

ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE, AND ALL THE MEN AND WOMEN MERELY PLAYERS

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Kwon, Heonik and Byung-Ho Chung. North Korea: Beyond Charismatic Politics. Rowman & Littlefield. Lanham, MD, 2012. 232 Pages. ISBN 978-0742556799

According to Kwon and Chung, the North Korean leadership has turned itself into a “theatre state,” a regime that relies on the use of rituals to perpetuate the charismatic rule of the leadership. The authors point to what Max Weber called the “routinization of charismatic authority.” What Weber meant in a nutshell was that charisma was an inherently unstable form of political authority. It cannot be easily renewed or “routinized,” and is further prone to decay and erosion; this means of course that charismatic authority usually cannot be inherited because it is usually invested in one leader alone (pp. 43-45). The authors make liberal use of the ideas of Clifford Geertz, an anthropologist who pioneered the concept of the theatre state with reference to Bali in the 19th century (pp. 44-45). They also make use of the notion of “partisan state” with reference to North Korea. The idea of North Korea being a “guerrilla state,” as the authors point out, is that of the Japanese historian Wada Haruki. Haruki is Japan’s foremost authority on Kim Il-sung’s Manchurian partisan days, as well as being a noted historian of North Korea in general. The authors make use of the theory to describe the mythology that the North Korean state relies upon, and how that mythology, i.e., of the Manchurian partisan ethos, has been actualized in state ideology (pp. 15-19).

Utilizing the “Theatre State” model, the authors stress the use of theatrical spectacles and rituals to instill a sense of loyalty amongst the North Koreans for the Manchurian partisans, especially Kim Il-sung himself. Rituals take many forms, be they mass parades, mass games or theatrical plays. The authors also stress the importance of monuments and cemeteries for the authority of Kim Il-sung, the Manchurian partisans in general and the fact that Kim Jong-il was

instrumental in creating said landmarks. The authors state that in sanctifying the Manchurian partisans, above all Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-suk (Kim Il-sung's first wife; she was also a partisan fighter), Kim Jong-il and the regime in general has been able to practice "legacy politics." This form of politics has been crucial to the regime's "routinization" of charismatic authority (pp. 43-63).

North Korea's military-first (Songun) politics is the ideological vehicle for this partisan kind of politics. Songun itself is of importance in the ways that it ties the military-dominated regime of Kim Jong-il to the legitimacy of the regime under Kim Il-sung, the military's role in protecting the legacy of Kim Il-sung helps to legitimate Kim Jong-il, as the successor to his father. The Manchurian partisan "tradition" is protected and perpetuated by Kim Jong-il's Songun Korea (pp. 71-93).

The authors also highlight the importance of the Great Leader's bestowing of gifts to his people. The act of gift giving to the leader by the peoples of the world is also of great importance to the regime. North Korea's state relies on the so-called "moral economy," in which relations between people are characterized by "general reciprocity"—i.e., generosity and gift-giving, rather than mere selfishness. The authors assert that before the famine of the 1990s, this was an operating norm within North Korean society. The gift functions as a symbol of both power—i.e., economic largess—and also as a symbol of paternal benevolence. Gifts received by the leader, from the rest of world, symbolize the love of the peoples of the world for the leader (Kim Il-sung and later Kim Jong-il, too).

The book offers some very interesting readings of North Korean ideological texts, but the employment of anthropological methods to a closed country, as noted by the authors themselves, is highly problematic. Many of the issues with the book are indicative of broader problems with academia itself: an over-reliance within certain disciplines on "discourse," i.e., words and ideas, and the elaborate but unsubstantiated analysis of said words and ideas without proper reference to how the words are actually understood by those involved and targeted.

The authors make use of second-hand reports from organisations like Good Friends in describing the social and economic situation in North Korea post-Kim Il-sung. However, they rarely if ever make use of refugee testimony when discussing the practical sources of the regime's authority. They have clearly not checked whether their metaphysical analyses of the North Korean state and their interpretations of North Korean texts actually resonate with the average North Korean. As a reader one is left with the impression that the authors have put together a very interesting theory, but have not tested it. At one point in the

book they even go so far as to assert that the ideology of Juche is a major reason why the regime did not collapse in the early 1990s (p. 128). This may indeed be the case; there are 24,000 North Korean refugees in Seoul. Surely some of them could have been asked by the authors whether North Korea is indeed a theatre state and whether so-called “legacy politics” explain why North Korea’s regime has been able to maintain itself up until present. Unfortunately, the book does not contain any sources to substantiate this assertion.

It should be noted that the modern North Korean state’s projection of authority is indeed mass-based, highly theatrical and often takes the form of dramatic display. From reading the book, it is not at all clear though that this form of authority construction—with Juche and Songun in tow—have kept the regime in power.

The definition of the North Korean state as a partisan state also is problematic. North Korea was not the only socialist state (or state in general) to be established and run by partisans. Let us not forget that Marshal Tito, former leader of Yugoslavia, was also a partisan fighter. The People’s Movement for the Liberation of Angola—Labour Party (MPLA), who continue to their country to this day, were also no strangers to the use of partisan tactics. Fidel Castro and his brother were partisans before they became the leaders of Cuba. And the reformist regimes in Beijing and Hanoi were both set up by former partisans, namely Mao Zedong and Ho Chi Minh. The authors do not differentiate between a state founded by partisans and a partisan state (pp. 15-16).

The political, social and economic institutions of North Korea cannot easily be explained purely by describing North Korea as a theatre state. The systems of social control, for instance the *inminban* (people’s unit), as well as the presence of a command economy until the collapse in the 1990s, and the regime’s use of other Stalinist rituals as a means of legitimation are overlooked by the authors. Indeed, the Supreme People’s Assembly (SPA) continues to be “elected” every five years, and it continues to certify North Korea’s annual state budget. The successions from Kim Il-sung to Kim Jong-il and from Kim Jong-il to Kim Jong-un, were confirmed and certified by the 6th Party Congress and the 3rd Party Conference, respectively. These rituals confer a popular, modern political legitimacy on the regime, rather than that of theatrical symbolism. The regime’s authority does not merely rest on the charisma of its leadership, but also upon its putative democratic and representative institutions. While the authors do talk about the conference that confirmed Kim Jong-un as leader, its significance as a legitimating event is not discussed (p. 186). The leaders of North Korea have all been anointed by supposedly representative institutions of party and state, their authority does not merely come from their charisma, but also from rational-legal processes.

The authors also make reference to the “new constitutional order” of North Korea after the death of Kim Il-sung (p. 73). Kim Il-sung was constitutionally declared “eternal president” posthumously. The issue is though, what kind of legitimacy does a constitution bestow? A constitution is a legal document and therefore the leaders of North Korea seem to seek legitimacy from rational-legal sources as well as from theatrical display.

While some of the ideological elements of the regime’s authority are discussed by the authors, they have missed more classically nationalistic or state socialist ideologies that have emerged from North Korea’s official media in the last 20 years. The cult and its theatrical elements notwithstanding, it is worth recapping some of these ideological motifs that the authors of this book have largely ignored. From the late-1980s, great stress in North Korean ideological publications and news media was placed upon “Socialism in our style.” During the famine in the 1990s, “the principle of national superiority” became a popular ideological leitmotif in North Korean ideological output. Another often repeated idea was that of the “Red Flag Idea.” Leading up to the centenary of Kim Il-sung’s birth, the importance of building a “Strong and Prosperous Nation” was ubiquitous in North Korean ideological output. Throughout North Korea’s entire history, words like revolution and socialism have been ever-present in North Korean ideological publications and general propaganda output. Such ideological themes could probably have been fitted into the model and there is no reason one cannot have a theatre state with socialism and revolution. The authors neglect to discuss these elements of the regime’s ideological discourse, and one is therefore left with a rather limited understanding of North Korea.

The personality cult and its state not only has a theatrical form, but also a Stalinist content. The authors stress the human-centeredness of Juche in contrast to Marxian materialism (p. 145). North Korean ideology is indeed more focused on ideas than classical Marxism. However, Stalin did often stress the importance of ideas under state socialism.¹ North Korea was, until 1994, a Stalinist state. The presence of collective farms, state planning and party-state domination over society is best explained through an understanding of Stalinism in practice, not through comparing Marx with Juche.

The authors of this work, while purporting to offer a holistic model of the North Korean state, ignore its socialist contents, its political structure, and its actual socio-economic realities; instead, they focus almost exclusively on certain cultural elements of the regime and the society that it has constructed. This approach is not without merit. The role of symbols, ideological norms

1 Erik van Ree, *The Political Thought of Joseph Stalin*, (New York: Routledge Curzon, 2002), 268-270.

and performance in the creation of legitimacy is an area that remains largely unexplored in the context of North Korea. Nonetheless, the theatre state in the form presented in this book is highly limited even when it comes to dealing with North Korean ideological publications, let alone how North Korean state and society actually work. It represents a limited model of authority creation, not a model of the entire North Korean state, its inner-workings and how state-society relations are constituted.

The survival of the North Korean state is not merely the product of a regime centered on the personality cult of two or three men, nor is the Manchurian partisan "tradition" a sufficient explanation for the survival of the state. The closed nature of North Korea leading up to the famine meant that its people could not countenance an alternative. The seemingly cohesive nature of the North Korean elite who fear change is also a major reason why the country remains intact. Institutional inertia and the general lack of dissent because of the closed, monolithic, and controlled nature of North Korean state and society explain the regime's longevity.

The cult that surrounds the Kims certainly also plays a role. The author of this review has frequently met refugees who believe much of the cult that surrounded Kim Il-sung. Almost all of them though are (and were before they left) united in their hatred of Kim Jong-il. The cult of Kim Jong-il, according to refugee testimony at least, seemingly never really took hold as a popular phenomenon in the country. It is important to remember that what actual North Koreans think and feel may be quite different from what the regime wants them to. **Y**