

“The North’s philosophy of rule bears close resemblance to what Koreans traditionally said about their kings—or what Hegel said about the German monarch. . . .”

The Kims’ Three Bodies: Communism and Dynastic Succession in North Korea

BRUCE CUMINGS

When Kim Jong-il died on December 17, 2011, I was lucky to be in Singapore. That way I could watch from a salutary distance the froth and drivel that passed for expert American commentary: How can his callow son expect to grapple with octogenarian leaders in the powerful military—won’t there be a *coup*? Then again, Kim Jong-un might “lash out” to prove his toughness to the militarists, like his indubitably crazy late father. “North Korea as we know it is over,” a Korea specialist asserted in *The New York Times*; it is just a matter of weeks or months, he wrote, before the regime comes apart. Others worried that such a collapse might require US Marines on Okinawa to swoop in to corral “loose nukes.” Meanwhile, Obama administration officials fretted about a “power struggle” erupting, something Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton prattled on about after Kim’s stroke three years earlier. Utterly ignored is what happened when Kim Il-sung died in 1994: nothing.

Since the early 1990s, every crisis involving the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) has occasioned an eruption of splenetic media, repeating claims of insanity in Pyongyang while invoking a country simultaneously on the verge of collapse and threatening to “lash out.” At the same time, befuddled administrations in Washington have seemed ignorant of America’s long history with the North and, on a bipartisan basis, bereft of any new ideas as to what to do about it. Is there no such thing as wisdom about this isolated but persevering post-cold war regime?

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BODY LANGUAGE

On my first visit to North Korea in 1981, I flew in from Beijing and hoped to go out through the Soviet Union, on the Trans-Siberian Railway. Consular officials said I should obtain a visa at the Soviet Embassy in Pyongyang. When I duly arrived at its doorstep, a friendly (read KGB) counselor sat me down, offered me cognac, and inquired as to what I might be doing in Pyongyang. More cognac, more discussion, and then he asked what I thought of Kim Jong-il, who had just been officially designated as successor to Kim Il-sung at the Sixth Party Congress in 1980. “Well, he doesn’t have his father’s charisma,” I said. “He’s diminutive, pear-shaped, homely. Looks like his mother in fact.” “Oh, you Americans,” the Russian said, “always thinking about personality. Don’t you know they have a bureaucratic bloc behind him? They all rise or fall with him—these people really know how to do this here. You should come back in 2020 and see *his* son take power.”

It proved to be the best prediction I’ve ever heard about this hybrid communist state-cum-dynasty, except that Kim Jong-il’s heart attack at the age of 69 merely hastened the succession to Kim Jong-un by a few years. The North Korean people have known only millennia of monarchy and a century of dictatorship—Japanese dictatorship from 1910 to 1945, during which, in the late stages of colonial rule, Koreans had to worship the Japanese emperor, and then the hegemony of the Kim family for the past 67 years.

On the grandson’s birthday, January 8, 2012, Pyongyang television ran an hour-long documentary bathing him in every North Korean virtue and identifying him with every salient place or monument visited by Kim Il-sung—but especially White Head Mountain, the vast volcanic peak on the Sino-Korean border that is the mythical fount

of the Korean people, the site of some of Kim's anti-Japanese guerrilla battles in the 1930s, and the purported birthplace of Kim Jong-il in 1942.

Most interesting, however, was Jong-un's body language in the documentary: Tall, hefty, grinning, pressing the flesh, he was already a politician, a hearty man seemingly at home with his sudden role as "beloved successor." Erased was the dour, dyspeptic, cynical, ill-at-ease figure of Kim Jong-il, swaddled in a puffed-up ski jacket, his face hidden behind enormous sunglasses. Most important, in visage and personal style, Jong-un is the spitting image of his grandfather when he came to power in the late 1940s, even to the point of shaving his sideburns up high (the documentary pointedly featured vintage photos of Kim Il-sung with the same haircut). It is as if the DNA passed uncontaminated through son to grandson—and no doubt that is what the regime wants its people to believe.

Korean culture is steeped in the ceremony, ritual, literature, poetry, lore, and gossip of royal families—and especially, which son would succeed the king. Many did so at a young age. The greatest of kings, Sejong, under whom the unique Korean alphabet was promulgated, took office in 1418 at the age of 21, assisted by the regency of his father. Like Jong-un, he was the third son; the eldest son was banished from Seoul for rudeness, and the middle son became a Buddhist monk. Kim Jong-nam, Kim Jong-il's first son, embarrassed everyone by getting caught entering Japan under a pseudonym (hoping to visit Disneyland, it is said), and prefers to reside in Macao, the gambling capital of the world. Virtually nothing is known about the middle son, and neither appeared at their father's funeral.

Asians, it is often said, hate to lose "face." It is a word better translated as dignity, or honor. In North Korean eyes, the prestige of the nation is bound up with the visage of the leader. On the way in from the airport in 1981, as we sped by various Kim Il-sung billboards, my friendly guide had one solemn admonition: Please do not insult our leader. (I hadn't planned to, lest I jeopardize my exit.) The leader's ideology, then and now, was "Juche," or *chuch'e*, a concept meaning always to put Korea first and above all else in one's mind. The Korea scholar Gari Ledyard has written that the second character, when joined to the word for nation—*kukch'e*—was used in classical dis-

course to connote the national face, or dignity. As Ledyard wrote, "The *kukch'e* can be hurt, it can be embarrassed, it can be insulted, it can be sullied. The members of the society must behave in such a way that the *kukch'e* will not be 'lost.' This sense of the word resonates with emotions and ethics that spring from deep sources in the traditional psyche." Anyone who has visited the North will recognize that this idea is alive and well—too often in overweening pride and grandiose monuments, but at bottom, in an insistence on national dignity.

The penultimate Korean king, Kojong, was a mere 11 years old when he took the throne in 1864, guided by his father—a powerful regent known as the Taewon'gun—until he reached maturity. During his regency the father reenergized the dominant ideology (neo-Confucianism), practiced a strict seclusion policy against several empires knocking at the Korean door, and fought both France (1866) and the United States (1871) in serious wars. This was the Hermit Kingdom at its height, and *kukch'e* was a particularly prominent concept under the

Taewon'gun. But when Kojong came of age he sought modern reforms, signed unequal treaties opening Korea to commerce, and tried to play the imperial powers off against each other. It worked for a quarter-century,

and then it didn't: Opening up merely staved off the eventual and predictable end—the obliteration of Korean sovereignty in 1910. At the Revolutionary Museum in Pyongyang, fronted by a 60-foot statue of Kim Il-sung, visitors witness a paean of praise to the Taewon'gun, stone monuments from his era meant to ward off foreign barbarians, and breast-beating tributes to Korean "victories" against the French and the Americans.

THE REGIME'S FACE

During the January 2012 funeral procession on a wintry day, Kim Jong-il's brother-in-law, Chang Song-t'aek, walked behind Kim Jong-un; Chang, 65, has long been entrusted with command of the most sensitive security agencies. Behind him was Kim Ki-nam, a man in his 80s who was a close associate of Kim Il-sung. Three generations walked solemnly alongside the vintage mid-1970s armored Lincoln Continental carrying the coffin of Kim Jong-il, and on the other side of the limousine strolled top commanders of the military in what

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has to be modern history's most amazing garrison state, with the fourth-largest army in the world.

These rituals were markedly similar to those when Kim Il-sung died, and just like this year, pundits and officials back then emitted the same derivative commentary—*Newsweek* ran a cover story titled “The Headless Beast,” the US military commander in the South said repeatedly that the North will “implode or explode,” and the imminent collapse of the regime became the CIA's mantra in the mid-1990s. A few months before Kim Il-sung's death I heard a Korean-American scholar tell a conference crowd that when Kim died, the people would rise up and overthrow the regime. Instead the masses wept in the streets—just as they did when King Kojong died in 1919, touching off a nationwide uprising against the Japanese.

After his father passed away Kim Jong-il disappeared, feeding more rumors of power struggles. Actually he was doing what the heir-apparent prince was supposed to do under the *ancien regime*: mourn his father for three years. By the 50th anniversary of the DPRK's founding in 1998, it was clear that Kim Jong-il was in full charge of the country, and he launched the North's first long-range missile to mark the moment. He also opined many times that communism had fallen in the West because of the dilution and erosion of ideological purity. Indeed, North Korea has turned Marx on his head (or put Hegel back on his feet) by arguing that “ideas determine everything,” a formulation the Taewon'gun's neo-Confucian scribes would have liked.

Kim Jong-un has not followed the ancient mourning ritual, visiting military units and appearing publicly elsewhere. He even took the unprecedented step of introducing his new bride to the public. Certainly it is in his interest to lay low and gain experience, while the seasoned old guard runs the country. But since the beginning of this year Kim Jong-un has unquestionably become the face of the regime, one much more agreeable to the public than Kim Jong-il's. Most likely, by showing the new leader waltzing around to this school or that factory, the regime hopes to project continuity and stability, while lavishing praise on a young man who stepped into his father's shoes about a decade sooner than expected.

Still, my Soviet informant was right and I was wrong about the significance of bodily appearanc-

es: Regardless of what he looks like, the king can do no wrong—he can even shoot several eagles on his first golf round (as Kim Jong-il's acolytes claimed). In a classic book, *The King's Two Bodies*, Ernst Kantorowicz wrote that there were two kings: the frail, human, and mortal vessel who happens to be king, and the perfect eternal king who endures forever as the symbol of the monarchy. The North Koreans thus made the dead Kim Il-sung president for eternity, all imperfections erased, and now his elaborate mausoleum is the most important edifice in the country.

Jong-un's mimetic face, one imagines, will make the population quickly forget about Kim Jong-il, whose 17-year reign was one of flood, drought, famine, the effective collapse of the economy, and mass starvation leading to hundreds of thousands of deaths—the “time of troubles” expected to follow on the death of the dynastic founder. Jong-il had one singular, if dubious achievement: the acquisition of nuclear weapons. (But here much credit goes also to the ignorantly provocative “Bush doctrine,” which listed the DPRK along with Iraq and Iran not just as an “axis of evil” but as a potential target for preemptive attack.)

What is entirely predictable, in my view, is that North Koreans will welcome the only handsome face of authority that all but the most elderly Koreans have known, the founder of the country, the “fatherly leader,” now reincarnated. He may not yet be 30, but if my Soviet interlocutor was right (and he has been for three decades), we are going to see Kim Jong-un's face for a long, long time.

THE COLLAPSE SCENARIO

As I noted, the idea that North Korea is on the verge of collapse was the main trope of media coverage after Kim Jong-il died. Victor Cha, the knowledgeable Korea scholar who asserted in the December 19, 2011, *New York Times* that “North Korea as we know it is over,” argued that even if the regime somehow managed to persist, it would be because the North had become, in effect, “China's next province.” Here the argument seems to be that the DPRK has survived only because China does not want it to collapse.

There is no question that in recent years North Korea has become heavily dependent on trade with China, and on Chinese food aid; in 2011 Chi-

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na accounted for more than 53 percent of its total trade. But this is also a direct result of the collapse of trade with South Korea after the 2008 advent of the Lee Myung-bak government, which revived the fierce anticommunism of the old South Korean dictatorships; the North's dependency on trade with China was 32 percent at that time, according to International Monetary Fund figures, while 22 percent was with the South. (The Lee government cut off trade in 2010.)

But let's assume that China has been propping up the North. Why did that hardly insignificant assumption not figure into the logic of nearly a quarter-century of predictions of the North's coming collapse? Kim Il-sung began his guerrilla career by teaming up with Chinese comrades. Korean radicals participated in the Northern Expedition and the Canton Commune in the 1920s and the Long March in the 1930s, and contributed tens of thousands of soldiers to the Red Army in the Chinese Civil War. Mao Zedong then bailed Kim's chestnuts out of a very hot fire (the Korean War) in the late fall of 1950. Kim Il-sung was very close to both Mao and his long-term successor, Deng Xiaoping.

Why would the current Chinese Communist leaders want a border with the Republic of Korea, with its large military a virtual replica of American military practices, and with 28,000 US troops still in the country and holding frequent joint war games directed not just at the North, but at China as well? Furthermore, for North Korea to become a "province" of China would contradict everything the North has stood for since 1945 (while mimicking 1940s propaganda by the first South Korean president, Syngman Rhee, about the North becoming a province of the Soviet Union). Notice, for example, how Pyongyang got bent out of shape when some scholars in China claimed that the ancient Korean kingdom of Koguryo was Chinese.

Professor Cha, who served in the administration of George W. Bush, touched on themes that have framed US policy at the highest level. Donald Rumsfeld, Bush's secretary of defense, knew so profoundly little about Beijing's relationship with Pyongyang that he actually called for a joint US-China program to topple the North Korean government. More reasonable American officials, on a bipartisan basis, have frequently tried to get Beijing to bring enough pressure on the North to put an end to its nuclear program.

Secretary of State Clinton's frequent invocation of "power struggles" in the DPRK apparently de-

rives from a communist model of what happened after Stalin and Mao died. But Stalin and Mao were very different from Kim Il-sung, with very different agendas and crimes. Nikita Khrushchev had to denounce Stalinism in his famous 1956 speech if he wanted to continue leading his country, given the tens of millions of Soviet citizens who had perished because of Stalin's rule. Mao was directly responsible for the deaths of tens of millions in the Great Leap Forward famine, and he had supported the Gang of Four—including his wife Jiang Qing—as they terrorized much of China's urban population in the Cultural Revolution. After Mao died they were quickly arrested and put on trial.

There is no record in Kim Il-sung's reign of mass violence against whole classes of people; even in the land reform campaign of 1946, landowners were not murdered en masse as they were in China and Russia. We know this because of a huge archive of captured North Korean documents from 1945 to 1950, many of them secret, that has been open to scholars since 1977—but then you have to be able to read Korean to use these materials, and hardly any of America's government experts can do so.

Defense Secretary Rumsfeld altered the US war plan against the DPRK with the goal of destabilizing its military forces and toppling the regime. This, of course, was before the American war in Iraq went so badly—and it would have led to another huge and unpredictable conflict. Since relations between Seoul and Pyongyang fell apart after 2008, dangerous skirmishes have erupted over islands close to North Korean shores, in waters that have been disputed since the armistice in 1953. Asked about the DPRK by CNN in April 2012, Defense Secretary Leon Panetta remarked, "We're within an inch of war almost every day."

This connotes an astonishing failure of American policy going all the way back to 1945—when 25,000 US troops occupied the South, fearing that with Soviet help, Kim Il-sung would come to power throughout the peninsula. Any new war would kill millions, destroy both Koreas and, quite likely, much of Japan (which would again be a staging area for the US military). The Kims were a *casus belli* then and remain so today—except now they have nuclear weapons.

A NORTH KOREAN 'SPRING?'

Since the Tunisian rebellion began the "Arab Spring" in January 2011, many people—especially my students—have asked if something similar

might develop in North Korea. It is a reasonable question. The Seoul-based Korea Foundation, which provides much of the funding for Korean studies programs around the world, chose to begin the February 2012 issue of its publication, *Korea Focus*, with an editorial by Kang Chol-hwan that began like this: “North Korea has been paying close attention to developments in Libya because . . . the two dictators are very much alike in their psychotic personalities, their iron grip on power, their hoarding of wealth for their own survival, and the ways they lavish their stooges with benefits to buy their loyalty.”

If Kim Jong-il before he died, or his son today, were to witness an uprising against the regime, as well as armed foreign intervention bent on regime change under the guise of creating a “no fly zone,” and ended up cornered like a rat and tortured to death, everything I wish to get across here would be proved wrong. However, it is Kang who is wrong. What the overthrow of Muammar el-Qaddafi proved is that Libya remained a tribal society under the guise of his “Green Revolution.” It was essentially three countries under Italian colonialism; King Idris appeared to preside over a single nation while favoring his tribe until his overthrow in 1969; and then Qaddafi did the same. As the Arab Spring spread to eastern Libya, a region always poorly integrated into Qaddafi’s state, the United States and European powers intervened to provide the hard power that finally caused his regime to collapse. His murder proved that at least some sectors of the population hated his guts.

Whatever one thinks of Qaddafi, Kim Jong-il was not psychotic. He commanded an enormous army with few if any signs of disloyalty to the leadership. North Korea has no tribes; perhaps some modest regional differences persist, but Korea had been unified for a millennium and divided only since 1945. Kim Jong-il certainly rewarded his friends and acolytes, as every dictator must. But it is not clear that this signals a broad disloyalty among the mass of the people. The Libyan example bears little if any relation to what might happen in North Korea.

Moreover, the civil war that raged intensely from 1945 to 1953 between North and South, and within the South, created the garrison state that defines the DPRK, and the army has only deepened its power under the post-Kim Il-sung *son’gun* or “military first” policy. To imagine that this army is just waiting for its chance to overthrow the Kim family and unite with the South is foolishness.

There will be no “Korean Spring” until the Korean War is finally brought to an end, and until the two Koreas have reconciled along the path etched out by South Korean Presidents Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun from 1998 to 2008. (If we ask what Lee has achieved as a result of his nearly five years of hostility toward the North, I think the answer is this: nothing.)

THE KIM MONARCHY

How might we come to a better understanding of this regime, so that our explanations and predictions might improve? We need to make a sincere effort to understand the country’s politics—and when we do, we discover that what began as a fairly typical version of postcolonial, anti-imperial revolution in the 1940s rather quickly morphed into a system that drew deeply from the well of traditional Korean political culture. By the 1960s, native political practice had begun to capture and overwhelm the communist system to a degree never before seen in the rest of the world. As the Arab Spring developed, some analysts came to understand that the movements of Arab peoples were not just a quest for the democratic rights that Westerners take for granted: They were also a quest for human dignity. So was the North Korean revolution.

It was amazing to me, when I first visited this country, to see the body language of North Koreans when they greeted me. They did not bow, but looked you in the eye and shook hands. They did not flatter, or dissemble, or give any impression that the encounter was anything but one between equals. One needed to live in South Korea in the 1960s and 1970s to grasp how utterly different this experience was, not just for an American but for all foreigners. It also contradicts the extremes of obeisance that North Koreans exhibit in the presence of their ultimate leader, his statue, or even his photograph.

North Korea is a bundle of contradictions because its leaders are pregnant with ideas that can’t really be voiced in our time. Karl Marx was famously opaque on what the nuts and bolts of a communist political system might look like, so Lenin filled that vacuum with “the dictatorship of the proletariat,” which became the dictatorship of the Politburo. Even so, Lenin and his successor Stalin provided no reliable guidance on the mechanisms of leadership transition. Pyongyang has filled that vacuum with monarchical succession, but cannot say so because it smacks of feu-

dalism. The North's philosophy of rule bears close resemblance to what Koreans traditionally said about their kings—or what Hegel said about the German monarch—but the leaders cannot admit that, either.

When we look at Hegel's theory of monarchy, the resonance with North Korea's ideology is marked. As Eli Diamond of Dalhousie University put it recently, "the general intention of Hegel's justification of the hereditary monarchical principle is to provide an institutional corrective to a purely liberal standpoint. . . . The immovable unity of the state is embodied in the undivided unity of the monarch's rule, in contrast to the insuperable division of civil society."

Diamond goes on to say that "the monarch is a *subjectivity* that makes decisions that are to a large extent arbitrary, in a way that is tolerable to citizens, since it is done from a perspective beyond the political fray. . . . This moment of arbitrary decision is necessary, because there are always various possible ways of looking at any practical matter, and opposed opinions on these matters can create deep divisions within government. At the same time, as belonging to the well-informed thinking will of the monarch, these decisions will not be wholly arbitrary and devoid of human reason."

Marxist-Leninist ideology has been converted to a native doctrine in the DPRK. "Juche" or *chuch'e* began as a predictable form of anticolonial nationalism and is generally translated as self-reliance, meaning a withdrawal from the world economy and attempts at independent development. But it slowly evolved into an idealist metaphysic that bears a close resemblance to Korean neo-Confucian doctrines, as well as Hegel's philosophical idealism. Or as a high-level defector, Hwang Jang-yop, put it simply, the two Kims "turned Stalinism and Marxism-Leninism on their heads by reverting to Confucian notions."

THE SINGLE MIND

It is not clear that anyone, including Hegel himself, quite understood what he meant by the constant invocation of the term "subjectivity," but that is the usual dictionary definition of *chuch'e* in South Korea and Japan. And further, as Hegel wrote in his *Philosophy of Right*, "the organic unity of the powers of the state itself implies that it is *one single mind* which both firmly

establishes the universal and also brings it into its determinate actuality and carries it out." With this, and especially with his endless emphasis on "mind" ("the nation state is mind in its substantive rationality"), and the identification of "one single mind" with the monarch, Hegel merely expresses a mid-nineteenth century German version of an ancient Korean truth.

In his "Philosophical Rebuttal of Buddhism and Taoism," the philosopher and architect of fourteenth-century Korean reforms Chong To-jon wrote that "The mind combines principle and material force to become master of the body. . . . [Principle] is also received by the mind and becomes virtue. . . . Principle is truly embodied on our minds." In a similar discourse, Kwon Kun, another neo-Confucian scholar, wrote, "Only after one is able to embody humanity, make complete the virtue of his mind, and constantly maintain without fail the principle with which he is born, can he be called human without being embarrassed." The human condition is none other than *virtue*, embodied in *mind* (conceived organically as brain, heart, and body integrated); virtue-in-mind is what makes us different from animals. Not only that, it is according to Kwon the "cause by which material force comes into existence"!

Now if we make the post-modern stipulation that we are all subjective creatures (not objective rational actors), and that therefore we construct our own realities, then Chong and Kwon do seem to be saying that humans create their universe. But not just any human—only those humans who, through long study, have cultivated the virtues that are the sine qua non of having the capability to judge, to decide, to lead, to teach, and thus to create. At the apex, of course, is the monarch, a perfected human being, "the supreme mind of the nation," and woe be it to the person who challenges his authority or denies that he can walk on water.

Hegel, to be sure, idealized constitutional, not absolutist, monarchy. But just like Korean philosophers, he overcame the difficulty of deciding *who* should be king by relying on bloodlines; for practical political reasons, he thought, the monarch's accession to the throne has to be hereditary: "It is the hereditary principle of succession that guarantees this unmoved quality, the *majesty* of the monarch. An elected head of state, and hence the state

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itself, is associated with one political perspective to the exclusion of others, and generally turns the state on its head, compromising the majesty of the monarch by grounding the sovereign's legitimacy in the attitudes and opinions of the masses, rather than having the sovereign be self-grounded and the source of the rights of the people."

It was none other than Marx who cut his intellectual teeth by ripping these justifications for monarchy to shreds, and he no doubt flips in his grave to hear the monarchical Koreans call themselves communists. "Hegel thinks he has proven," Marx wrote in 1843, "that the subjectivity of the state, sovereignty, the monarch, is 'essentially characterized as *this* individual, in abstraction from all his other characteristics, and this individual is raised to the dignity of monarch in an immediate, natural fashion, i.e., through his birth in the course of nature.' Sovereignty, monarchical dignity, would thus be born. The *body* of the monarch determines his dignity. . . . Birth would determine the quality of the monarch as it determines the quality of cattle. Hegel has demonstrated that the monarch must be born, which no one questions, but not that birth makes one a monarch."

Because of the emperor system in Japan and the monarchy in Korea, Hegel's thought was always influential on scholars in both countries; indeed An Ho-sang, the education minister under the First Republic in the South, had studied Hegelian philosophy in prewar Germany and was a lifelong exponent of his own idiosyncratic version of *chuch'e*.

UNDERSTANDING DIFFERENCE

By virtue of my wife's position at the University of Virginia, we live in one of 10 campus "pavilions" designed by Thomas Jefferson nearly 200 years ago. Two statues of him are within 100 feet of our front door. Here is one hallowed ground that is not "history," that curious American term for the obliterated, irrelevant past. Still "Mr. Jefferson" to everyone, he often seems "perfect"—but the brick shed where slaves kept their tools still sits in our garden. In early 2012, a museum in Washington and the curators at his Monticello home both opened exhibitions devoted to exploring the grandest of American contradictions, that between a slavery that lasted so far into the modern world, and the brilliant author of these indelible words: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal. . . ." In announcing a new nation, founded on principles of equality and democracy, Jefferson aimed squarely

at the ubiquitous political form in the world—the "Divine Right of Kings"—then he journeyed home to his Monticello slaves.

North Korea is a modern form of monarchy, realized in a highly nationalistic, postcolonial state. Americans have such trouble understanding this because most have not subjected their own liberal assumptions and beliefs, their own subjectivity, to a thorough inquiry and self-criticism. Fredric Jameson in his 1981 book *The Political Unconscious* observed that "the social unity expressed in the 'body of the despot'" is political, but is also analogous to various religious practices. Westerners typically fail to understand "the immense Utopian appeal of nationalism," wrote Jameson. "Its morbid qualities are easily grasped, but its healthy qualities for the collective and for the tight unity that postcolonial leaders crave, are denied." When you add to postcolonial nationalism Korea's centuries of royal succession and neo-Confucian philosophy, it might be possible to understand North Korea as an unusual but predictable combination of monarchy, anti-imperial nationalism, and Korean political culture.

We who live in Western liberal nations take for granted the relatively stable societies that we join as adults. We do what is expected without necessarily thinking about it. Civil society is subconsciously internalized and reproduced, as an outcome of centuries of Western political practice. Yet the creation of such habits—the spontaneous production of good citizens and good workers, loyal subjects who are also afforded the opportunity of disloyalty—appears as an opaque mystery where it does not exist.

"The ways by which people advance toward dignity and enlightenment in government," George F. Kennan wrote, "are things that constitute the deepest and most intimate processes of national life. There is nothing less understandable to foreigners, nothing in which foreign influence can do less good." The Kims are reviled because they thumb their noses at the West and at Western values and get away with it. But it is Americans' own blindness, their hidden complex of unexamined assumptions, that makes the North Korean leaders seem simultaneously so laughable, so impudent, and so outrageous. American policy makers have proved over seven decades that they do not understand North Korea, cannot predict its behavior, and cannot do anything about it—however much they would like to. We can, however, do something about our prejudices. ■