

North Korea in Transition: Politics, Economy, and Society **Edited by Kyung-Ae Park and Scot A. Snyder**

Dmitry V. Shlapentokh *

North Korea, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, the only "classical" Stalinist and full-fledged totalitarian state, continues to fascinate scholars with diverse views. Needless to say, the assessment of the North Korean regime by the various authors of the reviewed book is in many ways defined by their own experiences and, in a broader sense, by the cultural/political paradigms of the societies that produced them. The reviewed volume is authored not just by noted scholars of different political stances and occupations, but the chapters also deal with different aspects of the regime. While the approach and subjects differ, all the authors dealt either directly or indirectly with the nature of the DPRK regime, and predictions for the future. One of the common questions is certainly to what degree the North Korean regime is stable. Several authors noted that these ideas have been circulating for at least twenty years, possibly longer. While the demise of the regime has been predicted for a long time, the regime has survived and there is no indication that it is about to collapse. Still, the opinion that the regime's collapse is imminent remains popular.

There is the assumption that the DPRK is doomed to a final demise because of economic trends. Nicholas Eberstadt's article, "The Missing

* Associate Professor, Department of History , Indiana University

Link for North Korea's Economic Revival?" focuses on the weak economic performance of the regime and believes that this does not auger well. The question is how will the economic and related political problems ultimately translate into a political crisis? It might be explained by the application of the Thermidorian model, which implies that each revolution must undergo particular stages: a liberal stage, a radical stage, and then a return to a moderate regime. In the case of the French Revolution, these stages were called "Thermidor," and were related to the downfall of the radical Jacobins whose reign was marked by terror and economic regulation.

It was assumed that the Russian revolution would follow the same model when the 1921 New Economic Policy was implemented, which provided more economic freedom than before. This also was predicted for China at the beginning of the Deng reforms. One can see this approach in Andrei Lankov's, "Low-Profile Capitalism: The Emergence of the Post-Famine North Korea," in which he notes that the North Korean regime has been engaged in cautious economic liberalization. As a result, there is the appearance of a people who are not entirely dependent on the bureaucracy. They live a comfortable life and even possess flat-screen TVs (clearly very important). There, as he implies, the ironclad empirical force of history started to work, increasing the role of market forces and the rise of the middle class, inevitably leading to the transformation or collapse of the regime.

Russian scholars had implicitly applied this theory to explain the collapse of the USSR. It was assumed that the rise of an underground entrepreneurial "Teneviki" and general cynicism are what caused the collapse of the regime. Gorbachev had just accomplished the work of Zeigeist. Still, neither in Soviet Russia nor in China does this work. If the state had a well-oiled machinery it could ignore the *longue durée* or even reverse the course of events as Stalin did in 1929. Besides dealing with the economy, another focus of this book is the regime's ideology. Charles Armstrong notes an abnormality in the regime's ideological stance: supposedly the regime should follow a Marxist underpinning, which implies

that the social-economic process should shape the “superstructure,” the political process and the ideological make-up. At the same time, North Korean leaders promulgate that they actually ignore the social-economic foundation for change since it is the will of the masses manifested, of course, in the will of the leader that makes the difference. Secondly, the North Korean regime supposedly follows Marxism in its various manifestations, whereas in reality, North Korean leaders have followed a transmogrified form of nationalism. Thus the implicit point of Charles Armstrong’s chapter “The Role and Influence of Ideology” is also that the North Korean regime is in a way abnormal and should evolve or eventually collapse.

However, if this notion of “abnormality” is placed in a comparative context, it becomes apparent that the regime actually follows the same model as similar regimes in the past. Indeed, state control over the economy and, in fact, of the entire society provides the North Korean regime with the same kind of power enjoyed by Stalin, Mao or their true predecessors, the Egyptian pharaohs and Chinese emperors. One could hardly believe that their actions depended on the social-economic conditions of the society. It was the will of the ruler that mattered in most cases; if the pharaohs were limited it was due to the limitation of the actual work force and the availability of needed materials.

Nationalistic transformations of regime ideology are also quite natural, regardless of the view of the enemies of the regime that nationalism—the healthy manifestation of national spirit—has nothing to do with “abnormal” regimes that preach an “abnormal” ideology (such as Marxism-Leninism). Still, in the USSR, nationalism became fully integrated in its ideological construction early on. International Bolshevism soon became “National-Bolshevism,” where Stalin identified himself not just with revolutionary legacy but also with the mighty Russian tsars Ivan The Terrible and Peter the Great, both of whom expanded the state and purged the opposition.

This was also the case with Mao who at the end of his life likened himself to the First Emperor of Qin rather than to foreign revolutionary lead-

ers. And a considerable segment of the Iranian elite now connect themselves with Cyrus the Great, the founder of the great Achaemenid Empire, rather than with Shia “saints.” At least the pagan Persian king became as important as the Shia saints. There was nothing “abnormal” in the North Korean regime that makes it any different from other socialist regimes.

The question arises in this case as to why the Korean regime has survived whereas the Soviet regime did not. The answer to this question can be found in the most interesting essay, Bruce Cumings’, “The Kims. Three Bodies. Toward Understanding Dynasties, Success in North Korea.” With all the positive aspects of the essay, I would not subscribe to everything that is included in it. One of the glaring problems is that Cumings never elaborated on the terroristic nature of the regime. As a matter of fact, he noted that the regime never targeted an entire social group. One might state that Stalin also officially did not target entire social groups after the “liquidation” of “Kulaks as Class” in 1929. The Great Terror of the 1930s was officially not against certain social groups but against “traitors” and “foreign” spies. Stalin also proclaimed that “children are not responsible for their fathers,” and that the nature of repression was highly exaggerated by the enemies of the regime. He invited to the USSR sympathetic foreigners, such as Leon Feightvanger who, similar to Cumings, found none but self-confident, patriotic citizens and fully supported Stalin’s treatment of the opposition. Still, terrorism was the very nature of such regimes, and everything—including the sense of patriotism and fine ideological shibboleths—could well have disappeared due to political pressure. One should remember here that even North Korean defectors should not be regarded as being completely free from fear. First, they most likely leave behind loved ones in North Korea. Second, they most certainly fear the “long hands” of the regime, as was the case with Soviet dissidents during the Stalin era. As a matter of fact, the practices for eliminating political enemies abroad have been well resurrected in Putin’s regime.

Of course, the North Korean regime has not followed the models of their predecessors word for word. As a matter of fact, neither Stalin nor Mao shot their mistresses or executed their relatives as is the case with the

new North Korean leader who not only shot his mistress but also, if one would believe the rumors, fed his uncle and tutor to the dogs. Mass starvation, which the authors of the book cannot ignore, was also a good way of terrorizing the populace. One cannot assume that starvation was a “free market enterprise,” where all groups starved on an equal footing, or that starvation was of the same nature as the nineteenth century potato famine in Ireland where the penniless peasants were the major victims of the famine simply because they had no money to buy food. With some role of the black market, the major source of food in North Korea is still the state. And those who starve first are the inmates of camps and “less valuable” peasants, whereas the army and loyal useful members of the apparatus do not suffer the same fate.

Still, with all of its problems, Cumings’ essay is the most interesting and insightful for it explains the reason for the regime’s durability and why it did not follow the path of the USSR. The author explains how he developed this idea of durability: while a young researcher many years ago, he visited the Soviet consulate and had a convivial conversation with a KGB officer who suggested that the regime could well survive for decades, although at the time, the young man was convinced that the surge for liberty would inevitably lead the North Korean dynasty to its demise. His interlocutor, however, implied that if each leader had a strong hold over power and ensured a smooth transition to the next, they could perpetuate their rule almost indefinitely. Only later, Cumings said, did he understand the wisdom of the KGB interlocutor who, of course, did not anticipate the rise of Gorbachev. The major advantage of a smooth transition from one generation of rule to the next—the fact that the previous ruler had never been discarded or criticized (especially in the case with North Korea)—made the founding father of the regime immortal and the ultimate anchor for the regime’s stability. Here Cumings aptly turns to the analysis of the absolutist Europe in Ernst Kantorowicz’s, *The Kings Two Bodies*, a classic work on the body politic and the body natural of the king. In the view of historians, the medieval and early modern kings had two bodies, the body politic and the body natural. One was mortal and would

disappear. The other, the embodiment of the state, was perfect and immortal. Thus, as Cumings concludes, history vindicated the insights of the KGB interlocutor who predicted a long life for the North Korean regime. Still, should it be seen as being absolutely immortal, and free of danger? One should not be tempted by the spectrum of revolution from below, although some of the contributors of this volume seem to. The contributors to the book note that the people in North Korea are different from the older generation. They are more cynical, for example, than previous generations of North Koreans. However, this also could be said about present-day Chinese who are less indoctrinated than the people of Mao's era. Still, with the strong grip of the regime, fear is present and transitions are smooth, and thus there is no sign that the regime is going to collapse or undergo dramatic changes. But whether this guarantees the Chinese, or even more so the North Korean, leaders from collapse is the crucial question. I would argue certainly not since the strength of the North Korean regime is at the same time its weakness, for everything depends on the leader. Any wrong choice of the successor, for example, could lead to "Gorbechevism" in its idiosyncratic fashion. The "King" also could die abruptly without arranging for a successor. And, this could cause the regime to collapse with remarkable speed. If this would happen, all the sacred shibboleths of ideology would disappear since the majority of the population will most likely discard quite rapidly what they had so recently worshiped. And historians would discover the seeds of the rot in the regime's past, which would lead to its inevitable demise. Hegel noted that the "owl of Minerva takes flight at dusk." Still, a wise bird could not only provide insight but also deceit, and this should be remembered if the regime does indeed fall in the interim.

How can one assess the book in general? Such an assessment is difficult since it includes articles of different quality, focus and approaches. In a way, all of them bring something new to the understanding of North Korea or, in a broader sense, the understanding of totalitarian and similar regimes throughout history. Most important as noted is Bruce Cumings article. Its importance is not only that it stresses the role of the leader and

the transition from one ruler to another as the key for the regime's stability but because he does not place the North Korean regime in the context of modern totalitarian regimes, as is usually done, but compares it with other authoritarian/totalitarian regimes in the past. While comparison with Mao's China, Stalinist USSR, etc. is common, it is not common to compare totalitarian regimes with regimes in authoritarian Europe. The historians and political scientists, especially those who are quite critical of the regimes, do not like such comparisons for they prevent them from presenting these regimes as absolute aberrations and as having nothing to do with "normal" societies.

Bruce Cumings' chapter shows that the problem with the transition of power is not a uniquely totalitarian phenomenon and can be found in other societies. The broadening of the comparative approach to the study of totalitarian regimes is rather refreshing and methodologically important.

Charles Armstrong's article is useful in confirming the ideological trends known to anyone who studies the cultural and ideological trends in totalitarian/authoritarian societies, e.g. the transition from eschatological millenarianism of the early periods to more traditional nationalism in its idiosyncratic form.

Still, most of the articles—even those that are most insightful—provide more information about the cultural and political milieu of the author rather than about North Korean society. For example, Cumings could not understand that the apparent patriotism and love for the leader that he found among North Koreans was a deep Orwellian sublimation of the absolute fear so deeply internalized for the sake of one's survival that one could truly believe in his own utterings. Here, Cumings implicitly transfers to North Korea the political culture and perception of modern Americans who quite open in their view of a particular president—not, of course, of their bosses for whom their livelihood depends.

The Andrei Lankov article is another example of transferring personal views of his milieu to North Korean reality. Most Russians reject with indignation the very notion that the collapse of the mighty Soviet empire

was caused just by Gorbachev's blunder and the collective naïveté of the majority who initially saw in Gorbachev a deliverer. They were convinced in the deep rot of the system and the "natural" death of the regime and the state. Consequently, Lankov transfers this notion to North Korea, seeing in the regime's social-economic makeup the seeds of inevitable doom.

Thus, the book as could be said about most other collections of articles, is uneven in its narrative. The great insights and methodological innovations co-exist with well-known observations and some of them could even mislead those who study not just North Korea but totalitarian regimes in the broad meaning of the word.