubt following the death of a ruler–patriarch, the oldest living dowager had the right to pick the successor.

Interestingly, it was a time when Yi dynasty society was undergoing a period of rapid and violent internal change and was faced with increasing pressure from abroad to open up. This period, moreover, did not produce any of the Korean kings–patriarchs. Instead, most of the kings of this period ascended to the throne before majority, or had little experience in ruling the country, or had dubious credentials undermining their legitimacy. Therefore, in order to survive and be

11 For example, King Chongjo (1776–1800) could not mourn for his own father, Prince Sado, who had been accused of treason and suffocated by his own father, King Yongjo, in 1762. Therefore, in order to maintain the throne’s moral authority without performing the requisite rituals in honour of his ancestors, he had to show extreme filial loyalty and respect to the Queen Chongsun, his dowager stepmother.

King Sunjo (1800–1834) was steered to the throne by the queen dowager Chongsun when he was eleven years old, and was dependent upon her advice until her death. King Honjong (1834–1849) was put on the throne when he was eight years old by his
accepted as legitimate rulers by the ruling clans, they all had to turn to the politics of filial piety, especially emphasising their filial obligations to the stepmother queen or queen dowager, who was the real power behind the throne.

Against this historical background, Kim Il Sung, as a patriarch, did not have this female aspiration/domination problem, but Kim Jong-il, as a carrier of the politics of filial piety, does. To be sure, he is well beyond majority age, and has accumulated considerable (twenty years plus) experience in governance and is well recognised by the people and the ruling class in the DPRK as a legitimate leader. However, he has a reportedly energetic and restless stepmother, the late Great Leader's second wife Kim Song-ae, invisible as long as her spouse was alive, but who now seems to be seeking to promote Kim Jong-il's half brother—her own son Kim Pyong-il—to the pinnacle of power in Pyongyang. He also has to watch out for numerous relatives on his maternal side—uncles, cousins, in-laws, and so on, altogether about 24–25 people—who all see themselves as legitimate successors to Kim Il Sung.

As tradition prompts, Kim Jong-il has to perform dutifully his filial obligations to his stepmother and confer on her all the appropriate honours for Kim Il Sung's dowager if he wants to keep her at bay and content. It is not easy, however. On the one hand, reportedly he hates her guts, and this animosity is mutual and almost thirty years old. On the other hand, he has to balance his filial obligations to Kim Song-ae—his living and powerful stepmother—with his filial affection to his late real mother, whom he still loves but is not expected to show much filial piety toward. This is Kim Il Sung's first wife, the late Kim Chongsuk. Also, Kim Jong-il has to walk a tightrope in balancing relations between his grandmother, the queen dowager Sunwon (1789–1857), who reigned as regent throughout that period. King Ch'oljong (1850–1863), a son of a farmer, was enthroned when he was nineteen years old by the same queen dowager Sunwon, who retained all the power at the court. Finally, the penultimate king of the Yi dynasty, Kojong (1863–1907), was put on the throne when he was twelve years old by the authority of Princess Cho, King Honjong's mother, and his rule was characterised by an intense power struggle between his wife, Queen Min, and the regent, Hungson Taewon'gun.

Mrs Kim Song-ae was reportedly born in 1932, and married Kim Il Sung in 1960.

Kim Jong-il is believed to feel much pity for his real mother because he is said to believe that she may have been put to death by Kim Il Sung's order in 1949, which he cannot forgive. In an attempt to show his filial affection, he began to build her cult as the 'Mother of the Korean Revolution' from the early 1970s on when he began to rise to power himself.

For instance, Kim Jong-il did not attend a mass rally to mark the forty-fifth anniversary of the death of Kim Jong-suk, his natural mother, held in Pyongyang on 21 September 1994. Apparently, he was persuaded to show his deference to his living stepmother thereby. See Nodong Shinmun (Pyongyang), 22 September 1994, p. 1.

In a sense, Kim Jong-il finds himself in the same state of denial as King Yongjo (1724–1776) who had great affection for his real mother, Lady Ch'oe, but could not reveal and pursue it in public because it would have undermined his moral authority since she...
This filial ritual dancing appears to take much time and may distract Kim Jong-il from affairs of state. However, it is very important for him deal with this problem correctly if he wants to succeed in consolidating his own grip on power.

What if Kim Jong-il fails to perform his filial duties to his stepmother in accordance with the expectations of her clan members? The history of King Kyongjong’s brief and unsuccessful rule (1720-1724) provides us with a telling example of what might happen to him. King Kyongjong inherited the throne from his father, King Sukchong, who had ruled Yi Korea with an iron fist as a patriarch from 1674 to 1720 in a divide-and-conquer fashion toward the bureaucratic community, pitting one faction against another and deepening already formidable animosities. Kyongjong, who attempted to assert himself with his father’s techniques but had none of his father’s political instincts, nullified any progress his father might have made in enhancing royal power. Eventually, he frustrated the court officials and bureaucracy so much that the Noron faction began to spread rumours about the feebleness of his mental and physical health and even his tutors began to cite his impotence and gradual mental deterioration. Finally, Kyongjong died from eating pickled crab, presumably poisoned and sent to him by his younger step-brother Yongjo, upon the advice of his stepmother, queen dowager Inwon. Consequently, Yongjo became the next king of Yi Korea and ruled for fifty-two years.

There are some striking similarities between King Kyongjong and Kim Jong-il. For instance, Kim Jong-il too inherited the ‘crown’ from his patriarchal father, who had reigned in Korea for almost fifty years with an iron fist. He too attempted to continue his father’s divide-and-conquer policy toward the government bureaucracy in Pyongyang but without any success. His rule still seems to be somewhat unstable and unpredictable. Kim Jong-il too is haunted by allegations of poor mental health and a number of serious physical ailments, including diabetes, high blood pressure, and cirrhosis, which seem to be emanating from Pyongyang itself rather than from the intelligence community in Seoul or Washington. It is

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16 Kim Jong-il has been married twice. His first wife, Hong Il-chon, used to study Russian literature at Kim Il Sung National University where she met and married Kim Jong-il in the mid 1960s. She might be responsible for Kim Jong-il’s later passion for literature and arts. They had one daughter. In the early 1970s, Kim Jong-il divorced her, allegedly because of the lack of revolutionary credentials in her background, which his father did not approve since he was about to begin to groom his son for the leadership succession. In 1973, Kim Jong-il married Kim Yong-suk, a typist of revolutionary descent, born in 1947. They have one son, probably born in 1973, and two daughters, one of whom—Kim Sol-song—was born in 1974.

17 In stark contrast with appropriate clichés of the past, on 21 September 1994, Deputy Premier Choe Yong-rim appealed to all KWP members and workers to make ‘all efforts
Kim Jong-il’s younger stepbrother Kim Pyong-il, ardently supported and promoted by the Dear Leader’s stepmother Kim Song-ae, who is reported to be the leader to rally behind for all those who do not like the idea of Kim Jong-il in power and who potentially might challenge the Dear Leader.\(^{18}\) I am not saying that Kim Jong-il’s days are numbered, as Kyongjong’s days were, or that Kim Pyong-il is likely to become the next sagacious King Yongjo. But clearly, this is an historical parallel worth mentioning, and one should watch very closely how these two half-brothers pitted one against another by Kim Il Sung’s dowager will settle their power dispute in the post-patriarchal political environment.

**Reinventing a bicycle: North Korean style**

The revival of tradition in contemporary North Korean politics is a remarkable development. But the DPRK’s economy continues to be in a deep depression. The real questions to ponder include the following. Can Confucian values and reborn native Korean political traditions be related somehow to the DPRK’s economic situation? Could these two become essential factors in North Korean economic modernisation? Are they going to be conducive to economic growth in post-Kim Il Sung society or, on the contrary, to continuing economic stagnation? In general, is Confucianism a good ideological foundation for ‘getting the basics right’ in order to jump-start the economy and modernise the economic and political systems in the DPRK? Will the reintroduction of Confucian values help the KWP stay in power and keep the current regime in command? Apparently, Pyongyang ideologues believe in the affirmative.

It is not a secret that in Kim Il Sung’s opinion, Singapore’s developmental model embedded in Confucianism was *the* answer to his quest for reform: Singapore has achieved Western living standards without having been ‘infected by

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\(^{18}\) On 13 January 1995, Associated Press cited Yonhap reporting that between 12 and 17 December 1994, there had been an alleged shoot-out between Kim Pyong-il’s supporters and Kim Jong-il’s bodyguards in Pyongyang, with eight people killed. This allegation was made to the Yonhap news agency by a senior Chinese official in Hunchun after his discussions with high-ranking DPRK officials of the reasons why the North Korean side had cancelled a bilateral conference on the Tumen River Development Area Project planned for late December 1994, in Pyongyang. At this time, there is no way to confirm this allegation.
Western political malaises'; and it is populated with clean, diligent, faithful, and law-abiding citizens who obligingly keep their rulers in power through regular elections. But he also realised that North Korea could not emulate the economic miracle of Singapore because of its different international environment and domestic political and economic settings.

For Kim Il Sung, the second best choice was, of course, the developmental model of his big brother to the North, the PRC. Despite its new mission as a genuine carrier of communist civilisation, Kim Il Sung, reportedly, thought that his country had a lot to learn from its rapidly modernising neighbour.

It is worth noting that in the late eighteenth century when Yi Korea was searching for a new mission as a saviour of true Confucian civilisation, the native Korean philosophical school of pragmatic learning ‘Sirhak’ branched out a ‘Going North (that is, to China) to Study’ school called ‘Pukhak’. Led by a scholar and traveller of China named Hong Tae-yong (1731–1783), these scholars of pragmatic learning travelled to China frequently and discovered an incredible economic growth and rising prosperity in a rapidly modernising ‘barbarian’ China. They could not understand why a nation that had just abandoned the values and leaders of a genuine Confucian civilisation was making such progress. Eventually, despite a lot of resentment accumulated since the mid-seventeenth century against the Chinese for their ‘betrayal of values’, the ‘Pukhak’ scholars came to think that Korea needed to take a positive attitude to China. In particular, in his book called ‘Tamhon yonggi’, despite his serious doubts about China’s vibrant markets, Hong Tae-yong argued that Korea should judge the Chinese and the Manchu dynasty by their performance and not on the basis of the bitter past historical experience of value betrayal and abandonment.

Against this historical background, it is no wonder that at present the North Korean government, despite its newly discovered sense of mission and understandable resentment of some of the Chinese policies and attitudes, comprehensively studies the Chinese practices of economic reform and continuing maintenance of political control. It is safe to say that after Kim Il Sung’s death the dialogue on economic matters between the two countries intensified significantly, with a constantly increasing number of economic delegations of all levels and profiles shuttling back and forth. North Korea tries to learn.

In an effort to jump-start the economy, the Pyongyang regime has launched three major economic modernisation projects recently. The first project involves the modernisation of the country’s infrastructure, especially its energy sector and adjacent industries. The second project is a limited economic liberalisation in the Tumen River Development Area Special Economic Zone aimed at boosting national consumer goods industries and foreign trade. The third project includes a gradual decommunisation of agricultural production and allowance of local free markets for
food stuffs. The DPRK government seems to hope that if these three megaprojects are successfully implemented, they will be able to pull out the entire economy from the hole it is in today.

It was a brilliant idea for the North Korean government in the course of nuclear negotiations with the United States to link the freeze and dismantlement of its nuclear program with an obligation from the Western donors to finance the reconstruction of its entire energy sector and some adjacent industries, as well as to share its technological expertise in the nuclear development area. The price tag is US$4.5 billion, almost 25 per cent of the DPRK’s GNP. North Korea has an industrial, albeit obsolete, manufacturing economy. Now it is at a standstill because its engine is dead. Once Pyongyang succeeds in implementing the nuclear deal which will literally refuel the economy and refurbish its energy and communications infrastructure, the country’s economic machine will be jump-started again.

The TREDATA (Tumen River Economic Development Area) project has several years of history already. But only after Kim Il Sung’s death last July did it seem to acquire the scope and significance of a national priority. It is being billed as the future of the country’s economy, ‘if all goes well’ (meaning economic soundness of the enterprise and lack of subsequent political turmoil). It is conceived as a testing ground for experimenting with Chinese-style policies aimed at economic liberalisation, or building capitalism, within the boundaries of several DPRK counties. It is aimed at gradually opening the North Korean economy as a whole to the outside world. If it succeeds, the Administrative Council has already adopted plans to spread its application to many other major cities and provinces of the DPRK, including Wonsan, Namp’o, Shinuju, Haeju, Chongjin, and even Kaesong.

Lastly, as Confucius taught and Deng Xiaoping proved in the Chinese economic reform, sound agriculture was indeed one of the foundations of any stable and prospering society. As long as the people are hungry because of failing domestic food production and lack of hard currency to buy food stuff abroad, they are angry and might rebel. Therefore, the political system will inherently be unstable. The only way to ameliorate this situation is by introducing a painful land redistribution reform and some degree of free markets for agriculture. Apparently, a closed-door debate gains momentum in Pyongyang on the necessity and feasibility of some changes in the current agricultural production system in the country. No official indication of a forthcoming change of agricultural policy has been made public yet, however.

Reportedly, on 6 July 1994, two days before his death, President Kim Il Sung held a ‘long consultative meeting with leading economic officials’ of the DPRK government. He spoke along the lines of the above-mentioned three megaprojects. In a nutshell, his message to the economic bureaucracy was: ‘If you want to survive,
roll up your sleeves and find ways to implement it effectively’. It was a directive and a blessing. For this meant a green light from the Great Leader himself authorising them to proceed with economic experimentation in the uncertain political context of succession politics right on the eve of his demise. Only the future will tell whether the North Korean experiment in alloying traditional values with the goals of economic modernisation will prove a success or a failure. But no one can deny that they are trying.

**Conclusion**

Does history matter? This is one of those eternal questions the answer to which lies in the eyes of the beholder. Since the North Korean leadership believes that their civilisation is on trial and they are guided by historical examples in their quest for survival and search for a new identity, historical traditions and analogies, especially ones from the history of the Yi dynasty, do matter in North Korea. The DPRK leaders may be unconscious of history, yet as authentic Koreans they evoke it instinctively and naturally.

In this paper I have argued that since the disintegration of the communist world the DPRK has undergone a profound change in interpreting its mission in the world. Today its leadership strongly believes that it has a mission of carrying forward all by itself the true civilisation of communism abandoned by its former allies. This new sense of mission sharpened the regime’s insecurity, causing it to explore a nuclear option and further the militarisation of the entire society. It also sparked a domestic debate within the ruling class about ideological orthodoxy, what is and what is not the legacy of the Great Leader, and what the scope of authority of his successor ought to be. This in turn led to the re-emergence of latent factional disputes along ideological lines.

I also argued that with the demise of President Kim Il Sung the North Korean political world came to witness a new kind of politics practised by his heir son Kim Jong-il: instead of the politics of patriarchy he engaged himself in practising the politics of filial piety. Lacking the impeccable and long-standing credentials of his father, Kim Jong-il had to strengthen his own legitimacy by resorting to time-honoured Korean traditions—preaching traditional Confucian values to the public and establishing that he was a man of virtue by performing all the required filial obligations at the court.

Finally, I outlined a new action program that the current leadership in Pyongyang strives to implement in order to ensure the survival of KWP rule and the Kim dynasty. It includes three megaprojects—modernisation of the DPRK’s energy sector and adjacent infrastructure worth a quarter of the country’s GNP, a gradual economic opening in special economic zones that may eventually spread to cover the whole country, and radical changes in the system of agricultural
production (still pending). The hope is that if these efforts aimed at economic modernisation succeed, the country's economy will be jump-started and pulled out of its present deep hole.

In conclusion, if I were asked to measure the strength of the current political earthquake in the DPRK on the Gingrich scale, I would assess it at three News: a new mission, a new politics, and a new action. Although we still have to deal with two Olds—old faces and old values—I remain optimistic that in its search for a new identity the leaders in Pyongyang are likely to find a right mix of traditionalism and modernity and to stay in power for some time.
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