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North Korea's Partisan Family State□□北朝鮮のパルチザン家族主義国家

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The decade after the Korean War (1950–1953) was a formative era for North Korea. Many of the striking features of the country's political and social system visible today took root during the postwar era, from the mid-1950s to the late 1960s.

The era was, above all, a time of proud achievements for North Korea. Socialist politics are often referred to as substantive economic democracy based on the principle of egalitarian access to and distribution of social goods, in contrast to the formal democracy of liberal states founded on ideas of universal suffrage and personal liberty to pursue greater access to social goods. In the early postwar years, North Korea achieved great success in building a state and economic system on the model of substantive democracy, rapidly transforming a war-torn, and previously highly stratified, primarily agrarian society into an energetic, industrial society enjoying distributive justice and universal literacy.

North Korea recorded this achievement in a relatively brief period of time and with relatively little social turbulence or political violence compared to other revolutionary socialist states. This was, in significant measure, an ironically positive consequence of the Korean War, which, although it literally brought North Korea to ashes and claimed unimaginable suffering from its population, nevertheless had the effect of eliminating major class conflicts and social inequalities. The war resulted in poverty and deprivation for everyone; it also uprooted potential class and political enemies, many of whom moved to South Korea during the war.



Pyongyang 1953

The Korean War also gave rise to an elaborate mechanism of mass mobilization in North Korea, which was subsequently used in economic recovery and then in building a state-controlled, collective economy. The result was impressive. By 1956, just three years after the end of the devastating war, North Korea recovered its prewar level of agricultural production and doubled pre-war industrial output, achieving a stunning annual industrial growth rate of forty-five per cent in 1957. The collectivization of agriculture was completed by the end of the 1950s. During the same period,

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the country carried out a series of major social reforms including free primary and secondary school education, state-sanctioned equal rights for women in workplaces, state-subsidized medical services, and a welfare system for war invalids and the families of the fallen. It was against this background of successful mass mobilization that the famous Cambridge economist Joan Robinson, after her visit to Pyongyang in October 1964, wrote a report called "Korean Miracle." Robinson praised "the intense concentration of the Koreans on national pride" in North Korea's social economic development, led by the country's leader Kim Il Sung, who was "a messiah rather than a dictator." [1]



Pyongyang cotton mill, 1955



Workers' sanatorium, Wonsan, 1955



Kim Il Sung with construction workers, 1953

There is no doubt that a great number of people in post-war North Korea were firmly committed to bettering economic and social conditions and that there was intense pride in the collective community, as Robinson observed. It is also beyond doubt that in the immediate postwar years the country's "messiah," Kim Il Sung, played a pivotal role in raising popular commitment and creating a social force for the collective good.

North Korea borrowed from Soviet Russia the Stakhanovite drive for labour heroism, propagating passionate, even miraculous, labour as the principal civic virtue. However, North Korea also created some unique ways to arouse passion and enthusiasm for labour. This is evident in its post-war labour heroism which took on a more militaristic form and a more nationalistic character, adopting slogans and images relating to the Kim Il Sung-led Manchurian partisan struggles in the 1930s (see below) and the heroic sacrifices during the Korean War (or "Chosun War," as it was called in North Korea, and later "Victorious Fatherland Liberation War").

Notable was Kim Il Sung's on-the-spot-guidance art of rule, a very modern form of pageantry involving intimate contact between the charismatic ruler and the ordinary worker-citizens. A foreign observer who had travelled

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widely in North Korea told us how impressed he had been by the extent to which the late leader had practiced on-the-spot guidance throughout his life, as testified by the large number of local sites of memory dedicated to the leader's visits found in all corners of North Korea. This intimate contact with people was critical to his establishment as a charismatic leader. Helen-Louise Hunter writes of the power of Kim's signature art of modern pageantry: "He conveyed a deep personal interest in the lives of the people, worked tirelessly for the national good (as he saw it), and maintained the image of a man of the people. Moreover, his particular style of leadership, featuring endless tours of the country, kept him in close touch with the population where his personality was used to the fullest."[2] Hunter quotes Prince Norodom Sihanouk of Cambodia, who spent some time in North Korea: "Kim has a relationship with his people that every other leader in the world would envy."[3]

The combination of these two powerful arts of socialist economy, one borrowed from the Soviet Union and the other largely original, resulted in a North Korean public economy diverging in form and experience from that of Soviet Russia. Jeffrey Brooks explores Soviet public culture in Stalin's era, focusing on what he calls the "morality play" of gift exchange between the Soviet leader and the Soviet peoples.[4] He describes how the workers were driven to understand all the amenities of modern life that they were enjoying, be they new housing, schools, or modern transportation, as gifts from Stalin, and how they, in turn, were encouraged to conceptualize it as their duty, as citizens of the Soviet state and as workers in the workers' state, to appreciate these gifts from Stalin and to try to reciprocate. In this light, Brooks focuses on the dramas of the Soviet labour heroes, whose superhuman agricultural or industrial labour performances were widely disseminated by the Soviet press as a form of repayment for the gift of love from Stalin.[5] The Soviet shock-workers received entitlements and gifts from Stalin; a similar relationship of politicized gift exchange characterized North Korean mass mobilization. This changed since the 1960s, however, as the leader's pageantry practice intensified. In this milieu, North Korean labour heroes did not necessarily have to be rewarded with material benefits from the state. For them, the most meaningful gift from the state became the leader's visit to their workplace, which constituted the ultimate public acknowledgement of their dedicated labour.

The above process was further radicalized in the 1970s (when North Korea, compared to the previous decade, began to lose economic strength and also faced a mounting political crisis in international socialist solidarity caused by the Sino-Soviet split), giving birth to a new logic of gift. As Kim Il Sung's cult of personality developed from a sublime form to an extreme degree, it sought not only to encompass the entire foundation of North Korea's political sovereignty but also to incorporate the entire working order of the national economy and the entire spectrum of civic life from the public to the domestic sphere. The Great Leader became the beating heart of the revolutionary polity as an historical entity, the genesis of which, in turn, became ever more closely associated with the leader's biography. This made the life of every citizen conceptually part of the leader's personified sovereign body and the citizen's economic life part of the super-organic household economy headed by the leader—thus, the slogan, *janggunnim siksol* ("We are the General's family"), which is widely displayed in the domestic space of North Korean households. Moreover, it made the very material fact of being a North Korean, and having a political home and enjoying a meaningful political life in that home, fundamentally a gift from the leader's exemplary historical life—the élan vital of the collective organic life of the family state.

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As is known, it was the future successor to Kim Il Sung, his eldest son, Kim Jong Il, who played a central role in the formative political process to sublimate the founding leader's charismatic authority throughout the 1970s and 1980s. This development was, according to how it is explained in the North Korean sources, equal to Kim Jong Il's exemplary performance of the virtue of filial piety, conducted on behalf of the people of North Korea, all of whom are, categorically, the founding leader's political children. It is also evident that the process was part of the long, careful preparation for the succession of power from Kim Il Sung, the founding father of the North Korean polity, to Kim Jong Il, the emerging leader whose dedication to the authority and legacy of the founding leader was, as the North Korean media often emphasized, more powerful than the combined feelings of fidelity and loyalty to the same persona held by the entire North Korean population.



"We are the General's family"

In this light, the South Korean anthropologist and veteran observer of North Korea, Lee Moon-Woong, defines North Korea's political order as a "family state." Lee argues, "The ties between the masses and their supreme leader are very much like kinship relations. It is therefore appropriate to call the political system of modern North Korea a family state… The leader's role is akin to the role of a head of household; he exercises absolute authority and is the source of all wisdom. Thus the destiny of the state resembles the fate of a family."[6] The ethos of the state as a super-organic family is well expressed by the song, "We Celebrate our Supreme Leader's Longevity and Health," released in the wake of Kim Il Sung's sixtieth birthday in 1972:

> To the single purpose of bringing us happiness,
>
> Our Supreme Leader dedicates his entire life.
>
> From his parental love and embrace,
>
> Has blossomed our happiness today.
>
> We shall follow you to the end of heaven and earth.
>
> We shall serve you until the day the sun and the moon disappear.
>
> Keeping our indebtedness to you for generations and generations,
>
> We shall be loyal to you with one single heart.
>
> Looking up to our great Parent,
>
> Your people celebrate your longevity and health.

The idea of the political community as a household writ large, and the related idea that the political home is a gift from the exemplary leader, are prominent in other songs released in the same anniversary context such as "Nothing to Envy in the World":

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> The sky is blue; my heart is joyous,
>
> And I hear the sound of an organ.
>
> I love my country where people live in harmony.
>
> Our father is the Supreme Commander Kim Il Sung.
>
> Our house is the [Workers'] Party's embrace,
>
> And all of us are real blood brothers and sisters.
>
> I have nothing to envy in the world.

The idea of the family state, however, should be understood in relation to another important paradigm that arose forcefully in the immediate postwar years. In a seminal study of North Korea's political history, the eminent Japanese historian of modern Korea, Wada Haruki, proposes a definition of North Korea's political system as a "partisan state" (*yugekitai kokka* in Japanese; *yugyokdai gukka* in Korean).[7]

The concept draws attention to the political actors who played a central role in the foundation of North Korea in the middle of the twentieth century and to the career backgrounds of these formative actors in colonial times as members of an armed resistance group based mainly in Japanese-occupied Manchuria.[8] One relatively small group of armed resistance fighters was led by the young Kim Il Sung and drew on considerable moral and political support from the large group of settlers of Korean origin in northeastern China.[9] After 1945, these originally Manchurian-based armed revolutionaries were privileged over other nationalist groups in the early years of state-building in North Korea after liberation from Japan's colonial rule, with strong support from the Soviet military which occupied the northern half of postcolonial Korea (the southern half was occupied by U.S. forces).[10] It is also well known that during the decade after the Korean War, Kim and his former partisan group from the Manchurian era waged a vigorous power struggle against other revolutionary groups and factions. By the end of the 1950s, Kim's so-called Manchurian partisan faction had become an unchallenged, unchallengeable political force in North Korea, and remains so to this day.

Since then, according to Wada, the story that "North Korea was established by Kim Il Sung and his Manchurian faction" became North Korea's official history.[11] This group of aged former guerrilla fighters has been the principal power base on which the so-called personality cult of Kim Il Sung rested throughout the post-war years. These people contributed to building North Korea's people's army, in which they have held key posts, into an increasingly vital political force after Kim's death in 1994, in support of his designated successors, Kim Jong Il and later his son, Kim Jong Un. In proposing the idea of a "partisan state," Wada describes how the post-war political development of North Korea reified the history of the Kim Il Sung-led partisan group's armed anti-colonial resistance activity in Manchuria as the single most important, sacred, and all-encompassing saga of the nation's modern history and the polity's constitutional history.

The idea is demonstrated in a host of post-war public cultural productions but also powerfully in the organization of North Korea's national cemetery in the Daesongsan hill near Pyongyang. The cemetery was first built immediately after the Armistice agreement in July 1953 and underwent relocation and renovations in the second half of the 1970s (after Kim Il Sung's 60th birthday in 1972) and again in the mid-1980s (after his 70th birthday). The timing of the cemetery's original construction may convey the impression that

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the place should be a burial ground for North Korea's fallen soldiers of the Korean War. That is far from the case, however. North Korea has no state-instituted, recognized public cemeteries for the fallen soldiers in the Korean War, although it has a number of epitaphs, memorials, and museums dedicated to their memories. In fact, North Korea's national cemetery has no trace of the country's collective Korean War experience or of the tremendous mass sacrifice to that brutal, protracted civil and international war. Instead, the cemetery is reserved exclusively for a particular cohort of national heroes from a pre-war history and from the era many years before North Korea existed—the so-called first generation of Korean revolutionaries, which refers to the members of Kim Il Sung's Manchurian partisan group in the 1930s.



Cemetery of Revolutionary Martyrs

The cemetery, called the Graves of Revolutionary Martyrs, brought together in one place some one hundred graves of Manchurian partisans, which had been widely scattered throughout the country and in northeast China. Kim Il Sung's intention to bring the remains of his old comrades to Pyongyang was to show, according to his instruction, which is today inscribed prominently in a memorial stone, that "the honorable revolutionary spirit of the martyrs of anti-Japanese revolution will forever live in the heart of our party and our people." However, his initiative undoubtedly had other objectives than paying respect to the memory of old revolutionaries. As mentioned, the post-war years in North Korea were a time of forceful mass mobilization for economic recovery from the devastation of war. It was also a time of intense power struggles within the Workers' Party, which resulted in the purge of members of the indigenous Korean communist movement as well as groups whose backgrounds and political orientation were closely aligned with the Soviet or the Chinese communist movements. Charles Armstrong aptly calls this power struggle "centering the periphery," pointing to the fact that the struggle resulted in a group with relatively marginal revolutionary credentials, represented by Kim Il Sung, winning over all other historically more major streams of the Korean communist and nationalist movement.[12] The decision to build the Graves of Revolutionary Martyrs close to the country's capital and to bury there exclusively the heroes of Kim Il Sung's Manchurian partisan movement (which was, in fact, a small part of the Manchurian-based Korean independence movements) was, therefore, an important initiative to center the periphery and, for Kim Il Sung and his Manchurian-faction comrades, to seize and consolidate power. Kim later reminisced in his memoir how grateful he felt to his old Manchurian comrades and to the unrelenting trust and fidelity they had shown him. The concentration of the graves of the Manchurian partisans was an important episode in the consolidation of Kim's power base and the construction of his charismatic authority.

We believe it is useful to view the historical character of the North Korean polity in terms of the interplay between the two above-mentioned modalities: the partisan state and the family state. Both paradigms speak not merely of the North Korean state but also of the relationship between state and society. These modalities

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also help clarify the difficulties and challenges facing North Korea today.

Military-first politics or songun has been North Korea's primary political guideline since the founding leader Kim Il Sung died in July 1994, being associated with his successor Kim Jong Il, who ruled the country until he himself passed away in December 2011. This political idea is, in many ways, a continuation and reinvention of the partisan-state idea from the post-Korean War years.

Songun politics is better known in North Korea at the grassroots level as *ch'ongdae* (barrel of a gun) politics. The barrel of a gun became a master symbol of Kim Jong Il's mass politics, replacing in significance the classical symbols of the proletarian revolution and workers' state, the hammer and sickle (in North Korea, they also include the symbol of the brush, representing intellectuals). The barrel-of-a-gun symbol, when unified with traditional class-based symbols, thereby becomes a single source of power and meaning for agricultural, industrial and intellectual labourers. This is demonstrated by numerous events reported in the North Korean media in which the People's Army takes the lead in state construction projects. The army also actively participates in seasonal agricultural work, especially during rice-seeding and harvest times. The substitution of the barrel of a gun for the sickle and hammer means conceptually that economy and society are modeled after the army and, in practical spheres, that state resources will be concentrated on strengthening the army prior to sustaining society. In short , we may call this theoretical development a turn from the labour theory of value to a theory of human and material values predicated on the paradigm of partisan politics.



The barrel-of-a-gun of military-first politics



Defend the Leader!, painting

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Defend the Leader!, sculpture

The idea of *ch'ongdae* is complex and fascinating; for the purpose of this short essay, it suffices to mention that it refers to all resources, animate or inanimate, necessary to sustain the partisan state. Its broad referential terrain includes North Korea's entire armed forces, the entire military hardware and personnel, all patriotic individuals and communities, and their moral dispositions and practical commitments. Kim Jong Il is reported to have said more than once that a gun is the most loyal comrade for a *son'gun* revolutionary and that, as such, it never betrays the revolution.[13] Indeed, the barrel of a gun is not merely a thing but rather an embodiment of the purest loyalty and fidelity, the obligatory spiritual quality of the citizen of the military-first-era partisan state. According to a key slogan of military-first politics, in today's North Korea ten million gun barrels are poised to defend to the death the revolutionary center. In this context, the barrel of a gun is both an object and a being; namely, a person loyal to the founding heritage of the North Korean revolution, and a means for sustainable political rule for the revolution's exemplary centre.

Recent North Korean literature on the ch'ongdae idea acknowledges the difficulties in being the barrel of a gun. To be so requires having a powerful longing for the late founding leader, and absolute loyalty to the leader's legacy as well as to the keepers of this legacy.[14] It also requires sustaining comradely love and fidelity to the keeper of the legacy as intense and strong as that held by the Manchurian heroes to their partisan leader. Recently, however, North Korean literature has begun to acknowledge that being the barrel of a gun might entail overcoming the pain of hunger, as did the Manchurian heroes, as well as the sorrow of losing one's loved ones to hunger. At the same time, the *ch'ongdae* political idea asserts that these self-disciplinary and human-existential difficulties can be conquered if one has adequate faculty of love and the correct force of love.[15]

The famous North Korean lyric, *Song of Comradely Lov*e (1980), celebrates this power of love:

> No matter how arduous the way may be,
>
> We shall climb over the hills of hardship.
>
> No matter how strong the wind of fire may be,
>
> We shall stay together in life and death.
>
> You can't purchase even with tons of gold,
>
> The boundless love of comrades.
>
> Let our resolve live forever,
>
> Looking up at the Single Star.

In the mid-1990s, the North Korean state released a number of new songs and dramas on the virtue of comradely love. Among them was the popular television drama *Sea Routes*, which depicted the way in which a group of people on a ship came to discover true comradely, altruistic love for one another amidst the

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hardship of thirst and hunger while the ship was adrift after being caught in a storm. The drama's theme song, *Comradely Love*, says:

> We didn't know in the quiet days,
>
> How precious the true comrades are.
>
> The love of a comrade who shares my fate,
>
> I discovered in turbulent days that without you, I am no longer.
>
> In the embrace of our General who taught us what true love is,
>
> Let you and I remain eternal comrades.

These two songs relate to two distinct periods of hardship in the evolution of the North Korean revolution, both of which are referred to as the time of the Arduous March. One of them is the extreme hardship of scarcity and famine suffered by nearly the entire population of North Korea since the second half of the 1990s. Although the North Korean administration declared in October 2000, while celebrating the birth anniversary of the Workers' Party, that the period of the Arduous March was over, the dire economic and subsistence crisis nevertheless continues today for a great portion of the population. The song *Comradely Love* interacts with the experience of this contemporary hardship.

The other lyric, *Song of Comradely Love*, refers to another period of hardship, also called the Arduous March, which goes all the way back to the end of 1938. It was at this time that the Kim Il Sung-led Manchurian militia, under intense Japanese pressure, was forced to undertake a long march for survival, fighting against hunger and the harsh winter of northeast China as well as enemy attacks. The march, which lasted for about one hundred days, is remembered in North Korean history as the most trying time for Kim and his revolutionary comrades. Kim's militia suffered heavy losses at this time, as well as several crises of betrayal by long-time comrades. However, the Arduous March, like the Long March in the Chinese revolution, is depicted in North Korean history as a glorious time when the country's revolutionaries struggled against impossible odds to achieve final victory and lay the ground for the proud home of a revolutionary state. In North Korean arts and literature, the one hundred days of Arduous March are typically depicted also as a beautiful time—when the supreme human virtues flowered amidst extreme hardship. These virtues were comradely solidarity and iron-like commitment to the cause of national liberation. Above all, they were fidelity and faithfulness to the partisan leader, as depicted in countless songs, dramas and paintings on the era.

The new songs and dramas of the Arduous March produced in the 1990s, such as *Comradely Love*, are intended to draw an analogy between the contemporary crisis of hunger and the historical anti-colonial struggle. The analogy propagates the power of human spirit and moral solidarity in overcoming adverse historical conditions—the conviction that there are no insurmountable obstacles for people who are armed with proper spiritual and moral strength. This spiritual power is not a dialectical force (shaping historical conditions and being shaped by these conditions) but a transcendental force which, properly guided, is free from constraints imposed by objective historical conditions. Key to this spiritual power is the moral solidarity among the fellow travellers on the arduous march, which the above songs depict as "comradely love"; yet, the transcendental quality of this spiritual solidarity is not limited to the moral ties among comrades. More crucially, it consists of their unshakable collective faith in the all-embracing, infallible authority of the leader,

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and it is only through this that the morality of comradely love finds its ultimate purpose and genuine strength.

Today's *songun-ch'ongdae* idea is, therefore, an invented tradition of the long-existing partisan state paradigm in the era of political and social crisis. This crisis has many facets (such as the fragmentation of the socialist international order in the early 1990s) but, most importantly, it relates to the loss of the founding charismatic leader Kim Il Sung in 1994. The death of this messianic leader coincided with the tragic death of numerous North Korean citizens due to the profound food shortage and collapse of North Korean economy in the mid-1990s—the victims categorically being the founding leader's "children" according to the family state paradigm.

The civic morality propagated by today's narrative of the Arduous March, therefore, takes the form of heritage politics. This political form is referred to as yuhun jongch'i ("legacy politics") in North Korea and, as such, it is inseparable from the country's particular, hereditary mode of leadership succession now to a third generation. It brings to full flower the family-partisan state aesthetics that have been developed during the postwar years, adding to them a powerful montage of past and present; a continuity between the earlier crisis in the revolutionary movement and the new reality of crisis in the life of the revolutionary state, and between the morality of old Manchurian partisans and the civic ethics required for members of today's North Korean political family. In doing so, however, today's political narrative of the Arduous March confronts a critical inner contradiction.



Arduous March, 1938–1939

The paradigms of the family state and the partisan state are closely intertwined in the art of rule in North Korea. Nevertheless, the distinct moral conceptual dimension of the family state may, in certain circumstances, resist partnership with the partisan state idea. The idea that a polity is a household writ large carries with it a moral reciprocal relationship between state and society: the state provides security in basic economic life and human welfare in return for society's fidelity to the political system and contribution to the national economy. This is the case whether this relationship takes on a personalized paternalistic character centred on a charismatic leader as in Kim Il Sung's North Korea, or a more institutionalized form of socialist politics explained in terms of the relationship between the party and the masses.

North Korea's political leadership in the era of *songun* began its career on the ruins of the

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everyday economy and as an authority whose power derives only from the tradition of the partisan state, without the ability to wield this power with an authority deriving from managing an economically sustainable political household, that is, the authority of a family state. The military-first-era, which continues to date in North Korea, therefore confronts radical contradictions between the two political forms, whose harmony has been the backbone of the country's legitimate statehood and the polity's meaningful relationship with society since the post-Korean War era. The North Korean state continues to show strong commitment to the ideal of a proud partisan state, yet its many failures undermine its claim to rule as a meaningful family state. Meanwhile, ordinary North Koreans are obliged to bear the consequences of the growing contradiction between the proud partisan state and the failed family state, in terms of continuing pressures to be exemplary barrel-of-a-gun citizens amidst ongoing economic and subsistence crisis.

This contradiction goes to the heart of the partisan state idea. The Manchurian story of partisan struggle is one of a revolutionary movement, involving a handful of vanguard revolutionaries and a relatively simple social organization formed by these battle-hardened actors. In contrast, today's *songun-ch'ongdae* politics involves a complex state society that has an elaborate division of labour including that between the army and the economic society.

In this regard, the logical contradiction embedded in the historical-analogical scheme of old and new partisan politics refers to the attempt to extend the rules of military-moral unity born in extraordinary historical circumstances to a complex modern society. Even in the Manchurian context, it is unthinkable that the rules which were meant exclusively for the professional militia could be readily extended to civilian lives. The life of the partisan is an extraordinary form of life, and this life may not continue, by definition, without material and moral support from sympathetic civilian groups. This is why the violence of modern counterinsurgency warfare often targets for destruction civilian communities as a way to destroy partisan groups. When this violence occurs, mobile partisan forces may attempt to escape encirclement by counterinsurgency forces (as did Kim Il Sung's Manchurian partisans in the winter of 1938–1939), leaving the civilian communities to fend for themselves.

This art of survival in partisan warfare, however, is not an option available for a partisan state. The partisan state is a territorially bound entity unlike the classical partisans, and it has no place to go other than the place it rules. Moreover, its survival depends on the survival of civil society no less than that of the army. This contradiction between the two forms of partisan politics, old and new, and the related contradiction between the partisan state and the family state paradigms, constitute one of the most critical structural problems faced by the North Korean political and social order today. The viability of the new third-generation leadership that has emerged since the death of Kim Jong Il in December 2011 will depend on how it creatively confronts the radical structural and moral contradictions embedded in the genesis of North Korea's partisan family state.

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Notes

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