

“They Wanted to Cut Off My Head”: The Impact of the People’s Republic of China on
the Personality Cult of Kim Il Sung, 1956-1969

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A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty of the University of Virginia in Candidacy for
the Degree of Master of Arts

Department of East Asian Languages, Literatures, and Cultures

University of Virginia

December, 2020

Introduction

The 1960s were a turbulent decade for North Korea, as it was pulled in both directions during the height of the Sino-Soviet split, contended with a new authoritarian Park Chung-hee regime in the South, and Mao's Cultural Revolution to the North strained the Sino-North Korean relationship. Amidst these challenges, Kim Il Sung's personality cult underwent some major changes, taking on the extreme form that is recognizable today. Some of these changes include the introduction of the Monolithic Ideological System, promotion of Juche as the state ideology, and the near-deification of Kim Il Sung himself. Most works overwhelmingly focus on Stalinist influence on North Korean society, including the Kim personality cult. While Stalinism undoubtedly had an enormous influence on North Korea, it was not necessarily the sole influence. This thesis examines how Sino-North Korean relations also influenced the development of Kim Il Sung's personality cult and culminated in its sudden intensification in the mid-1960s.

Kim Il Sung felt a palpable threat from China during the mid-1960s when Sino-North Korean relations were at their lowest point, and there was a historical precedent for Kim to have felt threatened by China. In this thesis I demonstrate these points and take them a step further to argue that Kim Il Sung engineered his personality cult to stave off threats at home as well as from China. Furthermore, in the mid-1960s, Kim Il Sung's personality cult took on elements of Mao's personality cult, and I argue that their similarities are not just coincidence, because North Korea has a demonstrated precedent for imitating China.

Historiography

As Fyodor Tertitskiy points out, very little has actually been written about the creation of the Kim personality cult.¹ As the foremost scholar on the genesis of the Kim personality cult, Tertitskiy has published several articles documenting his research on its creation, and these works form the entire historiography of the creation of the Kim cult. In none of his works does he explore the possible external causes or influences behind the personality cult, but he does describe in detail some key events that led to the intensification.

In a short article published to the website *Sino-NK*, Tertitskiy first explored his idea that the intensification of the cult was triggered by a specific secret speech, known only as the “May 25th Instructions.”² According to Tertitskiy, this speech was made by Kim Il Sung with the specific intent of launching his personality cult to new heights, presumably with the end goal of securing the complete obedience of the North Korean people.

Tertitskiy describes the mid-1960s intensification of the Kim cult as a “revival” of a somewhat dormant personality cult in his article “The Ascension of the Ordinary Man: How the Personality Cult of Kim Il-Sung Was Constructed.”³ He argues that Kim Il Sung deliberately orchestrated its intensification and used the General Association of Korean

¹ Fyodor Tertitskiy, “The Ascension of the Ordinary Man: How the Personality Cult of Kim Il-Sung was Constructed (1945-1974),” *Acta Koreana*, Vol. 1, no. 1 (June 2015): p. 211, <https://doi.org/10.18399/acta.2015.18.1.008>

² Fyodor Tertitskiy, “Back to the Primary Source: Hunting for Kim Il-Sung’s ‘May 25th Instructions,’” *Sino-NK*, February 19, 2014, <https://sinonk.com/2014/02/19/primary-source-hunting-kim-may-25-instructions/>

³ Tertitskiy, “The Ascension of the Ordinary Man,” p. 220.

Residents in Japan (also known as Chongryon or Chōsen Sōren) as a testbed for the new and improved cult in the early 1960s, and in 1967 established his “new” personality cult and began to enforce it with the introduction of the Monolithic Ideological System. Members of the party who opposed this new system were famously purged in the “Kapsan faction incident,” which culminated in the secretive “May 25 Instructions.”⁴ However, Tertitskiy does not ascribe a specific motivation for why Kim chose to intensify the cult at this time.

In his later work, a chapter from *Change and Continuity in North Korean Politics*, Tertitskiy expands on the idea that the issuance of the “May 25th Instructions” was a pivotal moment in North Korean history. Though the speech itself is inaccessible, he uses defector testimony and context clues from primary sources to construct a meaningful assessment of how the speech influenced North Korean society and Kim’s personality cult. He argues that the speech triggered a campaign to enforce the “Monolithic Ideological System” and an intensified personality cult. Tertitskiy concludes that that the purpose behind the speech and the intensification of the personality cult was “an attempt to create a totalitarian state.”⁵ However, such a conclusion is too broad. Certainly, the end result of all of this was a totalitarian state, but *why* did Kim Il Sung see a need to tighten his control any further?

⁴ Ibid., p. 221.

⁵ Fyodor Tertitskiy, “1967: Transition to Absolute Autocracy in North Korea,” in *Change and Continuity in North Korean Politics*, ed. Adam Cathcart, Robert Winstanley-Chesters, and Christopher Green (Routledge, 2016), p. 91, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315545646>

While the intensification of the personality cult was certainly a part of Kim Il Sung's ongoing efforts to further consolidate his control over the Korean Worker's Party, there must be a reason why Kim felt the need to do so in the first place. Some possibilities include a feeling of insecurity posed by the threat of domestic factions, foreign powers, or a combination of the two. The aim of this thesis is to fill the gap in Tertitskiy's work by showing that China posed a perceived, if not credible, threat to Kim Il Sung's hold on North Korea, and that Kim responded by taking steps to intensify his personality cult.

Extended Historiography

A historiography of North Korea includes many works that present information about the cult as a part of discussions of broader North Korea-related subjects. Observers and scholars of North Korea tend to take for granted that North Korea has a robust personality cult and rarely ask the question of *why* it came to be. Those that do variously describe the cult as a tool for social control, a way of legitimizing Kim family rule, or as merely an inheritance from the Soviet Union. Most works that devote substantial attention to the personality cult (such as Bradley Martin's *Under the Loving Care of the Fatherly Leader*, and B. R. Myers' avant-garde *The Cleanest Race*) describe how the cult has shaped North Korean society but do not explore its genesis in-depth.

Not all works agree on when the cult emerged, but most agree that it either emerged or intensified in the mid-1960s. My discussion of the Kim personality cult assumes that the cult already existed before its rapid increase in prominence and grandeur

in the mid-1960s. This thesis is not concerned with how specifically the personality cult changed, but rather the motivations and inspirations behind the changes that took place in the 1960s.

Dae-Sook Suh's landmark biography of Kim Il Sung only briefly touches on his personality cult, noting that in the 1960s "North Koreans began to idolize Kim" and the use of the term *suryong* to refer to him came into vogue.⁶ He also points out that Kim Il Sung began deliberately promoting his personality cult in the late 1960s.⁷ Suh doesn't offer an explanation for intensification of the cult during this time, though he frames its later promotion abroad as an attempt to supplant Mao Zedong as the leader of the communist movement in Asia.⁸

Sŏ Chae-jin's *Pukhan ūi kaein sungbae mit chŏngch'i sahoehwa ūi hyogwa e taehan p'yŏngga yŏn'gu* (*Study for the Evaluation of North Korea's Personality Cult and the Effectiveness of Political Socialization*) mainly focuses of the effects that the Kim family cult has on North Korean society. He says that when Stalin nominated Kim Il Sung as the leader of North Korea in 1945, he also passed his style of personality cult onto Kim.⁹ Sŏ identifies the institutionalization of the Monolithic Ideological System in 1972, by writing it into the North Korean constitution, as the moment that Kim's

⁶ Dae-Sook Suh, *Kim Il Sung: The North Korean Leader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 197.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 210.

⁹ Chae-jin Sŏ, *Pukhan ūi kaein sungbae mit chŏngch'i sahoehwa ūi hyogwa e taehan p'yŏngga yŏn'gu* [*Study evaluating the political and societal effects of the personality cult in North Korea*] (Seoul: T'ongil Yŏn'guwŏn, 2004), p. 21, <https://www.kinu.or.kr/www/jsp/prg/api/dlV.jsp?menuIdx=344&category=44&thisPage=1&biblioId=5982>

personality cult began to intensify. However, he describes this moment as the ultimate completion of Kim Il-Sung's consolidation of power, rather than as an outcome of foreign pressure.¹⁰

In *Munhwadaehyökmyöng ch'ogi pukchunggwangyewa yönbyön chosönjok* (*Sino-North Korean Relations During the Early Cultural Revolution and Ethnic Koreans in Yanbian*), Pak Chong-ch'öl describes the degradation of Sino-North Korean relations throughout the 1960s and details the persecution of ethnic Koreans in Yanbian Autonomous Korean Prefecture during the Cultural Revolution. However, Pak makes little effort to connect the Cultural Revolution as it occurred in Yanbian to the degradation of the Sino-North Korean relationship. Instead, he merely suggests that Yanbian's Cultural Revolution was a reflection of the poor relations between China and North Korea throughout that time.¹¹

Martin Bradley vividly illustrates how the Kim cult manifests in North Korea in *Under the Loving Care of the Fatherly Leader*. He claims that by 1947 Kim Il-Sung's personality cult was in full swing, generated as a result of Soviet efforts to build up the young Kim's image.¹² He acknowledges that in the early 1960s the cult was intensifying and largely imitated Stalin's personality cult.¹³ Like others, however, Martin does not

¹⁰ Sö, p. 27.

¹¹ Pak, Chong-ch'öl. "Munhwadaehyökmyöng Ch'ogi Pukchunggwangyewa Yönbyön Chosönjok." *Minjok Yöngu, Tükjip: Chungguküi Kunsä Mit Minjokmunche* Vol. 63 (n.d.), p. 127.

¹² Bradley Martin, *Under the Loving Care of the Fatherly Leader: North Korea and the Kim Dynasty* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2006), p. 59.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

question the reasons behind the intensification of the cult, and portrays it as a result of Soviet influence rather than driven by foreign or domestic factors.

Adrian Buzo describes the Kim Il Sung personality cult and other features of North Korean government and society as entirely inherited from the Soviet Union in *Politics and Leadership in North Korea*.¹⁴ While he occasionally notes some similarities to Mao's personality cult or style of governance, he maintains his argument that Stalinism is the sole influence behind the Kim personality cult and argues that the result of the Korean War ultimately drove Kim to pursue tighter control of the state and society.

The Cleanest Race by B. R. Myers can be thought of as the antithesis of *Politics and Leadership in North Korea*. In reference to the Chinese Cultural Revolution, B. R. Myers states that "Kim evidently worried that Mao fever might infect his own people," and suggests that North Korea tightened its control of society to control the spread of "Mao fever" within the country.¹⁵ His brief discussion of how Kim has copied elements of Mao's cult, such as a 1948 speech allegedly plagiarized from Mao, suggests a long-standing practice of (and therefore a precedent for) imitation.¹⁶

In his working paper for the Wilson Center, Bernd Shaefer explains that Kim Il Sung felt a palpable threat from China during its Cultural Revolution, citing a Soviet report that Kim had requested flight paths into the Soviet Union that avoided overflight of

¹⁴ Adrian Buzo, *Politics and Leadership in North Korea*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), p. 38-39.

¹⁵ B. R. Myers, *The Cleanest Race: How North Koreans See Themselves - and Why It Matters* (New York: Melville House, 2010), p. 43.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

China or the sea.¹⁷ He also suggests that intensifying Kim's personality cult was one way for elites to prevent the Cultural Revolution from spreading into the country, but does not explain how this would have done so.¹⁸ However, he also cites East German diplomats' assessment that Kim Il Sung was building up his personality cult not only to protect against the Cultural Revolution but to replace Mao as the leader of the Communist movement in Asia.¹⁹

Zhihua Shen and Yafeng Xia's recent work, *A Misunderstood Friendship*, does not discuss Kim Il Sung's personality cult but does shed light on Sino-North Korean relations during the 1960s. While they discuss some reasons for the degradation of the relationship leading up to 1966, the sudden intensification of the personality cult in that year is completely unrecognized in the work. They disagree with Myers' assertion that China intended to spread the Cultural Revolution to North Korea.²⁰ According to one of their sources, a Chinese prefectural government document detailing eyewitness accounts, no military skirmishes ever occurred along the Sino-Korean border.²¹ However, a reference to "educated youth from Shanghai" may corroborate reports that Red Guards came to Yanbian from Shanghai to agitate Chinese citizens and criticize North Korea.

In *Leader Symbols and Personality Cult in North Korea*, Jae Cheon Lim discusses the trappings of the Kim personality cult at great length, but touches only on the surface

¹⁷ Bernd Schaefer, "North Korean 'Adventurism' and China's Long Shadow, 1966-1972" (Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, October 2004), p. 2, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/north-korean-adventurism-and-chinas-long-shadow-1966-1972>

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 9.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 11.

²⁰ Zhihua Shen and Yafeng Xia, *A Misunderstood Friendship: Mao Zedong, Kim Il-Sung, and Sino-North Korean Relations, 1949-1976* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018). p.184.

²¹ Shen and Xia, p. 191.

of the motivations behind it. He also discusses the personality cult as a hereditary feature of Kim family rule. He breaks the cult into two different periods: the “pre-family cult period” between 1945 and 1966, and the “family cult period” from 1967 onward.²² This indicates that Lim recognizes a fundamental shift in the nature of the cult between 1966 and 1967. He claims that the cult was formally initiated in 1946.²³ Contrary to Tertitskiy, Lim describes an intensification of the cult following the 1956 August Faction Incident and a shift from a personal cult to family cult after the Kapsan purge in 1967.²⁴

Finally, numerous additional sources are also of great help for understanding the political conditions of North Korea before and after the Cultural Revolution broke out in China. Both Andrei Lankov’s *Crisis in North Korea* and Balazs Szalontai’s *Kim Il Sung in the Khrushchev Era* explain the conditions leading up to the 1956 August Faction Incident and its aftermath. Hyun Ok Park’s *The Capitalist Unconscious* provides the most complete English description of the Cultural Revolution in Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture, a borderland between North Korea and China.

In addition to these secondary materials, this thesis relies heavily on the primary materials found in the History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, hosted on the Wilson Center’s website, in its analysis of Kim Il Sung’s personality cult and its progression. Some sanitized, declassified American intelligence reports, released under the auspices of the Freedom of Information Act and hosted on the Central Intelligence

²² Jae-Cheon Lim, *Leader Symbols and Personality Cult in North Korea: The Leader State* (Routledge, 2015), p. 21, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315736570>

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

Agency's Freedom of Information Act Electronic Reading Room, were also used to corroborate claims made in other documents. Microfilm copies of *Rodong sinmun* (Worker's newspaper) issues published in the second half of 1966, stored in the East Asian Reading Room archives at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., were also used in this research.

The Development of Kim Il Sung's Personality Cult to 1966

Before examining why Kim Il-Sung's personality cult intensified in the 1960s and how the Sino-North Korean relationship affected the personality cult, it is important to understand the circumstances that led up to that point. There are two key events that molded Kim Il Sung's perception of China as a threat – the August Incident of 1956, and the Kapsan purge in 1967. These two events both concerned the personality cult and had enormous impacts on it.

For an understanding of those events, it is important to first have a working knowledge of the four factions that comprised the early Korean Worker's Party (KWP). The domestic faction was comprised of indigenous Communists who had organized during the colonial period, many of whom organized in Seoul, the center of Korean intellectual life. The Yan'an faction was composed of ethnic Koreans who had held positions in Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and operated throughout China against the Japanese invaders and the Chinese nationalists. The Soviet-Korean faction (henceforth referred to as the Soviet faction) was made up of ethnic Korean members of the

Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), many of whom held dual Soviet and Korean citizenship, who were dispatched to Korea to help establish the North Korean government. Finally, the guerilla faction, to which Kim Il Sung belonged, was comprised of those who waged guerilla warfare against the Japanese in Northeast China and along the northern Korean border.

Each of these factions were considered to have different interests within the KWP. After the war, the domestic faction was considered by Kim Il Sung to be ineffective at spreading the Communist revolution to South Korea, and many of its members were accused of incompetence or of being spies, and were eventually purged from the party. The Yan'an and Soviet factions were considered to represent the interests of the CCP and the CPSU, respectively. The guerilla faction, of course, essentially came to represent Kim Il Sung.

Hō Ka-i, considered to be an early leader of the Soviet faction, was purged in 1953.²⁵ His elimination is largely seen by scholars as one of Kim Il Sung's early actions to secure his control of the KWP.²⁶ His purge appears to have caused consternation among members of the Yan'an and Soviet factions, and by 1956 seems to have been recognized by some CC members as an attempt by Kim Il Sung's group to consolidate power.²⁷

²⁵ Andrei Lankov, *Crisis in North Korea: The Failure of De-Stalinization, 1956* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), p. 15.

²⁶ Balazs Szalontai, *Kim Il Sung in the Khrushchev Era* (Washington, D.C., Stanford, California: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, Stanford University Press, n.d.), p. 33.

²⁷ "Memorandum of Conversation with Choe Chang-ik," June 08, 1956, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, RGANI, Fond 5, Opis 28, Delo 410, Listy 210-214. Obtained for NKIDP by James F.

Hō Ka-i was followed by others, including Pak Il-u, who was purged in 1955. Pak is particularly interesting: according to a Soviet report, Kim Il-sung accused Pak of being an agent appointed by Mao Zedong to act against Kim and his Soviet supporters.²⁸ While it is difficult to determine the truth of Kim's accusations, the same report notes that Pak worked closely with Peng Dehuai, the commander of the Chinese People's Volunteers during the Korean War, who by 1955 had become the People's Republic of China (PRC) Minister of Defense.

While the veracity of Kim's accusations is questionable, these events show that early in North Korea's history Kim was suspicious of Chinese intentions towards him. An unverified Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) cable dated October 9, 1952, states that in August that year Zhou Enlai, then the PRC Minister of Foreign Affairs, requested that the Soviet Union cede complete control of North Korea over to China.²⁹ This suggests that Mao may not have believed that Kim would be able to maintain control over North Korea throughout or after the Korean War, which at the time of the report was in the midst of a stalemate between North Korea's allies and United Nations (UN) forces. Kim Tu-bong, considered by many to be the leader of the Yan'an faction at that time, was reported to be Mao's preferred alternative to Kim Il Sung. The same report claims that Peng Dehuai had promised Kim Tu-bong that he would help Kim take control of North Korea from Kim Il

Person and translated for NKIDP by Gary Goldberg.
<http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/114132>

²⁸ "Report from I. Kurdyukov to V.M. Molotov," May 11, 1955, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, AVPRF F. 0102, Op. 11, P. 65, Delo 45. Translated for NKIDP by Gary Goldberg.

<http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/115702>

²⁹ "Information Report by Cable," Central Intelligence Agency, October 9, 1952.

<https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP82-00457R014300490008-6.pdf>

Sung. If rumors such as these truly existed and were circulating in North Korea, and Kim Il Sung was privy to them, it would seem natural that Kim Il Sung would be suspicious of anyone in the Korean Worker's Party (KWP) with connections to China, and especially those with connections to Peng Dehuai.

A Brief History of the Cult to 1956

During North Korea's early days and following the Korean War, Kim's personality cult played second fiddle to the personality cult of Stalin. The first three Central Committees invoked Stalin as their honorary president. North Korean reverence for Stalin (whether genuine or faux) declined in the aftermath of Nikita Khrushchev's 1956 "Secret Speech," but rather than disappear like many other personality cults modeled after Stalin's, Kim Il Sung's cult persisted, and later thrived.

Dae-sook Suh's landmark biography of Kim Il Sung claims that immediately after liberation from the Japanese Empire, Kim was virtually unknown to the Korean people and that it took a great effort on the part of the Soviet occupiers to convince audiences of his heroic qualities.³⁰ Seemingly contradicting Suh, a Soviet report on the situation in North Korea in 1945 briefly mentions Kim Il Sung's popularity among the people, hinting at his burgeoning personality cult. The author of the report notes that "the Korean people have created many legends about him, and he has indeed become a legendary hero of the Korean people" and that he would make "a suitable candidate" to

³⁰ Suh, p. 61.

lead the Korean government.³¹ According to Lim Jae-cheon, the occupying Soviets promoted Kim's early personality cult in order to exaggerate his military accomplishments and increase his legitimacy as a ruler.³² It's unclear whether the 1945 report's description of Kim's popularity in this report should be taken as evidence of his indigenous popularity, contradicting Suh, or an assessment of how well Soviet efforts to promote Kim were in 1945. Fyodor Tertitskiy even argues that the cult was actually being constructed even before World War II had officially come to an end.³³ Regardless of whether the cult emerged natively or was entirely constructed, the Soviets certainly had an interest in promoting it as a means to establishing Kim Il Sung as the leader of North Korea.

In his analysis of the emergence of Stalin's personality cult, Robert Tucker posits several key factors that encouraged its development. He claims that there was a "pragmatic need for a prestigious unifying symbol" after the death of his predecessor, Lenin.³⁴ Likewise, in North Korea there likely was a perceived need for a "prestigious unifying symbol" in North Korea immediately after liberation. According to a 1945 Soviet report on the situation in Korea, the Soviets were very concerned with establishing a unified Korean government, pointing out that in order to strengthen the KWP they must

³¹ "Soviet Report on Communists in Korea, 1945," 1945, *History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive*, AGShVS RF. F. 172. OP 614631. D. 23 pp. 21-26. Translated by Gary Goldberg. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/114890>

³² Lim, p. 21.

³³ Tertitskiy, "The Ascension of the Ordinary Man: How the Personality Cult of Kim Il-Sung Was Constructed (1945-1974)," p. 212.

³⁴ Robert Tucker, "The Rise of Stalin's Personality Cult," *The American Historical Review* 84, no. 2 (1979): p. 347, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1855137>

“end the factional struggle in the Seoul Party organizations.”³⁵ To that end, the Soviets recommended Kim Il Sung as the future leader of the KWP.

Throughout the years following the establishment of North Korea, various policies were passed and attributed to Kim Il Sung, developing his reputation as a “great man” and feeding his growing personality cult.³⁶ Throughout the Korean War, there was little focus on Kim Il Sung in the media. After the signing of the armistice agreement, however, the war began to be portrayed as a victory won by Kim Il Sung.³⁷

Only two years after the cease-fire, signs of unrest emerged within the KWP over the growth of Kim Il Sung’s personality cult. On March 31, 1955, Pak Ch’ang-sik, Chairman of the Chagang Provincial People’s Committee, was invited to the apartment of Soviet Embassy Counselor to the DPRK A. M. Petrov in Pyongyang. According to a record of the conversation that took place, Pak “stressed that an unhealthy atmosphere of sycophancy and servility toward Kim Il Sung exists [among a] majority of senior officials in the Cabinet of Ministers and the KWP Central Committee (CC).”³⁸

Pak Ch’ang-sik’s comments as well as nearly identical complaints from Ri Sang-jo and the participants in the 1956 August Incident the following year support Adrian Popan’s argument in *The ABC of Sycophancy* that cult creation is “a bottom-up process, allowed by structural conditions and triggered by individual members of a pseudo elite,

³⁵ “Soviet Report on Communists in Korea, 1945,”

³⁶ Buzo, p. 14.

³⁷ Tertitskiy, p. 217.

³⁸ “Record of a Conversation with Illarion Dmitriyevich Pak, Chairman of the Jagang Provincial People’s Committee,” April 13, 1955, *History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive*, RGANI fond 5, opis 28, delo 314. Translated for NKIDP by Gary Goldberg.
<https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/116308>

unable to challenge the dictator's position, but willing to secure powerful positions for themselves."³⁹ In "Thoughts on the 'Cult of Personality' in Communist History," John Pittman describes a similar process as a "top-down" approach. According to Pittman, the secretive nature of revolutionary parties "shifts...party work onto a small circle of personalities 'at the top,'" which increases the likelihood of a cult of personality forming.⁴⁰ In any case, the exclusivity of Kim Il Sung's circle demonstrates that a personality cult was generated in an environment similar to that which Pittman describes, with the pseudo-elite that Popan describes constituting Kim Il Sung's circle.

As for how the personality cult manifested in public, Tertitskiy notes that during the same year, Kim Il Sung's name began to be bolded in all publications.⁴¹ Between 1945 and 1955, Kim Il Sung's cult of personality had grown to a level that was concerning to members of both the Yan'an and Soviet factions.

The August Faction Incident

Kim Il Sung's personality cult would grow and intensify throughout the 1950s as Kim sought greater control over the ruling party. Following Khrushchev's posthumous denunciation of Stalin in his "Secret Speech" at the 20th Congress of the CPSU in early 1956, the personality cult of Kim Il Sung became a target of criticism by various

³⁹ Adrain Popan, "The ABC of Sycophancy: Structural Conditions for the Emergence of Dictators' Cults of Personality (Dissertation, University of Texas, 2015)," p. 1. <https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/handle/2152/46763>.

⁴⁰ John Pittman, "Thoughts on the 'Cult of Personality' in Communist History," *Science & Society* 81, no. 4 (October 2017), p. 539.

⁴¹ Tertitskiy, p. 218.

members of the KWP CC. By this time, factional opponents of Kim Il Sung within the KWP had already been the targets of criticism and minor purges by Kim and his supporters, and the factionalists' bold statements against the activities and personality cult of Kim provided him with an excellent pretext to eliminate his critics from North Korean politics.

The purge that would occur in August 1956 is considered to have largely been a Yan'an faction affair. Ri Sang-jo, a prominent member of the Yan'an faction and DPRK Ambassador to the Soviet Union, reportedly spoke to Embassy Counselor N. T. Fedorenko after the Third Congress on May 29th to explain that everything said during that congress was a farce. Later, on July 16th in a conversation with the Chief of the Far East Department at the USSR Ministry of Foreign Affairs I. F. Kurdyukov, Ri requested that Khrushchev or Mao Zedong intervene and publicly criticize Kim for his management of the party and his growing personality cult.⁴² Other members of the Yan'an faction expressed similar views, most notably Ch'oe Ch'ang-ik, Yun Kong-hŭm, and Sŏ Hwi. However, there were also some who were critical of Kim Il Sung independent of the Yan'an faction cadre. DPRK Ambassador to the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and Soviet-Korean Pak Gil-ryong expressed the same disbelief to his interlocutors that Ri Sang-jo did to his.⁴³

⁴² "Memorandum of a Conversation with DPRK Ambassador to the USSR Ri Sang-jo on 16 June 1956," June 21, 1956, *History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive*, RGANI, Fond 5, Opus 28, Delo 412, Listy 238-241, Obtained for NKIDP by Nobuo Shimotomai and translated for NKIDP by Gary Goldberg. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/114133>

⁴³ "Record of a conversation with DPRK Ambassador to East Germany Pak Gil-ryong by S. Filatov for 4 June 1956," June 04, 1956, *History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive*, RGANI Fond 5, Opus 28, Delo 412. Translated by Gary Goldberg. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/120805>

Leonid Brezhnev, who was reportedly in attendance at the Third Congress of the KWP, noted that the CC Presidium elected fewer Soviet Koreans and actually increased the number of Yan'an Koreans.⁴⁴ In the wake of Khrushchev's speech and considering its poor reception by Kim Il Sung's inner circle, the reduction of Soviet Koreans is understandable. However, the increase in Yan'an Koreans is more difficult to explain. It could be viewed as a way to counter Soviet influence, especially considering that Kim apparently wanted to protect his cult of personality and the level of control that it afforded him. Alternatively, it could have been Kim's intent to bring more Yan'an Koreans into the presidium to observe them and prepare for the purge that would occur in August, but this seems unlikely since at this point there was little evidence that would suggest that the Yan'an faction was preparing to criticize Kim Il Sung at the 2nd Plenum.

The details of the actual events that took place at the 2nd Plenum of the 3rd KWP CC at the end of August, known as the August Incident, are murky.⁴⁵ What is known is that a group of CC members from the Yan'an and Soviet factions conspired to criticize Kim Il Sung at the 2nd Plenum for his personality cult and cronyism. During the summer of 1956, Kim Il Sung spent nearly two months traveling through Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Supposedly, the conspirators took advantage of Kim's absence to coordinate with one another and gain the support of other CC members and the governments of Moscow and Beijing. However, Kim was somehow made privy to their plans, and delayed the plenum to garner his own support from CC members against the

⁴⁴ "Record of the Third Congress of the Korean Workers' Party by L.I. Brezhnev," April 30, 1956, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, GARF, Fond 5446, Opis 98, Delo 721, Listy 221-228. Translated by Gary Goldberg. <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/120183>

⁴⁵ Lankov, p. 76.

conspirators. When the fateful plenum commenced, the conspirators aired their criticisms but were quickly shut down and railed against by Kim and his supporters. Some of the conspirators were arrested while at least four of them successfully escaped to China and two to the Soviet Union, but all were expelled from the KWP.⁴⁶

While the event has often been described as a failed coup attempt, the intentions of the conspirators are not entirely agreed upon by scholars. According to Andrei Lankov, it was unlikely that the conspirators would have attempted to stage a coup or forcibly remove Kim Il Sung, because they would likely have not had enough support or the proper resources to stage such an attack.⁴⁷ Balazs Szalontai, on the other hand, appears to believe that the August Faction Incident was certainly an attempt to remove Kim Il Sung.⁴⁸ In any case, both scholars note that prior to the plenum, Ri Sang-jo implored the CPSU to convince Kim to reduce his personality cult and address the conspirators' other concerns. This suggests that Ri wanted the Soviets to "soften Kim up" and make him more receptive to the criticisms of the conspirators. Therefore, the ideal outcome for the conspirators may have ultimately been to change Kim's behavior rather than to oust him.

⁴⁶ "Conversation records between Chairman Mao Zedong and the Soviet Communist Party Delegation, 18 September 1956," September 18, 1956, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Chinese Communist Party Central Archives. Translated by Sergey Radchenko and Jeffrey Wang. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/117838>

⁴⁷ Lankov, p. 101.

⁴⁸ Szalontai, p. 94.

Aftermath

Within days of the plenum, Pyongyang requested the extradition of those who had fled to China.⁴⁹ Two conspirators who fled to the Soviet Union were apparently not sought after by Pyongyang.⁵⁰ Despite that, Ri Sang-jo was recalled to Pyongyang, but ignored the summons, instead seeking asylum in the USSR.⁵¹

The fact that the conspirators fled abroad certainly could have raised suspicion that they were cooperating with or even acting on the orders of Moscow or Beijing. However, the urgency with which Pyongyang requested those who fled to China suggests a particular concern with those individuals over those who fled to the USSR. That Kim had already targeted and purged Pak Il-u the previous year further suggests that he was already wary of the intentions of the Yan'an faction and, by extension, China. Andrei Lankov has posited that China may have supported the factionalists or even orchestrated the attack on Kim Il Sung, but of his own admission there is no evidence that supports the latter idea.⁵² Furthermore, if Kim were aware of rumors surrounding Mao and Peng Dehuai's preference for Kim Tu-bong and Zhou Enlai's 1952 request for control of North Korea, Kim Il Sung would certainly have had even more reason to be concerned about China and the Yan'an faction. Regardless of the truth of these matters, Kim held the view

⁴⁹ "Memorandum of Conversation with the Ambassador of the Peoples Republic of China to the DPRK Qiao Xiaoguang," September 04, 1956, *History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive*, RGANI, Fond 5, Opis 28, Delo 410, Listy 322-325. Obtained and translated for NKIDP by James F. Person. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/113373>

⁵⁰ "Conversation Records Between Chairman Mao Zedong and the Soviet Communist Party Delegation, 18 September 1956."

⁵¹ Lankov, p. 155.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 115

that China was involved. China's next actions would give Kim little reason to doubt his suspicions.

Naturally, the appearance of political refugees from the DPRK was alarming to the governments of Beijing and Moscow. An emergency meeting was called between representatives of the Soviet Union and China, who met in Beijing. Mao Zedong met with Anastas Mikoyan, who revealed that Kim Il Sung visited Moscow during his visit to Eastern Europe and that Khrushchev had discussed the personality cult issue with him. According to Mikoyan, Kim appeared receptive to Khrushchev's message and even expressed agreement.⁵³ Obviously, Kim's agreement was no more than lip-service and his exchange with Khrushchev may have even galvanized Kim against his critics during upcoming August plenum. Mao and Mikoyan decided that a joint delegation led by Peng Dehuai and Mikoyan would visit Pyongyang to force Kim to accept the criticism of the August plenum and restore the expelled party members to their former positions.⁵⁴

According to Zhihua Shen and Yafeng Xia, the declassified record of the conversation between the Soviet and Chinese representatives shows that Mao had no intention of replacing Kim Il Sung, casting doubt on the idea that Mao wanted Kim replaced.⁵⁵ They argue that because Mao "said that he did not intend to overthrow Kim," China's "only purpose was to stabilize the situation in North Korea."⁵⁶ However, there is a saying that "the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence." It is equally likely that

⁵³ "Conversation records between Chairman Mao Zedong and the Soviet Communist Party Delegation, 18 September 1956."

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Shen and Xia, p. 103.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

Mao may have had serious doubts about Kim's leadership and possibly sought to replace Kim only four years prior to the Soviet-Chinese joint intervention.⁵⁷ Because Mao did not declare such intentions in a meeting with the Soviets does not mean that those intentions were absent. Considering that Kim enjoyed the official endorsement of the Soviet Union, it would be understandable that if Mao did wish to replace Kim, he would not have told the Soviet delegation. Mao perceptively noted during the meeting with the Soviets that Kim would accuse China of meddling in North Korean internal affairs if they went ahead with sending a joint delegation.⁵⁸ Indeed, Kim would go on to repeatedly invoke the incident as an example of Chinese interference in North Korean politics.

Regardless of the truth of whether or not Mao wanted Kim gone, Kim almost certainly perceived China as a threat to his position, and the joint intervention only strengthened that perception. In a 1961 conversation with Manush Myftiu, an Albanian diplomat, Kim recalled the joint intervention, remarking that "things got so bad that Mikoyan and Peng Dehuai had to come in" and that "the problem had grown so large that they wanted to cut off my head."⁵⁹

Mikoyan and Peng arrived in Pyongyang on September 19th, 1956. According to Mikoyan's reports on their following meetings with Kim Il Sung, after some deliberation Kim agreed to hold a CC Presidium meeting with Mikoyan and Peng in attendance, and

⁵⁷ "Information Report by Cable."

⁵⁸ "Conversation records between Chairman Mao Zedong and the Soviet Communist Party Delegation, 18 September 1956."

⁵⁹ "Report on the Delegation of the Albanian Labor Party's Meeting with Kim Il Sung," September 25, 1961, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, AQPPSH, MPP Korese, D4, V. 1961. Obtained by Ana Lalaj and translated by Enkel Daljani. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/114425>

the CC would hold another plenum at which Kim would reverse the decision to expel the conspirators from the CC.⁶⁰ Indeed, those who did not flee abroad were restored to their former positions, but this would prove to be only temporary. During the remainder of 1956, those Yan'an and Soviet Koreans who had expressed even an ounce of sympathy for the conspirators gradually disappeared from view. According to Jae-Jung Suh, those purges were in retaliation for the joint Sino-Soviet intervention.⁶¹ However, it seems highly likely that Kim Il Sung never intended to keep his promise to restore the conspirators to their former positions in the first place, considering the reluctance he expressed during his meetings with Mikoyan and Peng.

It is worth considering how Kim Il Sung perceived Mao's selection of Peng as his representative in the intervention. Recall the 1952 CIA report that claims that Mao did not want Kim Il Sung in control of North Korea, and Peng's promise to Kim Tu-bong that he would help him replace Kim Il Sung.⁶² Even if Kim Il Sung were not privy to such machinations taking place right underneath his nose, assuming that they were really taking place, Kim was likely well-aware of Peng's dislike of him. Peng was the commander of the CPVA when they intervened after the Americans had broken the KPA's near-domination of the peninsula during the Korean War, and had serious

⁶⁰ "Telegram from A. Mikoyan to the CPSU Central Committee," September 21, 1956, *History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive*, GARF, Fond 5446, Opis 98c, Delo 718, Listy 12-16. Translated by Gary Goldberg. <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/120194>

⁶¹ Jae-Jung Suh, *Origins of North Korea's Juche: Colonialism, War, and Development* (Lanham, Maryland, Lexington Books, 2012), p. 10, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uva/detail.action?docID=1101136>.

⁶² "Information Report by Cable."

disagreements with Kim over how to proceed with the war which on occasion erupted into heated arguments.⁶³

In a conversation with a Polish delegation in 1960 in Moscow, Liu Shaoqi related that “Had that delegation, in 1956 in Korea, only opposed the cult of personality of Kim Il Sung [that would be fine], but they wanted to topple the leadership.”⁶⁴ Liu’s comment suggests that one the intention behind the 1956 Sino-Soviet intervention was in fact the removal of Kim Il Sung. He elaborates that “Mikoyan and our [delegates] came and supported this opposition against Kim Il Sung.”⁶⁵ Liu later describes the joint intervention as having been a mistake that had negative consequences for Sino-North Korean relations.

Following the joint Sino-Soviet intervention, Kim Il Sung’s personality cult waned for a time. In May 1957, Ambassador Puzanov noted that “there were no noisy demonstrations, especially of servility toward or glorification of Kim Il Sung.”⁶⁶ In August that same year, Polish Ambassador Makarov noted that “Gradually, slightly, from the top, the results of the cult of the individual are being removed,” and that “Kim Il Sung has changed immensely.”⁶⁷

⁶³ Shen and Xia, p. 56-59.

⁶⁴ “Record of Conversation between Polish Delegation (Gomułka et al.) and Chinese Communist Politburo Member Liu Shaoqi, Moscow,” November 29, 1960, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Sygnatura XI A15, AAN, KC PZPR, Warsaw. Obtained by Douglas Selvage and translated by Malgorzata Gnoinska. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/117783>

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ “Journal of Soviet Ambassador to the DPRK A.M. Puzanov for 13 May 1957,” May 13, 1957, *History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive*, AVPRF F. 0102, Op. 13, P. 72, Delo 5, Listy 44-113. Translated for NKIDP by Gary Goldberg. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/115611>

⁶⁷ “Notes from a Conversation between the 1st Secretary of the PRL Embassy in the DPRK with the Counselor of the Embassy of the USSR, Comrade. Makarov on 27.VIII.1957,” August 29, 1957, *History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Polish Foreign Ministry Archive*. Obtained for NKIDP by

It is clear that Kim Il Sung's personality cult was not the unifying symbol that was needed to resolve the divisions within the KWP that led to the August Faction Incident in 1956. In fact, it was a key driver of those divisions. Rather than help to unify the Party after the incident, the personality cult was reduced for a time while those involved were gradually and silently "taken care of." In the case of the August Faction Incident, Kim's personality cult appears to have failed as a "prestigious unifying symbol."

In his doctoral dissertation *The ABC of Sycophancy*, Adrian Popan posits a theory of personality cult formation that centers on societal preconditions. He argues that personality cults are a "grassroots" process driven by the "pseudo-elite." Popan theorizes that there are three conditions required for a personality cult to develop in a country: "a particular combination of patrimonialism and clientelism, lack of dissidence, and systematic falsification pervading the society's culture."⁶⁸

While it is impossible to empirically gauge patrimonialism and clientelism, let alone define what "particular combination" of the two is required for a personality cult to emerge, Korean culture does have a well-documented tradition of patrimonialism and clientelism. But one need not look any further than Kim Il Sung's grip on the government apparatus of North Korea for evidence of patrimony, which the Kim family continues to hold to this day. As far as clientelism, it is trickier to prove, but reports of rampant sycophancy within the KWP before and during the August Faction Incident suggest that

Jakub Poprocki and translated for NKIDP by Maya Latynski.
<http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/110631>

⁶⁸ Popan, p. iv.

clientelism was present to a high degree at that time. Given that Kim Il Sung weathered the incident and his personality cult thrived, sycophants almost certainly continued to multiply along with clientelism. In the case of Kim Il Sung's personality cult, this portion of Popan's theory seems to apply well.

There was also a marked lack of dissidence within North Korea and the KWP. Early in the history of the KWP, dissidence (factionalism) was greater, and Kim Il Sung's personality cult was not as developed as it later became. During the August Faction Incident, Kim Il Sung made a powerful example of what would happen to dissenters within the KWP, creating a disincentive for future dissidence.

The Return of the Cult

Not until the summer of 1960 does the personality cult seem to have become a concern again. Soviet Ambassador Puzanov noted in a conversation with the GDR Ambassador to the DPRK K. Shneidewind that the cult of personality continued to be an issue within the KWP.⁶⁹ By 1961, Kim's cult of personality appears to have exceeded its former intensity, based on a GDR Embassy report. According to the report, some familiar features of the personality cult were noted, such as the "distortion of history," which Ri Sök-bok, Ri P'il-gyu, and Ri Sang-jo railed against in their conversations with various

⁶⁹ "Note about a Conversation in the Soviet Embassy with Comrade Puzanov," August 30, 1960, *History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR im Bundesarchiv (SAPMO-BA), Zentrales Parteiarchiv der SED (ZPA), IV 2/20/137*. Translated for NKIDP by Bernd Schaefer.
<http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/112960>

ambassadors throughout 1956.^{70, 71} The history in particular that was distorted largely involves the exaggeration of Kim Il Sung's role in the liberation of Korea, which would later become a key feature of his personality cult. Some new features emerged as well – the USSR's involvement in the reconstruction of North Korea was downplayed, and Kim Il Sung had begun to be represented in domestic media as one of the foremost Communist thinkers of the day, raising him to the level of Engels, Marx, and Lenin, if not higher.⁷²

In June 1960, Soviet Ambassador Puzanov shared with Kim Il Sung a document that described Mao Zedong's attitude towards Kim. In his journal, Puzanov described Kim's reaction: "Kim Il Sung was very disturbed and at first was even taken aback and sat silent for some time, and smoked unusually much. It was the first time I have had occasion to observe Kim Il Sung in such a condition. Usually it is hard to upset his equilibrium. Outwardly, he always remains calm."⁷³ While the precise contents of the document are unknown, it's certain that whatever Mao had said about Kim, it wasn't

⁷⁰ "Memorandum of Conversation with Gi Seok-bok," May 31, 1956, *History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive*, RGANI, Fond 5, Opis 28, Delo 410, Listy 222-223. Obtained for NKIDP by James F. Person and translated for NKIDP by Gary Goldberg.

<http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/111643>

⁷¹ "Memorandum of Conversation with the head of the department of construction materials under the DPRK Cabinet of Ministers, Li Pil-gyu.," July 20, 1956, *History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive*, RGANI, Fond 5, Opis 28, Delo 410, Listy 304-308. Obtained and translated for NKIDP by James F. Person. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/113366>

⁷² "Report, Embassy of the GDR in the DPRK to the Foreign Policy and International Department of the Socialist Unity Party, GDR," March 14, 1961, *History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive*, SAPMO-BA, Dy 30, IV 2/20/137. Translated by Grace Leonard.

<http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/112303>

⁷³ "Journal of Soviet Ambassador in the DPRK A.M. Puzanov for 16 June 1960," June 16, 1960, *History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive*, AVPRF fond 0102, opis 16, delo 7, p.1-15. Translated for NKIDP by Gary Goldberg. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/119419>

flattering. Throughout the 1960s, Mao and Kim's relationship would continue to deteriorate.

Border issues also strained the Sino-North Korean relationship. In part due to the economic difficulties that became prevalent as a result of the Great Leap Forward, large numbers of ethnic Koreans living in China fled to North Korea between 1960 and 1962.⁷⁴ In 1961, the Chinese Ambassador to North Korea Qiao Xiaoguang had a discussion with the North Korean Foreign Minister Pak Sŏng-chŏl regarding ethnic Korean Chinese nationals illegally crossing the Sino-North Korean border.⁷⁵ During their discussion, Pak explained that North Korea was having difficulty resettling such large numbers of arrivals, and implored China to better control their side of the border. In a later meeting in the same year with Zhou Enlai, Kim Il Sung claimed that by that time about 20,000 people had left Yanbian for North Korea.⁷⁶ Kim's figure may be exaggerated – according to a Chinese report from 1962, Pak Sŏng-ch'ŏl gave figures that over 28,000 people crossed the border into North Korea, but a substantial number of those were returned to China, putting the overall figure of those remaining in North Korea much lower.

⁷⁴ "Instructions from the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Public Security on the Issue of Ethnic Koreans Crossing the Border to Korea," March 23, 1962, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, PRC FMA 118-01025-02, 1-3. Obtained by Shen Zhihua and translated by Jeffrey Wan and Charles Kraus. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/115324>

⁷⁵ "Cable from the Chinese Embassy in North Korea, 'Illegal Crossings of the International Border by Chinese Koreans'," May 12, 1961, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, PRC FMA 118-01026-03, 71. Translated by David Cowhig. <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/188161>

⁷⁶ "Minutes of Conversation between Zhou Enlai and Kim Il Sung," July 11, 1961, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, PRC FMA 204-01454-01, 1-12. Translated by Jeffrey Wang and Charles Kraus. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/114178>

Regardless, Pak claimed that the influx of immigrants from China had “a negative political influence and [was] also affecting social order in [North] Korea.”⁷⁷

At the 22nd Congress of the CPSU in October 1961, Khrushchev again made statements against personality cults and advocated for its antithesis: collective action. According to a report by the Embassy of Hungary in the DPRK, Kim Il Sung forbade discussion of the personality cult within the Party and within Korea, even though Khrushchev’s remarks had apparently become known throughout the country. József Kovács, the author of the report, noted that “public opinion [within Korea] was greatly interested in it,” referring to the issue of the personality cult, among other issues.⁷⁸ Kovács’ comment is particularly noteworthy, because it is extremely rare to find signs of public opinion in North Korea at any point in history. It suggests that the North Korean public in 1962 were aware of the issues surrounding the personality cult and were eager for more information on the party’s response to the latest congress of the CPSU.

As a public unifying symbol (rather than a Party unifying symbol), a guess can be ventured as to whether the personality cult was necessary in the early 1960s. If József Kovács was correct that the public was interested in the issue of the personality cult, it does not signal clear public division on the issue or general public discord at all. Rather, it seems to paint the issue as a tabloid matter. Based on this very limited information,

⁷⁷ “Instructions from the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Public Security on the Issue of Ethnic Koreans Crossing the Border to Korea.”

⁷⁸ “Report, Embassy of Hungary in North Korea to the Hungarian Foreign Ministry,” April 05, 1962, *History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive*, MOL, XIX-J-1-j Korea, 13. doboz, 27/a, 0025/RT/1962. Translated for NKIDP by Balazs Szalontai. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/113487>

there was likely no need for a prestigious unifying symbol in the public sphere in 1962, though it doesn't rule out that the KWP perceived the need for one. Given the Party's paranoid disposition and overall support for Kim, it's likely that the KWP considered it necessary regardless of whether it really was.

Kim Il Sung's personality cult did not wane following the message of the 22nd Congress of the CPSU, unlike the period following Khrushchev's original denunciation of Stalin's personality cult in 1956 and the August Faction incident. In 1963, the East German embassy acquired an internal KWP brochure that shows clearly how members were indoctrinated into Kim's personality cult, and shows that the development and promotion of the cult was a deliberate act on the part of the KWP. Based on the details of the brochure, by this time Chinese and Soviet involvement in the liberation of Korea had been omitted from the party's interpretation of history (in fact, the brochure even claims that it was Korea that spread the revolution to China). According to the author of the report, Kim Il Sung is the only individual mentioned throughout the entire brochure, and all of North Korea's accomplishments were attributed to him.⁷⁹

Perceived threats to Kim Il Sung's control may have partly contributed to the reemergence of Kim's cult in the early 1960s. In a conversation with Song Renqiong in 1963, Kim Il Sung revealed that whenever he met with Mao Zedong, Mao would tell Kim that "you should maintain very good relations with the comrades of the Northeast. The

⁷⁹ "Comment on the Internal Korean Workers Party Brochure, 'The Revolutionary Traditions of our Party Established during the Period of the Armed Anti-Japanese Struggle,'" May 16, 1963, *History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive*, SAPMO-BA, Berlin, DY 30, IV A 2/20/250. Translated for NKIDP by Bernd Schaefer. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/110116>

Northeast is like the rear area of North Korea.” He further elaborated that “during [the Korean War], if the Northeast had not been a rear area, [North] Korea would have [faced] severe difficulties.”⁸⁰ Even though these conversations may seem to have been cordial and a way of emphasizing the closeness of China and North Korea, Mao’s constant reminders that it would be disadvantageous for Kim to lose the support of “the Northeast” may have portended the anxiety that Kim must have felt during the Cultural Revolution that would begin in 1966. A 1964 report shows that Chinese Ambassador to the DPRK Hao Deqing also made similar remarks to Kim Il Sung, which suggests that such a line was a cornerstone of Chinese diplomacy with North Korea at the time.⁸¹ Romanian diplomat Ionescu Teofil relates that in a conversation, the Chinese counselor in Pyongyang said that “the North Korean people...knew that China represented the guarantee of the very existence of the DPRK and that the Chinese people had helped and always would help the North Korean people, in any given circumstances.”⁸²

Kim Il Sung’s personality cult went through something of a rollercoaster ride from liberation to 1966. It may have had some indigenous roots, but was certainly constructed in the image of Stalin’s own personality cult and promoted by occupying Soviet authorities from 1945 to at least the Korean War. In 1956, Khrushchev made his

⁸⁰ “Report on Conversation between Song Renqiong and Kim Il Sung,” October 18, 1963, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, PRC FMA 106-00719-06, 49-54. Obtained by Shen Zhihua and translated by Jeffrey Wang and Charles Kraus. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/116546>

⁸¹ “Minutes of Conversation between Kim Il Sung and the Chinese Economic Goodwill Delegation,” September 05, 1964, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, PRC FMA 106-00767-01, 1- 13. Obtained by Shen Zhihua and translated by Jeffrey Wang and Charles Kraus. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/116548>

⁸² “Telegram from Pyongyang to Bucharest, No.14.213, TOP SECRET, April 7, 1967,” April 07, 1967, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Archive of the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Obtained and translated for NKIDP by Eliza Gheorghe. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/116696>

famous “Secret Speech” denouncing Stalin’s personality cult, sending waves throughout the Communist bloc and consternation among Kim Il Sung and his domestic supporters. After purging his domestic opponents during the August Faction Incident, Kim’s personality cult was reduced for a time until reemerging in 1960. In 1966, a new threat to Kim Il Sung’s control over North Korea would emerge, triggering the greatest spike in intensity of his personality cult.

Kim’s Cult during The Cultural Revolution

In 1966, Mao Zedong declared the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. From 1966 to 1969, fervent supporters of Mao organized and sought to eradicate what were considered detrimental or subversive elements of Chinese culture and society. Groups of young and enthusiastic Maoists known as Red Guards swept through China, destroying historical monuments and criticizing and assaulting those perceived to be insufficiently Maoist. Kim Il Sung and his supporters were baffled by the Cultural Revolution, and to some degree felt threatened by it. Chinese anti-Soviet policies and particularly the Cultural Revolution spurred Kim to promote his personality cult during this time, thereby increasing its intensity. Kim’s cult even adopted elements of Mao’s cult. The Cultural Revolution represents the period of lowest relations between China and North Korea as well as the beginning of the “final” intensification of Kim Il Sung’s personality cult.

In Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture in Jilin Province, just north of the Tumen River that forms the border with North Korea, the Cultural Revolution took on a

spectacularly violent form. A September 1966 telegram from the Yanbian Military District Party Committee to higher headquarters provides a rare insight into the early stage of the Cultural Revolution in Yanbian. The author of the telegram expressed concern that a large number of people would flee into North Korea as a result of Red Guard activities, and accurately predicted that the Cultural Revolution would transform Yanbian into a zone of ethnic conflict. Interestingly, the telegram claims that the CCP CC instructed Red Guards “not to carry out activities in the border region.”⁸³ This means that Chinese officials, and likely Mao himself, were aware that the Cultural Revolution would inflame tensions between China and North Korea and, at least in September 1966, strove to stymie the negative effect that the Cultural Revolution could have on Sino-North Korean relations. However, such efforts appear to have been ineffective and short-lived.

A Soviet report from December 1966 reflects the state of Sino-North Korean relations and Kim Il Sung’s initial feelings on the Cultural Revolution. By this time, Kim was highly critical of China’s relative inaction in Vietnam, and caused Kim to doubt China’s commitment to the defense of North Korea. Kim condemned the Cultural Revolution as “left opportunism” and “nihilistic,” both themes which would persist until Mao’s death and the beginning of Sino-North Korean rapprochement in 1969.⁸⁴ In another 1967 Soviet report, it is noted that “the leaders of the KWP speak of the so-called

⁸³ “Cable from the Yanbian Military District Party Committee, 'Implementing the Shenyang Military District's Opinion "Guidance on the Activities of Red Guards in the Border Area"',” September 08, 1966, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Jilin Provincial Archives, 77-12-3, 10-13. Translated by David Cowhig. <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/198179>

⁸⁴ “First Secretary of the Soviet Embassy in North Korean Reports on Sino-Korean Relations in 1966,” December 02, 1966, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, AVPRF, f. 0102, op. 22, p. 109, d. 22, pp. 38-49. Obtained by Sergey Radchenko and translated by Gary Goldberg. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/114591>

‘Great Cultural Revolution’ as a ‘great madness,’ having nothing in common with either culture or a revolution.”⁸⁵ The same report quotes Kim as having said that “the ‘Great Cultural Revolution’ might exert a great influence on our party.”⁸⁶ Later that year, Kim went on to call the Cultural Revolution “a massive idiocy.”⁸⁷

Interest in Kim Il Sung’s personality cult, which throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s had been a hot topic among foreign diplomats in Pyongyang, had diminished for a brief time after the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution, when interest in deteriorating Sino-North Korean relations skyrocketed. According to a June 1967 Romanian diplomatic cable, Kim’s personality cult “was visibly diminished” in October 1966.⁸⁸ However, despite the reportedly diminished cult, it remained a sensitive topic within the KWP. The same cable notes that several prominent members of the KWP had disappeared for reasons that they assessed were related to Kim’s personality cult.

The earliest recorded sign of what would come to be known as the Kapsan Purge emerged in the June 1967 diplomatic cable. It noted that “for some time the diplomatic corps has been speculating about the fact that starting with the second half of April, Ri Hyo-sun and Pak Kŭm-ch’ŏl, members of the Politburo Presidium and of the [KWP]

⁸⁵ “The DPRK Attitude Toward the So-called ‘Cultural Revolution’ in China,” March 07, 1967, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, AVPRF f. 0102, op. 23, p. 112, d. 24, pp. 13-23. Obtained by Sergey Radchenko and translated by Gary Goldberg. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/114570>

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ “Note on a Conversation with the 1st Secretary of the Soviet Embassy, Comrade Zvetkov, on 15 March 1967,” March 16, 1967, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, PolA AA, MfAA, G-A 364. Translated by Bernd Schaefer. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/116647>

⁸⁸ “Telegram from Pyongyang to Bucharest, No. 76.203, TOP SECRET, June 13, 1967,” June 13, 1967, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Archive of the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Obtained and translated for NKIDP by Eliza Gheorghie. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/116707>

Central Committee Secretariat, have not been seen in public.”⁸⁹ Small details of the purge would emerge over the next few months.

Kim’s personality cult appears to have been once again at the center of a purge of KWP officials. A Romanian cable from July 28, 1967 records some additional information on the Kapsan Purge acquired in conversation that Romanian Ambassador to North Korea, N. Popa, had with the Chinese charge d’affaires Van Pen. Van Pen told Popa that Pak Kūm-ch’ōl and others were purged “because of a serious ideological split within the [KWP] on matters related to the role of some Korean personalities in the revolution,” and “Pak Kūm-ch’ōl and Kim To-man did not make enough propaganda around Kim Il Sung’s cult of personality.”⁹⁰ Van Pen also claimed that those who were purged were “the last nationalist personalities who were in favor of friendly relations with the PRC,” suggesting that Kim’s motives in executing the purge were not only related to promoting his personality cult but also to attack China.⁹¹ At the very least, China seems to have officially viewed it that way.

The Kapsan Purge also corresponds with the establishment of the “Monolithic Ideological System.”⁹² Simply put, the Monolithic Ideological System is the codification of Kim’s personality cult. Based on comments reportedly made by KWP officials regarding the purge, it is almost certain that members of the Kapsan faction were purged

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ “Telegram from Pyongyang to Bucharest, TOP SECRET, No. 76.247, July 28, 1967,” July 28, 1967, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Archive of the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Obtained and translated for NKIDP by Eliza Gheorghe. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/116710>

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Tertitskiy, “The Ascension of the Ordinary Man,” p. 221.

due to disagreements over the Monolithic Ideological System. One comment that the Deputy Head of the Foreign Relations Department in the KWP CC made to a Czech diplomat elucidates the pressure to promote the system: “currently, we are emphasizing more than ever on maintaining the monolithic unity of our party around Kim Il Sung and the Central Committee, even if it means putting our lives on the line.”⁹³ The Czech diplomat further noted that after purge, the KWP CC headquarters had bolstered its security with armed soldiers in addition to “the usual security officers.”⁹⁴ Kim Il Sung’s personality cult appears to have become strictly promoted and enforced beginning at this time.

Though the Kapsan purge almost certainly was a pivotal moment in the development of Kim Il Sung’s personality cult and consolidation of power, unlike the August Faction Incident, there seems to be no Chinese connection. The East German Ambassador to North Korea assessed that the goals of the victims of the Kapsan purge were not to oust Kim Il Sung, and though the CCP viewed those purged as friendly to China, there is no evidence that they were swayed by China in the way that the Yan’an Koreans might have been.^{95, 96}

⁹³ “Telegram from Pyongyang to Bucharest, TOP SECRET, No. 76.276, July 30, 1967,” July 30, 1967, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Archive of the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Obtained and translated for NKIDP by Eliza Gheorghe. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/116712>

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ “Letter from GDR Embassy in the DPRK to State Secretary Hegen,” December 22, 1967, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, PoLA AA, MfAA, G A 360. Obtained and translated for NKIDP by Bernd Shaefer. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/113367>

⁹⁶ “Telegram from Pyongyang to Bucharest, TOP SECRET, No. 76.247, July 28, 1967.”

While the Kapsan faction almost certainly had opposed Kim's personality cult, their protests did not have the same effect as those during the August Faction Incident in 1956. Instead of momentarily calming the personality cult, the cult spiked in its intensity. Though the Kapsan faction's protests were not directly related to the Cultural Revolution, the purge that followed sent a message to KWP members that dissent would not be tolerated at a time when Kim Il Sung feared that the Cultural Revolution could spread dissent throughout North Korea. In this case, Popan's theory that a lack of dissent is required to foster a personality cult seems to apply following the Kapsan purge.

It may be argued that because there was clear dissidence in 1956 and 1967 Popan's theory is incorrect. However, dissidence was not widespread and failed to stymie both the development of Kim's personality cult and his accumulation of power. Popan theorized that there needs to be a lack of dissidence, not an absence of dissidence. By 1956, Kim's personality cult had already grown to a level that was disturbing to some Party members and he had already formed an initial inner circle of sycophants. In 1967, his personality cult had already begun approaching its highest level of intensity. Kim's personality cult was able to increase in intensity in the mid-1960s because there was a historical lack of dissidence. The dissidence that occurred was too little and too late to halt the progression of the cult. In 1969, a Soviet report also describes the culture of sycophancy within the KWP.⁹⁷

⁹⁷ "N. Sudarikov, 'The Main Directions of the Domestic and Foreign Policy of the KWP CC and DPRK Government and the Situation in Korea,'" November 18, 1969, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, RGANI, fond 5, opis 61, delo 462, listy 246-264. Contributed by Sergey Radchenko and translated by Gary Goldberg. <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/134264>

Shen and Xia argue that Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai never intended to spread the Cultural Revolution into North Korea.⁹⁸ This may be the case; however, others likely did want to spread the Cultural Revolution into North Korea. In October 1967, one Chinese official, Yao Wenyuan, made a speech in which he stated that “There is no Mao Zedong Thought in North Korea, but the masses and leftist KWP members worship Chairman Mao and love Chairman Mao. Kim Il-sung belongs to a privileged stratum and is a degenerate element...”⁹⁹ This statement may be hyperbole intended only to encourage Red Guards, but even so it reflects an enthusiasm for the spread of the Cultural Revolution into North Korea.

More importantly, however, Kim Il Sung may have perceived Chinese activities as deliberate attempts to infect the North Korean population with the Cultural Revolution, regardless of actual intent. In February 1967, North Korea banned photographic showcases from being displayed in front of resident embassies, a measure that was assessed by a Soviet diplomat to be a thinly concealed measure specifically “directed against the Chinese government.”¹⁰⁰ North Korean officials specifically tried to restrict the display and distribution of propaganda which praised Mao, highlighting the Cultural Revolution and Maoism as a topic of concern.¹⁰¹ While Kim Il Sung would later go on to

⁹⁸ Shen and Xia, p. 184

⁹⁹ Hongdaihui Sanzhong Linshi Geming Weiuyuanhui Zongbu Jinggangshan Tongxunshu [The Provisional Revolutionary Committee of the Third Congress of the Red Guard Red Flag Headquarters of Jinggang Mountains News Agency], ed., *Qingfeng* [Green Mountain Peak] 30 (November 2, 1967) cited in Shen and Xia, *A Misunderstood Friendship*, p. 180.

¹⁰⁰ “The DPRK Attitude Toward the So-called ‘Cultural Revolution’ in China.”

¹⁰¹ “Y.D. Fadeev, First Secretary of the Soviet Embassy in DPRK, to CC CPSU, ‘Korean-Chinese relations in 1969 (Memo),’ December 09, 1969, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, RGANI, fond 5, opis 61, delo 466, listy 187-197. Contributed by Sergey Radchenko and translated by Gary Goldberg. <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/134267>

claim that the actions of the Red Guards were not to be conflated with the official motives of the CCP, the fact that the Chinese embassy in Pyongyang publicly displayed and attempted to disseminate Cultural Revolution propaganda among the residents of Pyongyang would likely have suggested to the KWP that exporting the Cultural Revolution was an official foreign policy goal of the CCP. Alternatively, the ambassador to the DPRK at the time could have been a rogue advocate of the Cultural Revolution. It is worth noting that Kim was not the only one who may have believed that China attempted to spread the Cultural Revolution into North Korea. According to a declassified Soviet report, the KGB assessed that China was trying to do just that. Their assessment was supported by examples of anti-Korean sentiment, framed as a relentless propaganda campaign directed at North Korea: the burning of Korean books, the distribution of Cultural Revolution propaganda among Chinese citizens in North Korea, loudspeakers along the Sino-North Korean border that blasted anti-Korean propaganda, and pro-Mao demonstrations in Dandong, a Chinese city on the Sino-North Korean border.¹⁰²

North Korea reportedly changed the frequency and time that Chinese news and propaganda was rebroadcast in order to make it more difficult for North Korean citizens to receive them.¹⁰³ While it is uncertain what the precise messaging of Chinese Korean-language broadcasts were, it is possible that the KWP was concerned that Chinese broadcasts could inspire Mao's Cultural Revolution to take root in North Korea.

¹⁰² "B.A. Solomatin, 'Concerning Korean-Chinese Relations,'" April 25, 1969, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, RGANI, fond 5, opis 61, delo 466, listy 96-99. Contributed by Sergey Radchenko and translated by Gary Goldberg. <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/134238>

¹⁰³ "First Secretary of the Soviet Embassy in North Korean Reports on Sino-Korean Relations in 1966."

According to a Soviet report on the North Korean response to the Cultural Revolution, Kim Il Sung was very concerned with the possibility that the Cultural Revolution could have some influence on North Koreans.¹⁰⁴ According to the same report, in January 1967, a meeting was held with leaders and workers from various sectors of the North Korean economy that aimed to raise “the level of consciousness of the masses.”¹⁰⁵ In other words, one of the goals of that meeting could have been to ideologically inoculate North Korean citizens against any influence posed by the Cultural Revolution.

Though Kim Il Sung would later say that he distinguished between the activities of the Red Guards and the Chinese government during the Cultural Revolution, at the time that it was occurring it was likely difficult for Kim and the KWP to distinguish between the threats posed by independent Red Guard groups and the Chinese government. The Cultural Revolution had quickly gotten out of control, as evidenced by the 1966 Yanbian Military District telegram.¹⁰⁶ Anti-Korean broadcasts at the border and the display of Maoist propaganda near the Chinese embassy could very well have been perceived by members of the KWP as official attempts to spread the Cultural Revolution into North Korea. The arrival of a train filled with the bodies of ethnic Koreans in Sinŭiju must certainly have enhanced the perceived severity of the issue.¹⁰⁷ North Korean Minister of Foreign Affairs Pak Sŏng-ch’ŏl perceived such occurrences as deliberate

¹⁰⁴ “The DPRK Attitude Toward the So-called 'Cultural Revolution' in China.”

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ “Cable from the Yanbian Military District Party Committee, 'Implementing the Shenyang Military District's Opinion “Guidance on the Activities of Red Guards in the Border Area””

¹⁰⁷ “Note on a Conversation with the Acting Ambassador of the People’s Republic of Poland, Comrade Pudisz, on 9 October 1967 between 1000 and 1130 hours in the Polish Embassy,” October 20, 1967, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, PolA AA, MfAA, C 149/75. Translated by Bernd Schaefer. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/116640>

provocations.¹⁰⁸ By 1968 Kim did not seem to distinguish very much between the goals of the Red Guards and the Chinese government. After expressing his concerns about North Korean officials flying over Chinese territory en route to the USSR, Kim explained “that a forced landing might happen on flights over Chinese territory and insults by Red Guards might occur.”¹⁰⁹

Chinese activities were perceived by North Korea as threats. According to an East German diplomat in Bucharest who had spoken with the North Korean ambassador to Hungary, “The Korean ambassador also reported that China permanently slanders Korea and Korea is responding in kind. It is obvious that China wants to organize an overthrow [of Kim Il Sung] in North Korea.”¹¹⁰ It is unclear whether the latter statement was the opinion of the North Korean ambassador or an observation made by the East German diplomat. According to one Soviet report, the Koreans were also apparently aware of attacks on ethnic Koreans in Yanbian between 1966 and 1968.¹¹¹ However, no official statement or communication from North Korea regarding the matter has ever been uncovered, so presently there is no way of knowing how the KWP perceived the violence in Yanbian.

¹⁰⁸ “Y.D. Fadeev, First Secretary of the Soviet Embassy in North Korea, 'Korean-Chinese Relations in the Second Half of 1968 (Memo)',” January 07, 1969, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, RGANI, fond 5, opis 61, delo 466, listy 1-14. Contributed by Sergey Radchenko and translated by Gary Goldberg. <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/134218>

¹⁰⁹ “A Conversation with the 1st Secretary of the Embassy of the USSR in the DPRK, Comrade Zvetkov, and Comrade Jarck.,” July 29, 1968, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, MfAA, G-A 320; translated by Karen Riechert <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/113698>

¹¹⁰ “Excerpt from Information Report Embassy Bucharest of 26 June 1967,” June 26, 1967, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, PoLA AA, MfAA, C 149/75. Translated for NKIDP by Bernd Schaefer. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/116644>

¹¹¹ “Y.D. Fadeev, First Secretary of the Soviet Embassy in DPRK, to CC CPSU, 'Korean-Chinese relations in 1969 (Memo)'.”

It naturally follows that one must ask that if China did want to spread the Cultural Revolution to North Korea, why? Kim Il Sung likely believed that it was because it would force North Korea to acquiesce to China's anti-Soviet line, based on comments he made in a conversation with a Soviet diplomat:

“The Chinese assert that we are revisionists, and want to exacerbate relations between our peoples. They consider us revisionists because we are developing and will develop relations with the Soviet Union and do not oppose the line of the Soviet comrades. Their main goal is to oppose the Soviet Union. Mao Zedong hopes that if the authority of the Soviet Union is damaged then his, Mao's, chances are increased.”¹¹²

North Korea was frequently accused of revisionism, in large part due to the perception in China that North Korea was leaning towards the Soviet Union. In November 1966, Tao Zhu mentioned in a speech to Red Guards from Shenyang that “indeed [North Korea] has almost completely embraced revisionism.”¹¹³ At the same time, some Chinese officials recognized the damage that unfounded rumors spread by the Red Guards could have on Sino-North Korean relations. In a speech, some high-ranking CCP officials commented that “The Red Guard newspapers indeed have some good articles, but they should not spread false rumors. There are some articles that provoke

¹¹² “Record of Conversation between N.G. Sudarikov and Kim Il Sung, General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea,” March 17, 1969, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, RGANI, fond 5, opis 61, delo 463, listy 120-129. Obtained by Sergey Radchenko and translated by Gary Goldberg. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/134225>

¹¹³ Beijing jingjixueyuan wuchanjeji geming zao fan tuan, ed., Wuchanjeji wenhua da geming cankao ziliao, v.3 (Beijing, 1966). Accessed via the Chinese University of Hong Kong's Database for the History of Contemporary Chinese Political Movements, 1949–. Translated by Dr. Joseph Seeley. <http://ccrd.usc.cuhk.edu.hk/>.

disorder and confusion by saying, for example, that there was a coup in [North] Korea, or a coup in Vietnam. The North Korean government has protested this to us..."¹¹⁴

The combination of China's pressure on North Korea to join their side in the Sino-Soviet debate and perceived efforts of China to spread the Cultural Revolution into North Korea without a doubt caused the KWP to fear division within itself and the public at large. A reflection of this can be found in a secret telegram sent from Romanian Ambassador N. Popa to his home ministry in May 1967. In his report, he wrote that "the Korean leadership does not want to irk the PRC too much [...] because it fears this would reactivate the Yan'an faction, in exile in Beijing, composed of Kim Il Sung's old party activist comrades which the North Korean leader wanted to eliminate."¹¹⁵ He went on to claim that Kim's primary concern with the "reactivation of the Yan'an faction" was that the former Yan'an faction cadres would undermine his personality cult by revealing many of his accomplishments as falsehoods. Popa's analysis is important because it suggests that Kim Il Sung was afraid of a split within the KWP and that his personality cult would be revealed to be largely bogus. It may be no coincidence that around this time, Kim Il Sung announced the imposition of the Monolithic Ideological System to ensure the complete obedience of the North Korean people. According to the Czech ambassador to the DRPK, as recalled by Romanian ambassador Popa: "the Deputy Head of the Foreign Relations Department in the Workers' Party of Korea Central Committee

¹¹⁴ Yunnan 8.23 Feng zhang hongqi ed., "Mao Zhuxi wuxian guanhuai Yunnan renmin." Accessed via the Chinese University of Hong Kong's Database for the History of Contemporary Chinese Political Movements, 1949-. Translated by Dr. Joseph Seeley. <http://ccrd.usc.cuhk.edu.hk/>.

¹¹⁵ "Telegram from Pyongyang to Bucharest, No.76.171, TOP SECRET, May 20, 1967," May 20, 1967, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Archive of the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Obtained and translated by Eliza Gheorghe. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/116709>

[...] underlined that ‘currently, we are emphasizing more than ever on maintaining the monolithic unity of our party around Kim Il Sung and the Central Committee.’¹¹⁶ In this case, the cult seems to be used as a “prestigious unifying symbol” in order to counter a threat posed by the Cultural Revolution.

Conflicting assessments of the actual and perceived threat of the Cultural Revolution to North Korea existed among North Korea’s fraternal countries. A January 1969 Soviet report assesses that the KWP exaggerated the threat of the spread of Mao’s personality cult to justify Kim’s own, and points out that there are very few ways for China to spread such ideas into North Korea.¹¹⁷ However, such a view assumes that the cult was an end unto itself. At the same time, however, if Kim and the KWP were indeed insincere in their characterization of the threat of the Cultural Revolution, it stands that the Cultural Revolution was used to justify the intensification of Kim’s personality cult.

Throughout the period that spans the Cultural Revolution, the language used by foreign diplomats and visitors to describe Kim Il Sung’s personality cult was much more colorful than in previous years, which highlights that the intensity of Kim Il Sung’s personality cult was increasing. Though foreigners noted the gradual rise of Kim’s cult from North Korea’s founding until 1956 and its subsequent but temporary decline, words such as “grotesque,” “unprecedented,” “legendary,” and “incredible” are only used to describe the cult beginning in 1966. In part, such strong language may be partly due to renewed emphasis on collective action in the Soviet bloc after Khrushchev’s ouster in

¹¹⁶ “Telegram from Pyongyang to Bucharest, TOP SECRET, No. 76.276, July 30, 1967.”

¹¹⁷ “Y.D. Fadeev, First Secretary of the Soviet Embassy in North Korea, ‘Korean-Chinese Relations in the Second Half of 1968 (Memo)’.”

1964, but may also suggest the enhanced intensity of Kim's cult. In 1968, one East German diplomat even went so far as to claim that Kim Il Sung's personality cult was the single greatest obstruction to North Korea's development and the reunification of the peninsula.¹¹⁸

An alarming take on the intensification and manifestation of Kim Il Sung's personality cult can be found in a 1967 report from the East German embassy in Pyongyang. Based on the report, the "distortion of history" that concerned the Yan'an Koreans in 1956 had significantly progressed, with "the role of anti-Japanese partisans...and Kim Il Sung's role as their sole leader [were] elevated to a legendary level."¹¹⁹ Tributes to Kim Il Sung, his parents, and anti-Japanese guerillas were described as "grotesque."¹²⁰ Diplomats from other fraternal countries also noted the increased intensity of Kim's personality cult.¹²¹

Ambassador Holub, the East German Ambassador to North Korea, was heavily critical of Kim's personality cult. In a 1968 report he describes the familiar distortion of history, and explains that North Korean revolution was from the beginning out of touch with the Korean people. He even goes so far as to point to Kim's cult as the single

¹¹⁸ "Report from East German Ambassador to North Korea, 'Some Aspects of the Political Line of the Korean Workers' Party after the January Events,'" February 15, 1968, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Translated for NKIDP by Vojtech Mastny. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/113196>

¹¹⁹ "Information about Some New Aspects on Korean Workers' Party Positions concerning Issues of Domestic and Foreign Policy," August 18, 1967, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, POLA AA, MfAA, C 153/75. Translated for NKIDP by Bernd Schaefer. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/111828>

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ "Report, Embassy of Hungary in the Soviet Union to the Hungarian Foreign Ministry," November 25, 1967, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, MOL, XIX-J-1-j Korea, 1967, 61. doboz, 5, 002126/3/1967. Obtained and translated for NKIDP by Balazs Szalontai <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/110624>

greatest obstacle to North Korean success in virtually all fields. The East German embassy's assessment on KWP policies was that the personality cult would need to be eliminated for North Korea to make any progress towards unification whatsoever: "the cult of personality has reached unprecedented dimensions, [and] the liquidation of the cult and all its consequences would be necessary before inaugurating a more realistic policy."¹²²

The author of a January 1969 Soviet report notes that the KWP's distortion of history continued to be amplified by revisions that made absurd claims, such as that Korea liberated China from Japan, and artwork that depicts Kim Il Sung teaching the Chinese about revolutionary communism. During the 19th anniversary of the founding of the PRC, North Korea allegedly presented a film extolling the revolutionary anti-Japanese exploits of Kim Il Sung himself rather than show a film about China.¹²³ Such disregard for an important PRC holiday suggests the depth of North Korean concerns about China.

Kim Il Sung's worries about Chinese intentions would appear to have been well-founded. In a conversation with a Soviet diplomat, Kim explained that on March 15, 1969, during the latter days of the Damansky Island incident when Chinese and Soviet forces clashed over a disputed island along their shared border, probable Red Guards increased their propaganda campaign at the Sino-Korean border. Furthermore, 50

¹²² "Report from East German Ambassador to North Korea, 'Some Aspects of the Political Line of the Korean Workers' Party after the January Events.'"

¹²³ "Y.D. Fadeev, First Secretary of the Soviet Embassy in North Korea, 'Korean-Chinese Relations in the Second Half of 1968 (Memo)'."

unarmed Chinese crossed the border on March 15, 1969 for an unknown reason.¹²⁴ A later Soviet report identified the 50 intruders as military members who were dressed in civilian clothing.¹²⁵ Other incursions into North Korean territory reportedly occurred, though such claims are unable to be verified. The intentions and true identities of these intruders remains a mystery, though it seems quite possible that they were in fact Chinese military troops. Declassified American high-altitude reconnaissance reports do not make Chinese intentions any clearer, though they do confirm that a Chinese military buildup was occurring along the Sino-North Korean border at the time. According to one declassified report, beginning in February 1969 defensive posturing was observed on the Chinese side of the Sino-North Korean border in Dandong (across the border from Sinŭiju), Ji'an (across the border from Manpo), and across the border from Hoeryŏng.¹²⁶ The posturing included networks of trenches, artillery positions and deployed tracked vehicles (possibly personnel carriers or tanks).¹²⁷ Other provocations also occurred. According to a Soviet memo, operators of a Chinese dam on the Yalu River suddenly released a large volume of water in an attempt to destroy a monument located on the riverbank that commemorated Kim Il Sung's victory at the Battle of Poch'ŏnbo.¹²⁸ The

¹²⁴ "Record of Conversation between N.G. Sudarikov and Kim Il Sung, General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea."

¹²⁵ "Y.D. Fadeev, First Secretary of the Soviet Embassy in DPRK, to CC CPSU, 'Korean-Chinese relations in 1969 (Memo)'."

¹²⁶ "Chinese Defensive Activity Along the China-North Korea Border." National Photographic Interpretation Center, May 1970. <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP78T05162A000100010090-1.pdf>.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Y.D. Fadeev, First Secretary of the Soviet Embassy in DPRK, to CC CPSU, 'Korean-Chinese relations in 1969 (Memo)'."

veracity of that claim and the success of that “attack,” however, is unable to be confirmed.

In September 1969, a Soviet delegation visited North Hamgyōng province to celebrate the 21st founding of the DPRK. On top of the distortion of history with which diplomats in Pyongyang were by that time quite familiar, the delegation was exposed to new features of Kim’s personality cult. The leader of the delegation concluded in his report that the personality cult had “reached incredible dimensions.”¹²⁹ Over the course of their visit, they viewed no less than three cultural performances, all of which praised Kim Il Sung, as well as observed a class of school girls singing songs about Kim. They noticed that at least one train station was full of brochures about Kim Il Sung. Their attempt to lay a wreath at a grave of Soviet soldiers who had died in Korea was also very awkward, as the delegation was not convinced that the grave that they had laid a wreath at was actually the grave of Soviet soldiers or that the message on the wreath was appropriate, as none of the delegation appears to have been able to speak Korean. Assuming that there truly was supposed to have been a Soviet grave site and the site that the delegation visited was not, this incident suggests that physical elements of the local environment that contradict the narrative of Kim Il Sung’s personality cult had been deliberately altered in order to maintain that the myth of Kim that had been constructed was true.

¹²⁹ “I.I. Shtodin, 'Report about the Trip of a Delegation of the Primorsky Krai to the Province of North Hamgyong for the Celebration of the 21st Anniversary of the Proclamation of the DPRK',” September 13, 1969, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, RGANI, fond 5, opis 61, delo 462, listy 219-225. Contributed by Sergey Radchenko and translated by Gary Goldberg. <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/134252>

A war of personalities was waged on behalf of Kim and Mao abroad as well. One diplomat reported that North Korea's Deputy Foreign Minister had visited the Czech ambassador and asked that Czechoslovakia not publish Red Guard articles that were critical of Kim Il Sung. They also pressured the Czechs to publish the KWP's "distorted" version of history. Evidently, the Koreans were unsatisfied with descriptions of Kim in foreign press as one of many anti-Japanese revolutionaries, and wanted to promote the narrative that he was the sole leader of the anti-Japanese struggle. According to the report, the Czech ambassador's interlocutor angrily claimed that "It is known to the peoples of the world that Comrade Kim Il Sung, having been at the head of the anti-Japanese partisan troops, waged an armed struggle until victory. The Czechoslovak press writes that 'Comrade Kim Il Sung is one of the leaders of the anti-Japanese partisan struggles.' This is a falsification!"¹³⁰

Kim Il Sung's desire to supplant Mao as the leader of communism in Asia is well-documented. In 1967, the Vietnamese acting ambassador also noted Kim Il Sung's increasingly intense personality cult and believed that Kim's goal was to succeed Mao as the leader of Asian communism.¹³¹ The Czech ambassador to North Korea described Kim's attempts to promote the personality cult abroad a year later, in 1968:

"Especially in the last year, the personality cult of Kim Il Sung reached unprecedented magnitude. Attributes attached to his name often run several lines.

¹³⁰ "Report, Embassy of Hungary in North Korea to the Hungarian Foreign Ministry, 23 January 1968," January 23, 1968, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, MOL, XIX-J-1-j Korea, 1968, 57. doboz, 1, 001262/1968. Translated by Balázs Szalontai.

<http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/116667>

¹³¹ "Embassy of the GDR in the DPRK. 19 May 1967. Memorandum on a Conversation with the Vietnamese Acting Ambassador, Hoang Muoi, on 19 May 1967." PolA AA, MfAA, G-A 347. Cited in Schaefer, *North Korean "Adventurism" and China's Long Shadow, 1966-1972*.

Kim Il Sung is credited with all successes and victories past and present without regard to historical facts. Even his parents and grandparents are becoming the objects of celebrations. [North] Korean propaganda places an equal sign between Kim Il Sung and Korea, while Korea is presented as an example for other countries. The intensification of Kim Il Sung's personality cult is inseparable from two other issues, namely, – the importance of the DPRK example for the struggling nations of Asia, Africa and Latin America, and the embellishment of Kim Il Sung's role in the context of the international communist and workers' movement."¹³²

A discussion of the reasons for the intensification of Kim's personality cult would be incomplete without addressing the concept of *tukhta*. *Tukhta* is a Soviet-era slang term, translated by Popan as meaning a "falsification of output."¹³³ According to Popan, *tukhta* was a way for workers to "adjust to the unrealistic demands of the planned economy" and that over time it would become a habit that pervades the affected society.¹³⁴ Essentially, *tukhta* was the exaggeration of reported production to please economic planners and state leadership, and it evolved to become an habitual exaggeration of nearly everything.

There was indeed a "systematic falsification" pervading the culture of North Korea. That the personality cult was itself an example of systematic falsification aside, there appears to have been a widespread culture of falsification among the pseudo-elite and the workers of North Korea. There is some evidence of this in the KWP's ambition to, like the CCP, "achieve Socialism in great leaps."¹³⁵ Additionally, the KWP's optimism about the Seven Year Plan was likely in part fueled by a combination of *tukhta*

¹³² "'Information about the Situation in Korea'," February 04, 1968, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Czech Foreign Ministry Archives. Translated by Adolf Kotlik.
<http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/114572>

¹³³ Popan, p. 142.

¹³⁴ Ibid., p. 143.

¹³⁵ "Report, Embassy of the GDR in the DPRK to the Foreign Policy and International Department of the Socialist Unity Party, GDR."

at the level of the workers, where they over-reported their output, as well as within KWP leadership, where incorrect output figures resulted in optimistic estimates of performance and therefore even more greatly exaggerated estimates of the country's own capabilities. Beyond the economic sphere, *tukhta* is evident in the way that the KWP "[exaggerated] their own power" and exaggerated Kim Il Sung's exploits, much to the chagrin of fraternal countries.^{136, 137}

While China's behavior and the Cultural Revolution are not the sole reasons behind the sudden intensification of Kim's personality cult, their impact on the cult has historically been understated. The Cultural Revolution reasonably gave Kim Il Sung much cause for concern. Mao may not have made it a goal to spread the Cultural Revolution to North Korea, but things such as loudspeaker propaganda campaigns, diplomats spreading Maoist materials in the capital, and anti-Korean and anti-Kim statements made in the Chinese press could certainly have given the Kim the impression that it could have entered North Korea. The realization that China was one of the guarantors of North Korean independence also put Kim Il Sung in a compromising position, making China both one of North Korea's greatest allies and greatest threats. While Kim's view on violence across the border in Yanbian is not known, he was certainly aware of it. Increasing hostility towards Koreans by the Red Guards in the early years of the Cultural Revolution and military posturing along the border in 1969 provided

¹³⁶ "Report on Political Development in the DPRK," April 18, 1961, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, State Central Archive in Prague. Translated by Adolf Kotlik. <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/116752>

¹³⁷ "Comment on the Internal Korean Workers Party Brochure, 'The Revolutionary Traditions of our Party Established during the Period of the Armed Anti-Japanese Struggle'."

a palpable reminder of the potential damage that could be done to North Korea if China were to completely turn against Kim. While he avoided directly and openly criticizing China, Kim saw Mao and his Cultural Revolution as delusional, and attempted to promote his personality cult abroad, resulting in something of a personality cult arms race between Kim and Mao. There are indeed myriad ways that the Cultural Revolution impacted the personality cult of Kim and caused Kim to promote his cult with greater urgency between 1966 and 1969.

Imitation of China

Kim Il Sung's personality cult came to adopt features of Mao's during the Cultural Revolution. While there is no way of knowing for sure whether such features were deliberately copied from China, there were many precedents for North Korean imitation of China. B. R. Myers wrote extensively about North Korea's imitation of China in *The Cleanest Race*. In 1948, Kim Il Sung plagiarized a speech of Mao's.¹³⁸ According to Myers, a sudden increase in the number of revolutionary plays in North Korea increased in imitation of Mao's reputation as a skilled poet.¹³⁹ He also states that Kim adopted his own version of Mao's Long March and inserted it into his own personal

¹³⁸ Myers, p. 33.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 44

heroic narrative.¹⁴⁰ Szalontai also points out that North Korean methods of punishment seem to have been borrowed from China.¹⁴¹

Myers wasn't the only who noticed the similarities between North Korea's policies and China's. As early as 1960, foreign observers noted the similarity of North Korea's Ch'ŏllima movement to China's Great Leap Forward in both its execution and its goals. An East German diplomat assessed that the Ch'ŏllima movement was directly inspired by China's Great Leap Forward, and described its results as similarly disastrous.¹⁴² The same diplomat commented that North Korea adopted communes that were organized exactly the same as the Chinese communes. In his conclusions, he noted that diplomats from other fraternal countries agreed with many of his remarks. Notably, however, according to a report from the Czech ambassador, Soviet Ambassador Puzanov did not believe the North Korea was imitating Chinese practices, and instead chalked up North Korean behavior to inexperience.¹⁴³ To the contrary, Puzanov believed that North Korea was more greatly influenced by the Soviet Union. In several accounts related by both East German and Hungarian diplomats, Puzanov apparently believed that North Korea had imitated China in the past, but the failures that it experienced by doing so drove North Korea closer to the Soviet Union.¹⁴⁴ The East German and Hungarian diplomats, however, seemed to view Puzanov as a naïve optimist.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Szalontai, p. 30

¹⁴² "Report, Embassy of the GDR in the DPRK to the Foreign Policy and International Department of the Socialist Unity Party, GDR."

¹⁴³ "Report on Political Development in the DPRK."

¹⁴⁴ "Report, Embassy of the Hungarian People's Republic in the DPRK to the Foreign Ministry of Hungary."

In December 1967, the East German Ambassador to North Korea wrote a report that detailed the intensification of Kim's personality cult. This is also the first report that compares Kim's cult to that of Mao's, and even theorizes that the personality cult might be used to combat the influence of Mao domestically and abroad: "[the Kim cult would shield] against the influence of Mao as a revolutionary world leader, and particularly against Mao as a leader of the Korean revolutionary forces."¹⁴⁵

Kim appears to have been aware of his country's imitation of China. An article titled "*Chajusǒngŭl onghohaja*" was published in the August 12, 1966 issue of the *Rodong sinmun*, the official mouthpiece of the KWP. This editorial, titled in English as "Let's Defend Independence," spanned three of the four pages of that issue, and was largely regarded by foreign diplomats as the only public, though veiled, criticism of China and the Cultural Revolution. The fourth chapter of the gargantuan editorial, "*Namŭi gyǒnghǒmŭl kigyejǒkŭro mobanghaji maraya handa,*" or "We Must Not Mechanically Copy Others' Experiences," is largely a defense of North Korea's imitation of certain aspects of both China and the Soviet Union. The article states that it is the right of every country to accept or reject certain lessons learned from other fraternal parties, and even admits that North Korea has adopted aspects of unnamed fraternal countries.¹⁴⁶ It also says that the leaders of "some countries" demand that North Korea adopt their

¹⁴⁵ "Letter from GDR Embassy in the DPRK to State Secretary Hegen."

¹⁴⁶ "Chajusǒngŭl Onghohaja." *Rodong Sinmun*. August 12, 1966. Asian Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

political lines.¹⁴⁷ This is indirectly describing China's pressure to take its side in the Sino-Soviet split, and possibly to adopt the Cultural Revolution.

The personality cults of Mao and Kim were strikingly similar. Journalist Edgar Snow, famous for his 1937 book *Red Star Over China* which documented the then-budding CCP, noted the huge intensification in Mao's personality cult after revisiting China 1964. In *The Long Revolution*, he wrote that enormous portraits of Mao were by that time ubiquitous throughout the country, copies of his writings could be found everywhere, and Mao was presented in skits and plays as the sole hero of the country.¹⁴⁸ After the Cultural Revolution began in 1966, Mao badges became extremely popular, to the point that the absence of a Mao badge could be viewed as subversive by Red Guards.¹⁴⁹

These elements were also seen in North Korea. When the Soviet delegation visited North Hamgyŏng province in 1969, they observed many of the same things that Snow did in China: Kim was the hero of every play and skit and written materials about Kim Il Sung were ubiquitous.¹⁵⁰ By this time, portraits of Kim Il Sung were already ubiquitous. Kim badges, very similar to Mao badges, also began to be produced in North Korea during the Cultural Revolution. James Hoare's *Historical Dictionary of the*

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Edgar Snow, *The Long Revolution* (New York: Random House, 1971), p. 68-69, cited in Maurice Meisner, *Mao's China and After: A History of the People's Republic, Third Edition* (New York: The Free Press, 1999), p. 281.

¹⁴⁹ Helen Wang, "Introduction," *Chairman Mao Badges: Symbols and Slogans of the Cultural Revolution* (London: The British Museum, 2008), p. ix.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/265141958_Chairman_Mao_Badges_Symbols_and_Slogans_of_the_Cultural_Revolution

¹⁵⁰ "I.I. Shtodin, 'Report about the Trip of a Delegation of the Primorsky Krai to the Province of North Hamgyong for the Celebration of the 21st Anniversary of the Proclamation of the DPRK'."

Democratic People's Republic of Korea notes that Kim badges became mandatory wear for North Korean citizens by 1972 and also suggests that they were inspired by Mao badges.¹⁵¹

While Kim adopted major elements of Mao's personality cult and other policies of China, there were certainly elements that were not considered suitable for North Korea. Early during the Cultural Revolution, Kim was quick to criticize the movement as nihilistic.¹⁵² In the *Rodong sinmun* article "Let's Defend Independence," North Korea condemned *minjokhōmuju'ūi*, or "people's nihilism," very likely as an indirect criticism of Red Guard movements to destroy elements of China's past.¹⁵³ Kim Il Sung also refused to accept China's path of persecuting intellectuals wholesale. In a discussion with an East German delegation, Kim stated that the KWP must work with intellectuals if it wants to turn South Korea away from the Americans.¹⁵⁴

Kim Il Sung did not wholly imitate Mao's personality cult and methods, but it is likely that many of the aspects of Kim's cult that emerged during the Cultural Revolution were at least inspired by Mao. Though he tended to downplay it, based on the article "Let's Defend Independence," Kim was likely aware of elements and methods that he

¹⁵¹ James E. Hoare, *Historical Dictionary of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea* (Lanham, Maryland; Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2012), p. 57.

<https://books.google.com/books?id=rh5h4bZgkhEC&lpg=PA57&pg=PA57#v=onepage&q&f=false>

¹⁵² "First Secretary of the Soviet Embassy in North Korean Reports on Sino-Korean Relations in 1966."

¹⁵³ "*Chajusōngūl Onghohaja.*"

¹⁵⁴ "Memorandum On the Visit of the Party and Government Delegation of the GDR, led by Comrade Prof. Dr. Kurt Hager, with the General Secretary of the KWP and Prime Minister of the DPRK, Comrade Kim Il Sung, on 16 April 1968, 5:00p.m. until 6:50 p.m.," April 23, 1968, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, MfAA, C 159/75. Translated by Karen Riechert. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/116731>

borrowed from China. Foreign diplomats at the time were also drawing the same parallels between Mao's cult and Kim's – it is likely more than just a coincidence.

Conclusion

The PRC's Cultural Revolution almost certainly had a large impact on the development of Kim Il Sung's personality cult. Kim's personality cult has existed since the establishment of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. It possibly had some indigenous roots, but it was initially promoted by the occupying Soviet authorities, causing the cult to take on the Stalinistic hue emphasized by Adrian Buzo in *Politics and Leadership in North Korea*. However, first as a byproduct of the fallout from the August Faction Incident and later as a response to the threat China seemed to pose to Kim during the Cultural Revolution, it came under increasing influence from China and eventually came to transcend Stalinism, becoming what some scholars have come to call "Kimist."

Kim Il Sung viewed China as an adversary, especially during the Cultural Revolution, and with good reason. His relationship with China was already complicated by disagreements with Mao and Peng Dehuai on the execution of the Korean War, and Kim perceived the joint Sino-Soviet intervention after the August Faction Incident as foreign interference in domestic affairs. Peng Dehuai's inclusion in the joint delegation as Mao's representative was sure to further irritate Kim Il Sung. Despite the political tumult of 1956, relations between China and North Korea warmed right up until Mao announced the Cultural Revolution in 1966. Almost immediately, Red Guards hurled criticisms at

Kim and the entire Korean population spanning northeast China and both Koreas. Loudspeakers set up along the Sino-North Korean border blasted Maoist propaganda into North Korea, and the Chinese embassy even appeared to be promoting the Cultural Revolution from within North Korea. If Kim did not believe that China was attempting to spread the Cultural Revolution into North Korea, he at least exaggerated the threat in conversations with foreign representatives in order to elicit sympathy and support. A military buildup on the Chinese side of the border, observed by American reconnaissance assets, verify that the threat to North Korea was at least to some extent legitimate. If the intensification of Kim's personality cult was not a ward against the entrance of Mao's into North Korea, it was also a way for Kim to further consolidate his control of North Korea, possibly fearing another situation in which China would attempt to interfere in what he considered North Korea's domestic affairs.

Furthermore, the expressions of Kim's personality cult were likely influenced by that of Mao's. Like Kim's cult, Mao's had already existed to a small extent when the People's Republic of China was established. But with the commencement of the Cultural Revolution, Mao's personality cult skyrocketed. Kim's cult followed, adopting narratives very similar or identical to Mao's own. Art in North Korea followed similar trends, elevating Kim to a legendary hero of the people. His likeness became ubiquitous, even going so far as to becoming a mandatory fashion accessory for North Korean citizens in the form of pins, or badges, which imitated those worn by supporters of Mao in China.

Scholars have overwhelmingly focused on the influence of Stalinism on North Korea's development, but there is little doubt that the Chinese Cultural Revolution also

had a significant impact on the personality cult of Kim Il Sung. Perhaps in the future scholars will enjoy greater access to Chinese or even North Korean archival material that will enable a better understanding of North Korea's response to the Cultural Revolution. What little is known shows that Kim Il Sung was alarmed by the Cultural Revolution, and it is likely more than a coincidence that his personality cult emerged with its greatest intensity during that time.

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