



THE CLEANEST RACE

How North Koreans See Themselves—
And Why It Matters

B. R. MYERS

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MOTHER: 1) The woman who has given birth to one: *Father and mother; a mother's love. A mother's benevolence is higher than a mountain, deeper than the ocean.* Also used in the sense of "a woman who has a child": *What all mothers anxiously want is for their children to grow up healthy and become magnificent red builders.* 2) A respectful term for someone of an age similar to one's own mother: *Comrade Platoon Leader called Dǒngmani's mother "mother" and always helped her in her work.* 3) A metaphor for being loving, looking after everything, and worrying about others: *Party officials must become mothers who ceaselessly love and teach the Party rank and file, and become standard-bearers at the forefront of activities. In other words, someone in charge of lodgings has to become a mother to the boarders. This means looking carefully after everything: whether someone is cold or sick, how they are eating, and so on.* 4) A metaphor for the source from which something originates: *The Party is the great mother of everything new. Necessity is the mother of invention.*

FATHER: the husband of one's birth mother.

Two entries from a North Korean dictionary of the Korean language, 1964

PREFACE

The most important questions regarding North Korea are the ones least often asked: What do the North Koreans believe? How do they see themselves and the world around them? Yes, we know the country has a personality cult, but this fact alone tells us little. Cuba has a personality cult too, yet the Castro regime espouses an ideology quite different from that of its counterpart in Pyongyang. On what grounds is the North Korean Leader so extravagantly acclaimed? What is the nature of his mission, and the purported destiny of his nation as a whole? Only through this sort of information can one begin to make sense of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), to use its formal name. It is unfortunate but by no means surprising that our news correspondents eschew such topics in order to return *ad nauseam* to the same monuments and mass games, the same girl directing traffic. More remarkable has been the extent to which academics, think-tank analysts and other Pyongyang watchers have neglected to study the worldview of the military-first regime. Regardless of their own political leanings (and North Korean studies remains marked by a sharp left-right divide), they have tended toward interpretations of the country in which ideology plays next to no role. Conservatives generally explain the dictatorship's behavior in terms of a cynical struggle to maintain power and privilege, while liberals prefer to regard the DPRK as a "rational actor," a country behaving much as any tiny country would in the face of a hostile superpower. Such interest as either camp can bring to bear on so-called soft issues exhausts itself in futile attempts to make sense of Juche Thought, a sham doctrine with no bearing on Pyongyang's policy-making.

To be sure, the Western world is generally much less interested in ideology—for reasons that are themselves ideological—than it was during the Cold War. Most Americans know just as little about Islamism as they did before 9/11. But why is there more talk of ideological matters in any issue of *Arab Studies Journal* than in a dozen issues of *North Korean Review*? The obvious if undiplomatic answer is that most Pyongyang watchers do not understand Korean well enough to read the relevant official texts. But even scholars with the requisite language skills would rather research other topics, usually of a military, nuclear or economic nature. One colleague told me he finds the North Korean personality cult too absurd to take seriously; indeed, he doubts

whether even the leadership believes it. But no regime would go to such enormous expense, year in, year out for sixty years, to inculcate into its citizens a worldview to which it did not itself subscribe. (The only institution in the country that did not miss a beat during the famine of the mid-1990s was the propaganda apparatus.) As for absurdity: the examples of Nazi Germany and Pol Pot's Cambodia show that a dictator and his subjects are capable of believing and acting upon ideas far more ridiculous than anything ever espoused by the Workers' Party. For all the hyperbole in which it is couched, and the histrionics with which it is proclaimed, North Korean propaganda is not nearly as outlandish as the uninitiated think. No matter what some American Christian groups might claim, divine powers have never been attributed to either of the two Kims. In fact, the propaganda apparatus in Pyongyang has generally been careful *not* to make claims that run directly counter to its citizens' experience or common sense. Granted, it has made museum exhibits out of chairs that Kim Il Sung rested on while visiting this factory or that farm, but there is no reason to doubt that he actually *did* sit on the things. (In most cases there is an authenticating photograph nearby.) This approach can be contrasted with that of Stalin's Soviet Union, or Mao's China, where propagandists were not quite so effusive or incessant in their praise of the leader, yet regularly made claims—of bumper harvests, for example—which everyone knew to be untrue.

While ignoring North Korean ideology, the West has assiduously, almost compulsively, added to its pile of “hard” information on the country. Much of this has come from experts in nuclear or economic studies. Aid workers have also contributed accounts of their experiences in the country. An international network of Google Earth users is busily identifying structures visible in aerial photographs.¹ Despite all this, experts continue to describe North Korea as “puzzling,” “baffling,” a “mystery”—and no wonder. Hard facts cannot be put to proper use unless one first acquires information of a very different nature. If we did not know that Iran is an Islamic country, it would forever baffle us, no matter how good the rest of our intelligence might be.

Unfortunately a lack of relevant expertise has never prevented observers from mischaracterizing North Korean ideology to the general public. They call the regime “hard-line communist” or “Stalinist,” despite its explicit racial theorizing, its strident acclamation of Koreans as the world's “cleanest” or “purest” race. They describe it as a Confucian patriarchy, despite its maternal authority figures, or as a country obsessed with self-reliance, though it has depended on outside aid for over sixty years. By far the most common mistake, however, has been the projection of Western or South Korean values and common sense onto the North Koreans. For example: Having been bombed flat by the Americans in the 1950s, the DPRK *must* be fearful for its security, ergo it *must* want the normalization of relations with Washington.

These various fallacies have combined to make the West worry less about North Korea's nuclear program than about Iran's. The word Confucianism makes us think of Singapore, Asian whiz-kids, and respect for the elderly; how

much trouble can a Confucian patriarchy be? Self-reliance does not sound too dangerous either. Communism has a much less benign ring to it, of course, but if there is one thing we remember from the Cold War, it is that it ended peacefully. For fifteen years the perception of a communist North Korea has sustained the US government's hope that disarmament talks will work with Pyongyang as they did with Moscow. Only in 2009, after the Kim Jong Il regime defied the United Nations by launching a ballistic missile and conducting its second underground nuclear test, did a consensus begin to emerge that negotiations were unlikely ever to work. Yet the assumption prevails that the worst Pyongyang would ever do is sell nuclear material or expertise to more dangerous forces in the Middle East. All the while the military-first regime has been invoking kamikaze slogans last used by imperial Japan in the Pacific War.

In this book, therefore, I aim to explain North Korea's dominant ideology or worldview—I use the words interchangeably—and to show how far removed it is from communism, Confucianism *and* the show-window doctrine of Juche Thought. Far from complex, it can be summarized in a single sentence: *The Korean people are too pure blooded, and therefore too virtuous, to survive in this evil world without a great parental leader.* More must be added perhaps, if only to explain that “therefore” to an American reader, but not much more of importance. I need hardly point out that if such a race-based worldview is to be situated on our conventional left-right spectrum, it makes more sense to posit it on the extreme right than on the far left. Indeed, the similarity to the worldview of fascist Japan is striking. I do not, however, intend to label North Korea as fascist, a term too vague to be much use. It is enough for me to make clear that the country has always been, at the very least, ideologically closer to America's adversaries in World War II than to communist China and Eastern Europe. This truth alone, if properly grasped, will not only help the West to understand the loyalty shown to the DPRK by its chronically impoverished citizens, but also to understand why the West's policy of pursuing late Cold Wartype solutions to the nuclear problem is doomed to fail.

The word ideology is used in this book in accordance with Martin Seliger's understanding of it, which Zeev Sternhell puts in the following nutshell: “a conceptual frame of reference which provides criteria for choice and decision by virtue of which the major activities of an organized community are governed.”² Note the word *major*. No ideology determines every aspect of a nation's daily life. Technology, production and administration have always been guided in the DPRK by what Franz Schurmann referred to, in regard to China, as the “practical ideology of expertise.”³ And like all parties, the Workers' Party is ready to resort to temporary deviations from ideological essentials in order to maintain its hold on power. Paranoid, race-based nationalism has nonetheless guided the DPRK in its policy-making from the start. It is only in this ideological context that the country's distinguishing characteristics—which the outside world, with its Stalinist-Confucian model,

has always found so baffling—make perfect sense.

What is more, this ideology has generally enjoyed the support of the North Korean people through good times and bad. Even today, with a rival state thriving next door, the regime is able to maintain public stability without a ubiquitous police presence or a fortified northern border. Sensationalist American accounts of the “underground railroad” helping North Korean “refugees” make it through China to the free world gloss over the fact that about half of these economic migrants—for that is what most of them are—*voluntarily return* to their homeland. The rest remain fervent admirers of Kim Il Sung if not of his son. Though we must never forget the men, women and children languishing in Yodök and other prison camps, we cannot keep carrying on as if the dictatorship did not enjoy a significant degree of mass support. How significant? Enough to make the regime desperate to hold on to it. I intend to argue, however, that this support cannot be sustained for long, because what the masses are taught—especially in regard to South Korean public opinion—is coming increasingly into conflict with what they know to be true. It is the regime’s awareness of a pending legitimacy crisis, not a fear of attack from without, which makes it behave ever more provocatively on the world stage.

The official worldview is not set out coherently in the leaders’ writings. These are more often praised than read.⁴ So-called Juche Thought functions at most as an imposing row of book-spines, a prop in the personality cult. (A good way to embarrass one’s minders in the DPRK is to ask them to explain it.) Unlike Soviet citizens under Stalin, or Chinese under Mao, North Koreans learn more about their leaders than from them.⁵ It is not in ideological treatises but in the more mass-oriented domestic propaganda that the official worldview is expressed most clearly and unselfconsciously. I stress the word *domestic*. Too many observers wrongly assume that the (North) Korean Central News Agency’s English-language releases reflect the same sort of propaganda that the home audience gets. In fact there are significant differences. For example, where the DPRK presents itself to the outside world as a misunderstood country seeking integration into the international community, it presents itself to its own citizens (as I will show later) as a rogue state that breaks agreements with impunity, dictates conditions to groveling U.N. officials, and keeps its enemies in constant fear of ballistic retribution. Generally speaking the following rule of thumb applies: the less accessible a propaganda outlet is to the outside world, the blunter and more belligerent it will be in its expression of the racist orthodoxy.

The following chapters are based on my own extensive research of as many different forms of domestic propaganda as I could find at the Unification Ministry’s North Korea Resource Center in Seoul. (This is, ironically enough, a better place to study the stuff than Pyongyang, where a foreigner’s requests for anything more than a few months old are met with suspicion.)⁶ From nightly news reports and television dramas to animated cartoons and war movies; from the white-papered *Rodong Sinmun*, the Workers’ Party organ, to

women's and children's magazines printed on rough, gray paper; from short stories and historical novels to dictionaries, encyclopediae and school textbooks (these last printed, semi-legibly, on the worst paper of all); from reproductions of wall posters, oil paintings and caricatures to photographs of monuments and statues: these are the sources I have spent much of the past eight years studying.⁷ In the interest of brevity and variation—and in emulation of Alfred Pfabigan's practice in a perceptive travelogue entitled *Schlaflos in Pjöngjang* (1986)—I will occasionally refer to the body of myths espoused in this propaganda as the Text, though the reader is not, of course, to imagine a closed set of books.

Why would such a secretive country export propaganda that lays bare the true nature of its official ideology? There are many reasons. One is that the DPRK has never relinquished its dream of fomenting a nationalist revolution in South Korea. Another is that it can earn hard currency by selling these materials at a high price to one or two licensed distributors, who in turn sell them to research libraries abroad. Perhaps most importantly, the regime rightly assumes that almost no one hostile to the DPRK will ever bother to look at these materials. (I can count on one hand the times I ever saw a Western visitor take a North Korean book from the Resource Center's shelves.) Finally, and unfortunately, the more sensitive content is kept out of mass-produced, "hard copy" propaganda and confined to outlets intended exclusively for domestic eyes and ears. A current example is the on-again, off-again glorification of Kim Jong Il's putative successor Kim Jong Ŭn, a mainly oral campaign carried out at party lectures, factory assemblies and the like, and through unprepossessing posters hung in display cases far from tourist sites. Fortunately a sharp-eyed Taiwanese business traveler managed to photograph one of these posters, thus affording the outside world some insight into the nature of this budding personality cult. Regardless of whether Kim Jong Ŭn actually ends up taking power, I regret not having been able to include more about his myth in these pages.

* * *

This book is divided into two parts. The first recounts the historical development of the official culture, starting with its origins in colonial Korea. In the second part I will discuss each of the Text's main myths in turn, from those of the Korean child race and its motherly leaders to the myth of the "Yankee colony" to the south. Each chapter in part two contains an italicized section in which I take the liberty of condensing the relevant myth to a page or two, telling it sans excursions and in strict chronological order—admittedly, a very un-Korean thing to do. This way the reader can check the main assertions of anti-American propaganda, say, without necessarily having to bother with my ensuing evaluation of it. (These sections were written with a view to the many people who have complained to me about the unreadable diffuseness and repetitiveness of the few North Korean books available in English.) Although I have written these sections in a prose meant to replicate

the effusiveness of the original propaganda, I do not want anyone mistaking them for direct quotes; hence the italics.

In closing, let me make perfectly clear that in this book (if not in my last book on North Korean culture) I am more interested in thematic content than aesthetic form.⁸ I also focus more on propaganda that sheds light on North Korea's relationship to the outside world than on propaganda regarding, say, the land reclamation project. If this constitutes "essentializing," to use a trendy pejorative, so be it. Anyone interested in a discussion of the DPRK's literature as literature, or art as art, is advised to look elsewhere. So too are readers who want to know how the propaganda apparatus is organized, how the broadcast networks operate, and so on.

The McCune-Reischauer system is used throughout this book, with the customary exceptions for names (e.g. Kim Il Sung) and words (e.g. *juche*) better known in other spellings. Finally, I would like to thank Dongseo University for supporting my research, and Ms Eunjeong Lee for helping me track down certain North Korean materials. Responsibility for all errors in this book is mine.

B.R. Myers, Busan, South Korea, October 2009

PART I

A History of North Korea's Official Culture

CHAPTER ONE

THE COLONIAL ERA, 1910-1945

Korean schoolchildren in North and South learn that Japan invaded their fiercely patriotic country in 1905, spent forty years trying to destroy its language and culture, and withdrew without having made any significant headway. This version of history is just as uncritically accepted by most foreigners who write about Korea. Yet the truth is more complex. For much of the country's long history its northern border was fluid, and the national identities of literate Koreans and Chinese mutually indistinguishable.¹ Believing their civilization to have been founded by a Chinese sage in China's image, educated Koreans subscribed to a Confucian worldview that posited their country in a position of permanent subservience to the Middle Kingdom. Even when Korea isolated itself from the mainland in the seventeenth century, it did so in the conviction that it was guarding Chinese tradition better than the Chinese themselves. For all their xenophobia, therefore, the Koreans were no nationalists. As Carter Eckert has written, "There was little, if any, feeling of loyalty toward the abstract concept of Korea as a nation-state, or toward fellow inhabitants of the peninsula as 'Koreans.'"² It was not until the late nineteenth century, and under Japanese sponsorship, that a reform-minded cabinet undertook measures to establish Korea's independence and imbue the people with a sense of national pride.

The Japanese freed the peninsula from China only to take it for themselves. In 1905 Tokyo established a protectorate over Korea, assuming control first of its foreign, then its domestic affairs. Annexation of the peninsula followed in 1910. Public opposition to Japanese rule grew until patriots read out a declaration of independence on March 1, 1919 in Seoul, setting off a nationwide uprising. The authorities responded with a brutal show of force before relaxing some of the repressive policies that had inflamed their subjects.

Although nationalists took advantage of new Korean-language newspapers to canvas support, they were no match for the colonial propaganda machine, which now sought to co-opt Korean pride instead of stamping it out. It asserted that Koreans shared the same ancient progenitor, bloodline and benevolent ruler as the Japanese themselves; both peoples thus belonged to one "imperial" race morally (if not physically and intellectually) superior to

all others.³ The dominant slogan of the day was *naisen ittai* or “Interior [i.e. Japan] and Korea as one body.” While intent on undermining their subjects’ sense of a distinct nationhood, the authorities emphasized that *naisen ittai* did not mean the end of Koreanness, and even posed as champions of a culture that had languished too long in China’s shadow. Koreans were encouraged to cherish their “region” and its “dialect,” even its yin-yang flag (which was printed in school maps and atlases right up to liberation), as long as they remembered that the peninsula was but one part of a greater Japanese whole.⁴



A postcard from the “Japan and Korea as one body” campaign of the 1930s shows Japan (r) and its colony as schoolboy partners, running a three-legged race over the globe.

Nationalist intellectuals attempted to counter this propaganda by reviving interest in the legend of Tan’gun. Set down in an anthology of folk-tales in 1284, then largely ignored for centuries, it told how this half-divine figure had inaugurated the first Korean kingdom with his seed in 2333 BC. As the nationalists saw it, the tale gave the Koreans their own pure bloodline, a civilization grounded in a unique culture, and over four millennia of history to their colonizers’ three. One writer even tried to establish Mount Paektu, a volcanic mountain on the border with China, as Tan’gun’s birthplace and a counterpart to Japan’s sacred Mount Fuji.⁵ The South Korean historian Yi Yŏng-hun puts it best: “The myths and symbols needed to form a nation were coined new in the awareness of Japan’s myths and symbols—in opposition to and in emulation of them.”⁶ The public proved indifferent to this derivative mythmaking, however, and by the end of the 1930s most prominent nationalists had themselves become enthusiastic advocates of the new order.

Korea’s left-wing writers executed a similar *volte face*. Rounded up and imprisoned in the early 1930s, then released after promising to behave themselves, they soon began lending their voices to the great militarist chorus. As the Korean-language *Maeil sinbo* newspaper remarked with satisfaction in 1944, writers of all ideological stripes—communist, nationalist, libertarian—had united in support for the system.⁷

But even while these writers glorified the emperor, they urged their countrymen to cherish their Koreanness.⁸ In romance novels frail Japanese women fell in love with strong Korean men, much as they still do in South Korean films and dramas.⁹ Illustrations in newspapers and magazines showed girls in traditional *hanbok* costume waving the Japanese flag, and Confucian gentlemen in horsehair hats standing proudly by their newly recruited sons.¹⁰ The regime stimulated pride in “peninsular” history for imperial ends, encouraging Koreans to reclaim their ancient territory by settling in Manchuria.¹¹ One writer invoked the elite *hwarang* soldiers of the Silla dynasty to whip up fighting spirit.¹² Another called on young men to “demonstrate the loyalty of a Japanese citizen and the spirit of a son of Korea” by volunteering to fight in the “holy war” against the Yankees.¹³ As the historian Cho Kwan-ja has remarked, these collaborators regarded themselves as “pro-Japanese [Korean] nationalists.”¹⁴

Little of this propaganda reached the illiterate majority of the population, who often had to be brutally coerced into complying with Japanese demands for soldiers, laborers and prostitutes.¹⁵ The educated classes, however, being more highly propagandized (as the educated always are), and enjoying the benefits of the new order, generally behaved as the authorities wanted them to. Granted, a repressive system was in place.¹⁶ But one must either assume that the average educated Korean harbored a fierce opposition to the *status quo*, and collaborated in painful awareness of his fear and hypocrisy, or that he chose to believe he was serving his people as part of a winning racial team. No one familiar with human nature can doubt that the latter assumption is more likely to be true.¹⁷ It is borne out by evidence of widespread over-compliance with the *naisen ittai* campaign. By the end of the 1920s the upper and middle classes in Seoul were speaking Japanese in their own homes.¹⁸ Marriages between Koreans and their colonizers were, as a famous short story later put it, “thought quite natural by many, perhaps even a mark of distinction.”¹⁹ (In South Korea, marriage with Japanese citizens remains the form of international marriage with the least social stigma attached.) Newsreels of the imperial army’s victories in the Pacific War elicited vigorous applause from moviegoers.²⁰

They had less to clap about as the war progressed. By early 1945 propaganda had taken on a note of desperation. “If our destiny is thwarted in this war ... it would be a tragedy for all mankind,” the Korean-language daily warned in March. “We must win.”²¹ But on August 6 the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, emboldening the USSR to enter the war with Japan. The Red Army was advancing swiftly down the Korean peninsula on August 15 when Hirohito read out his famous surrender notice. By that time the US and the Soviet Union had already decided, without consulting the Koreans themselves, to share the administration of the former Japanese colony for an indefinite period. The Red Army occupied the north, setting up headquarters for a so-called Soviet Civil Administration in the ancient city of Pyongyang. American soldiers arrived in September to take over Seoul and the rest of the

southern half of the peninsula.²²

THE SOVIET OCCUPATION, 1945-1948

Though most Koreans in 1945 had no memory of life before Japanese rule, neither the Soviets nor the Americans saw a need to de-colonize hearts and minds. That the Koreans now hated Japan was taken as proof that they had always done so. Nor did either power punish former propagandists. In Seoul, the cultural scene's spontaneous efforts to come to terms with its past were soon undermined by the settling of personal scores and a general refusal to acknowledge a collective guilt.¹ Obscure ex-collaborators condemned the famous ones, those who had propagandized in Korean asserted moral superiority over those who had done so in Japanese, and erstwhile "proletarians" acted as if their brief prison stays in the 1930s made up for everything they had written afterward.

Meanwhile, to the north, the Soviet authorities set about orchestrating a "people's revolution" of the kind already underway in much of Eastern Europe. The first stage was to be a coalition between communists and other forces, followed by a pseudo-coalition in which the communists called the shots, and finally a monolithic regime.² This plan was complicated by the lack of left-wingers in the north of the country, which had hitherto been a bastion of conservatives and Christians. The occupying power had to build up a local party from scratch while courting right-wing partners for a coalition.³ For all their feigned impartiality, the Soviets lost no time transferring ownership of printing presses, publishing houses and radio stations to the fledgling Workers' Party. The first issue of the party daily (known today as the *Rodong sinmun*) appeared in September 1945.⁴ The radio network began operations on October 14, 1945 by broadcasting a mass rally in Pyongyang to honor the Soviet liberators.⁵

Among the Koreans who took the podium that day was Kim Il Sung, a Pyongyang-born thirty-three-year-old who had attained the rank of captain in the Red Army. Although Kim had sat out the Pacific War in the USSR, he had earlier fought against the Japanese as a commander in Mao Zedong's army, acquiring brief renown in 1937 for an attack on an imperial outpost just south of the Yalu River.⁶ For better or worse Kim was the closest thing to a resistance fighter the Koreans had. He is said to have wanted a military career, but the Soviets, finding no more appropriate person to work with, persuaded him to assume leadership of the new state. Yet Kim was by far the least educated of all the leaders in the socialist world. His spotty schooling had ended at seventeen, and although he had spent a year at an infantry officer school in the USSR, it is unlikely that he understood enough Russian to grasp anything theoretical. None of his writings evinces an understanding of Marx.[†] Equally ignorant of communist ideology were the guerilla comrades

who comprised the core of Kim's power base. Andrei Lankov, a prominent Korea researcher, has written that "with the exception of the Soviet Koreans, no top cadres had undergone training in ... Marxism-Leninism."⁷ It is no wonder that instead of guiding the cultural scene in ideological matters the party allowed itself to be guided by it.



Kim Il Sung

Contrary to South Korean left-wing myth, which the American historian Bruce Cumings has done much to nurture, almost all intellectuals who moved to Pyongyang after liberation had collaborated with the Japanese to some degree. Several who had done so with special enthusiasm, like the novelist Kim Sa-ryang, had been virtually run out of Seoul. The North was *more* and not less hospitable to such collaborators. As a history book published in the DPRK in 1981 puts it, "the Great Leader Kim Il Sung refuted the mistaken tendency to doubt or ostracize people just because they ... had worked for Japanese institutions in the past."⁸ Kim's own brother, it is worth remembering, had interpreted for Japanese troops in China.⁹



From one Great Marshal on a white horse to another; Hirohito (above) and Kim Il Sung (below) atop their respective purity symbols. Kim Jong Il, here on his father's arm, has been filmed and photographed on white horses of his own.

But retaining the emperor's administrators and technocrats was one thing, and retaining his propagandists another—or so one would have thought. According to Marxism-Leninism, a communist party's main task lies in infusing the masses with revolutionary consciousness.¹⁰ It is remarkable, therefore, that when the North Korean Federation of Literature and Art was established in March 1946, most of the top posts went to well-known veterans of the wartime cultural apparatus, like the playwright Song Yŏng and the choreographer Ch'oi Sŭng-hŭi.¹¹ No writer was excluded from the party or its cultural organizations due to pro-Japanese activities, let alone imprisoned for them (as Yi Kwang-su and Ch'oi Nam-sŏn were in Seoul).

The Workers' Party had to wait until 1948 to receive its own crash course in Marxism-Leninism and was therefore unable to provide much guidance to writers and artists.¹² Reading out a speech crudely plagiarized from Mao, Kim Il Sung told them to study Marxism and “communicate with the masses in words they understand.”¹³ A Soviet-Korean poet took it upon himself to

regale admiring fellow writers with a list of socialist realist classics not yet translated into Korean.¹⁴ Other than that, the party simply doled out themes, starting in early 1946 with that of land reform. None of the literati wanted to make the first move. “How was one to write a novel or poem on land reform? ... All put their heads to one side, finally concluding it was an impossible task.”¹⁵ Only when the party responded angrily to an anthology of love poems in January 1947 did North Korean writers begin propagandizing in earnest.¹⁶

Not surprisingly, their work bore the influence of the ideology they had spent much of their lives disseminating. Having been ushered by the Japanese into the world’s purest race, the Koreans in 1945 simply kicked the Japanese out of it. The legend of the ancient racial progenitor Tan’gun, which Korean nationalists had failed to popularize during the 1920s, came almost overnight to be regarded as historical truth. Japanese symbols were transposed into Korean ones. Mount Paektu, hitherto known only as the peninsula’s highest peak, suddenly attained a Fuji-like, sacral status as the presumed place of Tan’gun’s birth.¹⁷ Much of the Japanese version of Korean history—from its blanket condemnation of Chinese influence to its canards about murderous Yankee missionaries—was carried over whole. This is not to say that North Korean ideology simply codified what everyone already believed. The average illiterate citizen was likely no more nationalist in 1945 than he had been in 1910. It was the Japanese-schooled minority which now put a radio in every village, taught the peasants to read, sent children to school—and convinced the race that it was the purest in the world.

Gone, however, was the confident tone of imperial propaganda. Where the colonial power had touted Japanese virtue as a protective talisman, the Koreans now believed that *their* virtue had made them as vulnerable as children to an evil world. What by international standards had been an enviably placid history was now remembered as a long litany of suffering and humiliation at foreign hands. In depictions of the colonial era, novelists and painters focused on the forced labor of little girls and boys, thus reinforcing the impression of a child race abused by an adult one.¹⁸ Because Koreans truly were as the perfidious Japanese had only claimed to be, i.e. inherently virtuous, never evil by nature, all atrocities they had committed during the Pacific War were ascribed to duress and quickly erased from the collective memory.¹⁹ Koreans had done nothing under the Japanese but suffer.[†]

The new racial self-image manifested itself clearly in stories of Soviet-Korean friendship written and published in the late 1940s.²⁰ Writers depicted ailing men and women being carried to hospitals on the backs of Russian nurses and female doctors. Lest anyone miss the symbolism, the heroines were explicitly compared to mothers, the locals to children.²¹

Even in the hardest times Wŏnju had only to look into Dr. Kriblyak’s eyes to know that he would not die. His heart was always in her embrace, as if he were being held at his mother’s

bosom.²²

The genre was evidently meant to flatter the Soviets with the implication of filial subservience, and at the same time to plead for motherly protection of a race too pure to survive on its own. These tales should not, however, be misread as asserting the moral equality (let alone superiority) of the Russian people. Just as foreigners can be evil, while Koreans can only do it, so it is that only the child race is *inherently* virtuous; foreigners can at best do the occasional good deed.

The North Koreans were by no means alone in reinventing their past, nor were they the only nationalists in the new East Bloc. The historian Tony Judt has written that myths of a “France of resisters or a Poland of victims” played an important role in helping Europe set aside its past and move on.²³ But there is an enormous difference between nationalism and a race-based view of the world. The North Koreans’ image of themselves as inherently pure and vulnerable would prove particularly problematic, encouraging as it did both a dislike of their allies *and* a chronic dependence on them.



Kim Jong Il as a spartan, Juche-minded 18 year old, one of many images designed to counter the assumption that he had a carefree or privileged upbringing.

This worldview also posed problems for iconographers of the new personality cult, for Kim Il Sung had to be presented on the one hand as the embodiment of Korean naivety and on the other as a brilliant revolutionary warrior. The logical solution would have been for the regime to re-conceive ethnic virtues so as to include the qualities of strength, discipline and wisdom. Attempting to do just that, the Soviet-Korean poet Cho Ki-ch’ŏn—one of the few intellectuals in Pyongyang who had not received a Japanese schooling—depicted Kim as a brilliant strategist who read Soviet history between battles.²⁴ Han Sŏr-ya and other homegrown writers and artists, however, acclaimed a nurturing, maternal leader, one whose success derived more from his naivety and innocence than anything else. He had mastered Marxism-