INTRODUCTION

A Journey into the Abyss

This book may please neither human rights activists nor xenophobes. Anti-communists and diehard Stalinists may also dismiss it. But many readers may be intrigued by its take on North Korea—one derived from a look at state-society relations, drawing upon an ethnological approach that is based on a close reading of selected literary texts published in North Korea.

I neither advocate for North Korea nor directly accuse it of wrongdoing. Further, I avoid ridiculing it or questioning the legitimacy of its existence. The picture of North Korea that I present is neither a monstrosity nor, as North Korea’s own nomenclature would have it, a paradise on earth. There has been enough demonization on the one hand and self-embellishment on the other. I therefore refrain from taking either side, and instead look at North Korea from an entirely new angle.

My intent is to conduct an ethnological study of North Korea, just as any anthropologist or ethnologist would vis-à-vis his or her field, but with an important qualification. My specific focus will be on the way in which the connection between the people and the Great Leader is secured, as this connection appears to be one of the most important and meaningful social relations among North Koreans. Here, as the reader will soon find out, I hold the Great Leader (Kim Il Sung, the father) and
the Dear Leader (Kim Jong II, the son) to be separate entities. It is the father, now deceased, and his position vis-à-vis the people, to which I specifically point when I refer to the Leader. The world regards Kim Jong II as Kim Il Sung’s successor; however, this a misunderstanding, or at least an incomplete understanding. Kim Jong II did not succeed all of Kim Il Sung’s powers. Father Kim was not only the Supreme Commander of the Korean People’s Army, the title that Kim the son now holds, but also suryeong, the Leader, a title which the son does not and will never have, since there is only one possible suryeong, Kim Il Sung. Kim Jong II is referred to as chidoja or ryeongdoja, both meaning leader, but never suryeong. Suryeong is also translated into English as the Leader, but this hides the fundamental semantic difference between ryeongdoja and suryeong in the North Korean context. I will discuss this distinction more extensively below.

North Korea is one of a very small number of nation-states in today’s world into which no outside ethnographer has ventured with the specific purpose of conducting anthropological fieldwork. This is extraordinary, considering that the North Korean state has been in official existence for more than 60 years, having been established in 1948, and considering that anthropologists from western and other industrialized nations have ventured to most of the territories on earth during this period.

There are books written by former diplomats assigned to North Korea or by reporters who worked in North Korea covering it for certain periods. Some of these works include references to the everyday lives of so-called ordinary North Koreans (Bradley 2006; Lankov 2007, for example). There are books by photojournalists, novelists, academic researchers, and even tourists who have visited North Korea and then published reports of their discoveries. However, such works typically have been the product of short stays in the country, certainly when compared with anthropological ethnographic fieldwork, which usually lasts for one or two years (as suggested by Poirvert, Fenby, and Chancel 2007; Harris 2007). Furthermore, the
iterations of such trips are usually strictly controlled by the state, with visitors taken to pre-arranged, pre-designated sites by official guides, under conditions that differ markedly from the spirit of anthropological fieldwork.

There are also memoirs and expositions (such as Kang 2005; Choe and Sin 1988) by former detainees, deserters, and defectors who lived in North Korea for extended periods. While these undeniably carry a wealth of information on North Korean society, such accounts must be considered with particular caution, due to the overly politicized circumstances surrounding the publication of this genre of literature. In sum, none of the existing studies of North Korea that claim legitimacy based on the argument that they are derived from first-hand experience withstands comparison with the conventional criteria of ethnography.

While being ethnographically informed, ethnological studies do not have to be premised upon ethnographic fieldwork. Yet, the ethnological study aims to lay bare the logical undercurrents of the culture that it examines. Whereas the term “ethnography” denotes a genre of writing, “ethnology” refers to a scholarly discipline, an attempt to understand, among other things, an ethnos, its ethos and values. For that purpose, ethnographic data is extremely useful. But other data, including historiography, art and literature, media reporting, and even state-crafted propaganda, are equally useful. Not all ethnographers are ethnologists, but by the same token, not all ethnologists have carried out fieldwork in the cultural environment about which they study and write.

In writing this book, I define myself as an ethnologist of North Korea who has yet to conduct ethnographic fieldwork there. My strategy is a hybrid one, relying on no linear or chronological scheme. I make frequent reference to existing ethnological studies that have informed my investigation of North Korea because of the commonalities and contrasts they help illuminate in relation to cultural logic, structure, and the operative mode of everyday life. In fact, I place more emphasis
on these than on the various books on North Korea currently in existence, as the majority of the latter fall into one of the three categories discussed above: advocacy, accusation, or ridicule.

As such, this book seeks to make a break with overly politicized positions. Yet, I maintain that political institutions and political (not politicized) relations are of prime importance when trying to understand North Korea’s cultural logic. In this regard, it is more appropriate to regard the political domain as the target of this study. In North Korea, everything—including life, death, love, body, and the person—is political. Further, the political and the social are indissolubly connected. It is this excess, or the oversaturation of North Korean society with the political, that is the object of my inquiry.

For this purpose, it would appear crucial to closely examine the connection between individuals and the Leader. In studying these ties, I shall focus on three separate, yet intricately connected realms of inquiry—love, war, and self—followed by a concluding note offering a comprehensive analysis of the political foundations of North Korean society. But how are we to proceed in an ethnological study that penetrates to the heart of these fundamental issues? To gain data, I analyze and interpret the rituals and language embodied in North Korean literature, concentrating mainly on works published during the 1970s and 1980s, with additional references to earlier literature. I complement these literary analyses with data drawn from my own visits to North Korea in the 1980s and conversations with Koreans and others who have visited North Korea during different phases of its history.

Most important, however, is the framing of this book as an ethnological study of an unknown land. For this reason, the remainder of this Introduction is dedicated to clarifying my methodology as well as briefly outlining its theoretical and historical background.

**Anthropo-ization**

There is a reason behind my use of the neologism that heads this section. During the nascent phase of ethnology in the nine-
teenth century, European scholars sat in their offices in Oxford, Cambridge, London, and Paris, imagining the rituals and customs of remote peoples and writing about them as constitutive elements of humanity, *anthrōpos*, past and present. Studies of “primitives” by these armchair anthropologists were, in other words, endeavors that presupposed a connection between them, the “uncivilized,” and us, the “civilized.” The primitives, with their bizarre practices and customs, were seen as bearers of remnants of our past. Even after functionalism moved to the core of British Social Anthropology, with use values conferred upon bizarre and unfamiliar institutions—thereby paving the way for cultural relativism—“primitives,” now variously referred to as natives or locals, were never placed outside of the *anthrōpos*. They were humans, just like us, albeit inferior.

The dehumanization of the objects of ethnological study is a phenomenon that has been observed on a number of occasions in more recent years—but I am not referring exclusively here to colonialism and/or racism. When Bronislaw Malinowski, an Austrian Pole studying anthropology at the London School of Economics, was stranded in Australia during World War I as an enemy national, he had a golden opportunity to study the Trobriand Islanders in their archipelago off New Guinea. All of their seemingly bizarre and arbitrary institutions—the *kula* ring, the avunculate uncle and matrilineal kinship, the eyelash-biting courtship ritual, and the bachelor hut (*bukumatula*) where boys and girls stayed overnight to develop premarital sexual relationships—were introduced as parts of a splendid system that humans had created. However different they might have been from us, the intention was not to introduce them as a nonhuman species: they were placed within the frame of humanity (Malinowski 1961, 1987, and 1992). When the British military high commission in Sudan needed E. E. Evans-Pritchard to work on the Nuer in the 1930s, it was not because they deemed the Nuer to be nonhuman (although maybe less human). Fascinated by the Nuer kinship system, their ghost marriages, female marriages, leopard skin chiefs, and their ambivalent relationship with the Dinka, Evans-
Pritchard rendered them human, if not on an equal footing with Western civilization (Evans-Pritchard 1969, 1971).

It was much later, when the Iron Curtain was drawn and humans in opposing camps ceased to attack, invade, inquire into, be curious about, and indeed, touch each other, only regarding others as competitors or as objects of propaganda, that we discern the start of a more explicit and systemic form of dehumanization of the other.

Before Vietnam, there was Korea. Between 1950 and 1953, combat zones had not yet been penetrated by the global media and images of war had not reached living rooms. Consequently, details of the Korean War—the number of human casualties and the extent of destruction, for example—remain open to dispute and in some ways unidentifiable to this day. Although radio, newspapers, photo journals, and magazines carried extensive coverage of the war, the absence of television meant that the Korean conflict left behind very different memories to those evoked by the later Vietnam War (see Cumnings 1994). This war was the first example of a new kind of fight, the first of many in which the United States was the prime mover, yet where the institutional mechanism of the United Nations was utilized. It was also the first of many in a series of what later came to be viewed as proxy wars, battles fought between two parties that each represented the interests of one or the other of the dominant superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union.

No notable synchronic sociocultural studies were produced in relation to Korea and the Koreans during the Korean War, in contrast with Japan during World War II. Whereas anthropologists—and notably Ruth Benedict, working for the wartime enemy studies effort—were able to humanize the Japanese by delineating the intermingled hyper-connections between the seemingly fanatic kamikaze bombers and other imperial ultranationalists and the sociohistorical background and presuppositions of the Japanese during World War II, no such effort was deemed necessary during the later Korean War (Benedict 1946; Ryang 2004, Chapter 1). Why was this the case?
The answer, it seems, can be traced to the way Americans imagined Koreans, that is to say, in how they were not thought of as humans. There was no armchair anthropologist of Korea, as Ruth Benedict had been for Japan. The war was fought, not in order to understand, conquer, and eventually occupy Korea, but to eliminate it altogether. Here, I hasten to add that the object of elimination was confined to the northern half, viewed as the “invader” of the U.S.-occupied south. If classic anthropologists were later criticized for having been sentries in relation to imperial expansion and colonization, North Korea did not even warrant such status. The aim of the United States and the other nations that followed it in the name of the United Nations was to eliminate North Korea from the face of the earth, or perhaps not even that: they did not care. The study or understanding of its culture, therefore, had no place in war.

The dehumanization of North Korea goes back to the end of World War II and the beginning of the Cold War, just prior to the beginning of the Korean War. Already, Western POWs were complaining that their prison guards were Koreans, not Japanese, since, in their eyes, the Koreans were less human than the Japanese, the latter having had the guts to fight against the Allies, and the former having been powerlessly colonized by and subordinated to them.

Dehumanization of the other was carried out by North Koreans, too, perhaps even more ferociously, if less effectively, internationally speaking. Ever since the Korean War, North Korea has referred to the United States with the mandatory suffix nom. This is a derogatory term denoting worthlessness and baseness. But if the term nom borders on implying a marginal form of humanity, more explicit is the phrase “U.S. imperialist wolves” or seungnyangi mie, which literally banishes the American from the human race as a whole. Furthermore, the term consigns the United States to the level of carnivore animality. Accordingly, the following anti-U.S. slogan came to take on an intense ferocity: mijeui kageul tteuja. Direct and unambiguous, it calls for the mutilation (into millions of pieces)
of U.S. imperialism. Since *mije*, U.S. imperialism, is *seung-nyangi*, a wolf, tearing its limbs apart and gutting its organs would not incur humanly moral wrath of any sort. The effects of such phraseology are unmistakable: by the time a North Korean is old enough to speak, these terms have been adopted as part of his/her everyday discourse, extinguishing any concept of Americans as possessing an even remotely human side. It is, in other words, very hard for North Koreans to come to terms with the idea that Americans are fellow humans. My point, in sum, is that systematic, deep-rooted dehumanization of the other is recognized equally in North Korea and in the United States.

The challenge at this historical juncture, therefore, for the anthropological and ethnological study of North Korea is to (re)anthropo-ize the faceless Koreans. The task is unclear, though, and even more uncomfortable than the one faced by Ruth Benedict vis-à-vis Japan during World War II. For, no meaningful military (let alone social, political, or cultural) contact between North Korea and the United States (or the West, broadly put, for that matter) has occurred since 1953. And rather than being registered as “insane,” as were the Japanese involved in kamikaze bombing sorties, the Rape of Nanjing, and the Bataan Death March, North Koreans have come to be labeled as “unknown” and, hence, even less human. (Re)-anthropo-izing North Koreans should, thus, begin with the recognition that we are dealing with a people that are unknown, yet a people nevertheless.

The usual recourse of an anthropologist in this case would be to pack up and leave on a fieldwork expedition. This is not possible in this case, as stated earlier. Under the current conditions, under which no viable fieldwork is possible, how else do we attempt to get to know North Korea?

*Culture at a Distance*

The supposedly facile quest to conduct ethnographic fieldwork can become, of course, a naïve wish—not only in the case of North Korea, but also, historically, in other places, including
the most famed field sites of classical anthropology, such as the land of the Nuer and the Trobriand Islands. First, to make an obvious point: without utilizing archival, literary, historical, or census data, and without recourse to other studies and forms of documentation, no ethnographic fieldwork can be successful. That is to say, producing a good ethnography is not simply the outcome of having gone there and seen it all (as discussed in Clifford and Marcus 1986; Clifford 1988; Marcus and Fischer 1994). Secondly, moving on to an obscure, yet more important point: anthropo-ization is not simply about interacting with the other as a fellow example of humanity, but also about deeming the other a dignified being deserving of respect.

Ethically speaking, it is important to remember that the term “respect” is derived from the Latin *re-specere*, or, to look back at, to look again. Ethicist Karen Lebacqz emphasizes this concept in her essay exploring the position to be taken vis-à-vis the human embryonic stem cell. According to her: “Respect is owed not simply to persons, but very precisely to those who are always in danger of being cast outside the system of protection that personhood brings” (2001, 152–53). Thus, respect can be a concept that not only makes interpersonal human relations viable, but also renders different societies and cultures as counterparts even to the most self-assuredly “superior” nation-states.

If looking at a person again holds the key to entering into a dignified human relationship with that person, to dignify a culture requires multiple acts of re-looking. At first, it might seem ironic to realize that strenuous attempts of this kind were made at the height of Cold War tensions. But, with the Iron Curtain precluding them from conducting viable fieldwork on the territory of the opposing ideological camp, scholars, and especially anthropologists, tried nevertheless to do so, since not doing so would be to succumb to the temptation of the simplistic yet popular language of the propaganda at that time.

It was Margaret Mead and her associates, students of Franz Boas at Columbia University, that strived to establish as a skill
set this kind of attempt to “re-look” at distant others. Mid-twentieth-century Boasian anthropology is branded as the Culture and Personality School, which was grounded in the belief that if one had a full understanding of a given culture, one also had a comparable understanding of the typical personality that this given culture produced. The advantage of this approach became clear in the turmoil of World War II, as it became impossible for Western anthropologists to freely travel to remote corners of the world in order to conduct the fieldwork that had been a central element in the structural functionalist approach favored by British Social Anthropology. For this group of researchers, literature, film, public imagery, and other media materials were considered equally important (if not more so) to field data gathered on site (Beeman 2000). Furthermore, Mead and her associates (including Benedict) proposed that if anthropologists could not interview native peoples in their own lands due to war and other limiting circumstances, then interviewing overseas residents would be equally profitable for researchers in their attempts to understand that particular culture. Mead, the principal flag-carrier for this approach, called it the study of “culture at a distance” (Banner 2003, 412–14). (Incidentally, anthropologists and other researchers had already employed this method in relation to Japanese and Japanese-American internees incarcerated by the Roosevelt administration during World War II [Ryang 2004, Chapter 1].) Needless to say, “culture at a distance” was to flourish during the Cold War period, revamped and reinforced as national character studies.

Although Mead and Benedict worked closely with each other, the two women did not employ quite the same methods: Mead was more psychologically disposed, whereas Benedict, who was also a poet, enjoyed using literary sources (see Lapsley 2001; Ryang 2004, Chapter 1; Lummis 2007). Due to Benedict’s untimely death in 1948, she did not have the chance to explore the approach that came to be known as “culture at a distance,” as such. Nonetheless, this does not change the fact that she concurred with Mead, Gregory Bateson, Geoffrey
Gorer, and others in her belief that a culture (and the typical personality associated with it) could be studied without the need for on-site ethnographic fieldwork. I pay particularly close attention to Benedict, as her work on Japanese culture, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, stands out as different from other works carried out by scholars in this group. For example, based on interviews with Japanese nationals in the United States and American citizens of Japanese descent (utilizing the “culture at a distance” method), Gorer (1942) concluded that the excessive atrocities committed by Japanese soldiers in occupied territories was due to the strict toilet training to which they had been subjected as infants. Benedict’s work also came out of the wartime enemy studies sponsored by the Office of War Information, but it tried to do something other than label Japan and the Japanese: by utilizing literary and autobiographic sources from Japan’s traditional warrior culture, Benedict (1946) attempted to explain how Japan’s cultural logic allowed one to view a kamikaze bombing mission as the utmost demonstration of honor and dedication to the Emperor.

My aims in this book are not unrelated to those of Benedict in *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* and, for that matter, to the study of “culture at a distance,” in that I, an anthropologist, am studying the cultural logic of a society without conducting fieldwork. I am not, however, seeking to come up with some kind of empirical research manual using literature, broadly understood to include film, radio, novels, stories, textbooks and other media—as attempted by Margaret Mead. Nor am I trying to find out how North Koreans think and act and what kind of typical personality they might have; rather, I propose to abstract the cultural logic that runs through North Korean society as an undercurrent to its human relations. In order to do so, I maintain that the way the North Korean leader is represented to North Koreans provides a crucial key to understanding connections between people in that society. In this regard, literary sources published in North Korea provide us with abundant examples of how such connections are articulated and represented in idealized but also concrete terms.
One particular point to note is that in a society like North Korea, literature is not always produced as a two-way outlet: both as a reflection of social reality and as a constitutive part of that reality. It is, rather, produced on the part of the state apparatus in order to ideologically unify the masses, with the specific intentions of political mobilization and ethos building. Writers are assigned to write certain stories, following designated storylines that are aligned with current policies of the government. As such, it would not be an exaggeration to claim that there are no free writers in North Korea, as their creations occur strictly within the parameters of state control. This is one of the main reasons why my sources are limited.

In this book, I choose to introduce the reader to a total of some fifteen texts that I deem to be of key importance in illuminating the cultural logic that runs through North Korean society. I have selected those out of close to 50 volumes that I surveyed, a number of them being collections of short stories. Although I allude to the existence of so-called key texts, it is difficult to define what makes a particular text key to a society’s cultural logic. In some ways, all texts are key texts in North Korea, since each writer is given a specific task involving the promotion of state policy at a given time. The arena in which writers can compete to show off their literary styles and skills is, accordingly, extremely narrowly defined. Furthermore, in North Korea, those books regarded as politically more important are produced in a collective fashion and do not bear the individual names of their authors. These books are assigned as part of revolutionary education in schools and workplaces. This makes it difficult for researchers to assess their value. Whereas individually authored books allow us to make comparative interpretations, paying attention to the prose and storylines deployed in each example, a collectively produced book is nothing more than the official mouthpiece of the state. This does not mean that individually authored books are less important or less political. Finite and impoverished in quantity and quality as they may be, these too are produced by state-
trained, state-approved writers who write from a position of authority and privilege vis-à-vis ordinary North Koreans. Readers in North Korea are inherently seen as the object of education. As such, we can assume that these books play an important trend-setting role in North Korea’s otherwise rather monotonous and impoverished cultural environment.

Moreover, it is possible to claim that data exists even in the most arid of fields, if we look carefully: propaganda, slogans, official publications, clothing, gait, and even eye movements can be used as data allowing us to gain an understanding of a given society. Indeed, scholars have gone about their work in restricted environments using limited materials yet coming up with insightful research (for example, Whyte 1983 on China). Closely and critically examining North Korean literature—no matter how limited it may be—in this case will yield extra-textual information, approximating what anthropologists would usually call field data. As such, as I hope the reader will understand, this book is not about literature or textuality per se. I will not embark upon analyses of the literary establishment, the politics of literary creation, the publishing mechanism in North Korea, and so on. Rather, I treat literary texts as sources of data—just as Ruth Benedict did in *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*. I rely on literature as a form of textual and archival material that can give us a window through which we may obtain a certain glimpse of North Korean society. My treatment of this body of data is, thus, of an interpretive manner, rather than an empirical or factual one.

**A “Guerrilla State”**

The ideological origins of North Korea, as have been argued by a number of reputable scholars, go back temporally to the period of colonial occupation and rule by the Japanese (1910–1945) and spatially to Manchuria, to what is today northeastern China (Park 2005; Armstrong 2004; Cumings 1981, 1990). Contiguous with the Korean peninsula, Manchuria was a pivotal locale for the Japanese colonial authorities from early on, playing a key role in Japanese economic, political, demographic,
and territorial expansion toward the Asian continent. Japan’s securing of infrastructural hegemony started early with the establishment of the South Manchurian Railway Company in 1906. Its assets increased from 160 million yen shortly after its incorporation to 1 billion yen by 1930. The company’s expansion was accompanied by mass migration of Japanese settlers as well as the construction of military bases, as in the case of the Kwantung Army. These activities culminated in the founding of Manchukuo in 1932 and the restoration of Puyi, the last emperor of Qing-dynasty China, under the rubric of multiracial, multiethnic, and multilingual culture-building. Although such a slogan was firmly rooted in the absolutization of the Japanese emperor as the benefactor of all Asians, unlike in Korea, where colonial rule led to the annexation of the Korean royal family by the Imperial family of Japan through intermarriage, the Japanese project in Manchukuo had a different face from the outset. This was a new kind of endeavor, an adventure, and a speculative investment. Indeed, the Japanese were willing to invest heavily, and they did. Further, its objection to relinquishing this new territory led it to withdraw from the League of Nations in 1932 (Harada 2007; Katō 2007).

As it happened, 1932 was also the year when North Korean history books claim that the anti-Japanese Korean Revolutionary People’s (guerilla) Army was founded in Manchuria by the then twenty-year-old Kim Il Sung. In North Korea’s historiography, the modern era begins with Kim Il Sung’s birth on April 15, 1912, two years after the beginning of Japan’s colonial rule of the peninsula. Kim’s paternal family had moved from southeastern Korea a couple of generations prior to his birth, their clan lineage being the Kims of Andong, a southern family. Kim’s father, Kim Hyeong-Jik, attended a missionary high school, Sungsil School, in Pyongyang. While at Sungsil, sixteen-year-old Kim Hyeong-Jik married eighteen-year-old Kang Ban-Seok, daughter of a prominent local Christian family. The Kangs, Kim’s maternal family, were devoutly Christian and ran a missionary school near Pyongyang. Due to Kim Hyeong-Jik’s involvement in underground political activities of an anti-
Japanese nature, he was arrested and imprisoned in 1918. While in jail, Kim Hyeong-Jik taught himself Oriental herbal medicine and, after his release, embarked on a new career as an herbal doctor. Then, in the early 1920s, Kim Hyeong-Jik, Kang Ban-Seok, and their three young sons migrated to Manchuria.

Seen in this way, Kim Il Sung came from an immigrant family that had been uprooted and displaced on numerous occasions. At the same time, in terms of faith, his family was firmly Christian. The standard North Korean textbook outlining Kim Il Sung’s revolutionary history would always describe an episode in which the twelve-year-old Kim made a solo journey from Manchuria back to the village of his birth in Korea in 1924 in order to “receive a Korean education” at his maternal grandfather’s missionary school. Soon, however, his father’s health deteriorated, and he crossed back over the border in 1926. Given that his maternal grandfather was one of the most prominent church elders in the area and ran a Christian school, how much of his formative education was “Korean” and how much “Christian” is an interesting question. It would suffice to say that from early on, Kim Il Sung’s life was diasporic, nomadic, and in some ways “guerrilla-like” — namely, devoid of a secure base.

Soon after his return to Manchuria, his father died. After briefly attending a Chinese academy and then a large private high school in Jilin, one of the sociocultural centers of Manchuria, he gradually emerged as a notable anti-Japanese activist and then as a guerrilla fighter. Legend has it that when crossing the Yalu River again in 1926, Kim turned back to have one last look at his fatherland and swore never to return to Korea unless the country had achieved independence — another episode involving multiple displacements.

This, in large part, is exactly what happened. Kim’s return to Korea was indeed in October 1945, about two months after the surrender of Japan and the liberation of Korea. During the intervening twenty years, he had lived in various parts of Manchuria, waging guerrilla warfare against the Japanese alongside like-minded men and women, both Chinese and Korean, before
moving to the Soviet Union after 1941 or thereabouts. There, he married Kim Jong Suk, a guerrilla comrade, who gave birth to Kim Jong Il in 1942. Kim Il Sung led a guerrilla-like life struggling against Japanese rule during his entire adulthood prior to the liberation of Korea, and this story helps to explain why Haruki Wada (1992), a leading scholar of Kim Il Sung and of anti-Japanese guerrilla history, has styled North Korea as a “guerrilla state.”

The term “guerrilla state” summarizes the logic upon which the North Korean state was founded and has come to be legitimized. According to North Korea’s foundation myth, Kim Il Sung was the supreme commander of a Korean guerrilla unit that operated independently of the Chinese and the Soviets. The authenticity of Kim’s claim to leadership is derived from his guerrilla warfare against the Japanese. This is not entirely untrue: Kim indeed fought courageously against the Japanese. Whether or not his unit was independent of other units, Chinese, Soviet, or Korean, for example, is a separate question. Furthermore, whether or not Kim Il Sung was so revered by the masses is even less clear. Nevertheless, it is true that Kim Il Sung was widely known in Korea proper: “Kim Il Sung had [… ] a decisive asset. Compared to Choe Yong-Gon, Kim Chaek, and others, who were active in [guerrilla fighting in] northern Manchuria and therefore [… ] hardly known inside Korea proper, Kim Il Sung was most widely known in Korea, because he was active in southern Manchuria and had a record of waging battles in northern Korea” (Wada 1992, 331; my translation). Indeed, in the words of Dae-Sook Suh: “Kim Il Sung was a Korean patriot who gallantly took up arms for his country against the Japanese militarists and can claim a place in the annals of modern Korea for what he accomplished” (1995, xiii).

According to Wada’s research, between 1953 and 1967, individuals that had not been members of Kim Il Sung’s Manchurian guerrilla group (referred to as the “Manchurian faction”) were systematically eliminated from the North Korean political arena. By the time the Fifteenth Assembly of the Cen-
Central Committee of the Workers’ Party of Korea was held in May 1967, the key posts in the party were occupied by Kim’s close battle comrades, all of them Manchurian veterans. This was openly confirmed at the Fifth Congress of the Party in 1970, where Kim Il Sung’s ideas came to dominate North Korean life under the slogan _yuilsasang chegye_, translatable as the “sole ideological system” (Wada 1992, 377–80).

By the 1970s, however, the guerrilla state was beginning to lose the battle—not at the hands of the United States, but as a result of an altogether more banal and inevitable phenomenon: aging. Key leaders, including the top military commander and veteran anti-Japanese guerrilla fighter, Choe Yong-Gon, had died by the mid-1970s and Kim Il Sung himself, much younger than the others, turned 60 in 1972. It was during the 1970s and 1980s that what I call the notion of Kim Il Sung the sovereign and the sacred, no longer simply Kim Il Sung the great man, began to emerge. This was a topological shift of Kim’s existence.

_A Sovereign Being_

During the two decades of the 1970s and 1980s, Kim Il Sung was enshrined as sovereign. While he was routinely referred to as the Leader (or more precisely, the Great Leader), during these decades he was beginning to be viewed no longer as a man or even as a human. This does not mean that he was therefore seen exclusively as a deity, since he was not conceived as someone who belonged only to a higher, normally unreachable, and immaterial realm. He was, rather, understood to be a form of existence that is untouchable, yet ubiquitous, an entity that exists for its own sake, its very nature filled with love and wisdom. It was also believed that because of this very nature, this entity, whether intended or not, would act as the foundation of society and that, in its name, people would commit themselves to extreme causes and acts.

During the 1970s and 1980s, through lifelong normative immersion in an environment filled with admiration and gratitude for Kim Il Sung, North Koreans acquired a form of self-
identification that was in unison with ideas of/about Kim that, at the same time, always involved placing themselves in a lesser, subordinate capacity to that of Kim. Seen from the outside world, the way in which North Koreans relate to Kim Il Sung is one of the most—if not the most—enigmatic aspects of North Korean society. Defectors’ tales are replete with recollections of how North Koreans are indoctrinated, from early childhood, into thinking of the Great Leader as a being that loves them unfailingly and also as an object of their deepest love (see Kang 2004). As the title of Barbara Demick’s book on North Korea would have it, children grow up singing songs expressing deep gratitude to Kim Il Sung for his love and care and declaring that they have “nothing to envy” in the entire human world (Demick 2009). This over-the-top rhetoric incorporates a sober form of logic if we understand the mechanism connecting Kim Il Sung with North Korean individuals.

Here I am not alluding to a forceful, terror-inducing system of threats and punishments, despite the fact that references to such an environment are typically included in the tales of defectors—and indeed with good reason. Rather, I am trying to look at the ideological mechanism that enables North Koreans to be proud of being the recipients of Kim Il Sung’s leadership. According to this way of thinking, individuals owe their lives to this entity, the leadership, not simply in a spiritual way, but in a comprehensive manner extending, for example, to the bodily, material, social, and familial aspects of their lives. As such, this entity presides over every dimension of society. Whether this entity is man, woman, or child no longer matters. For, it is around the position or locus of the leadership that the fabric of social relations between members of society has come to be woven.

Is this entity a symbol of North Korean society? The answer is only partially affirmative. The leadership is in some ways too awe-inspiring and sacred to be casually replicated, due to the fear of being considered an impostor, despite one’s actual intentions. On the other hand, a metaphorical or metonymical piece of this entity is to be carried by everyone everywhere at
all times, as it is imperative that people should be able to feel constant proximity or spiritual contact with this sacred being. It was no coincidence that during the late 1970s and early 1980s it became the rule for all North Koreans to wear Kim Il Sung badges (with different designs according to one’s rank) on all public occasions, positioned on the left-hand side of the chest, close to the heart. His portrait penetrated every household, school classroom, workplace, office, public building, and square. Naturally, the intervention of a regulatory body is required in order for the measured distribution of such tokens to take place. Thus, in North Korea, the nation-state and its various apparatuses together play a pivotal role in disseminating Kim Il Sung’s ideas and words, also producing officially-sanctioned portraits of the Great Leader (in all sizes, filling gigantic tapestries as well as miniature lapel pins).

Unlike in the case of God in the context of Protestantism, one cannot claim to have Kim Il Sung inside one’s mind and thereby “privatize” him, so to speak. There is no such a thing as having one’s own personal Kim Il Sung, as opposed to the Protestant proclivity for holding one’s belief in God in the most personal and private part of one’s heart. Kim Il Sung is a national sovereign and his existence is inseparable from the collectivity of the North Korean nation. But, unlike royal state figureheads (as in Britain or Japan, for example), whom everyone reveres but does not learn from or understand, Kim Il Sung is believed, emulated, and upheld as a virtuous role model.

As such, there is a certain religiosity in the relationship between North Koreans and the entity called Kim Il Sung. Yet, this religiosity differs from the situation in the United Kingdom, where Queen Elizabeth II is also head of the Church of England. Everyone in Britain understands that she holds the highest nominal position in the church, but no one worships her in lieu of God. In this sense, the Queen is a mere office-holder. Kim Il Sung, on the other hand, has no church or church-like assemblies or establishments, but his existence itself is the object of worship, while he is seen as the utmost
form of existence that every North Korean is supposed to emulate (although everyone at the same time knows that it would not be possible to do so). He is a truly self-sufficient being, a sovereign being.

I proposed earlier that a topological shift occurred with respect to Kim Il Sung’s position in North Korea during the 1970s and 1980s. Before, as can be seen in Wada’s view, Kim Il Sung was a man, a great man, a military strategist, a leader, a political visionary, and a national hero. As such, if he were to die, he would be mourned, but it would be understood that when he was dead, he would be truly dead and gone. After the 1980s, however, Kim Il Sung came to be viewed somewhat differently, as a being that does not die and lives forever. This would be the case even after Kim Il Sung the mortal dies—as indeed happened in North Korea, but not simply because his body was embalmed and artificially preserved.

Before, Kim was not only revered, but also expected to possess and display certain attributes, gifts, and skills, such as theoretical rigor, linguistic ability, political farsightedness, and other examples of technical finesse, aside from showing his characteristic benevolence and warmth. As such, Kim had to perform certain duties in return for the respect accorded him by the people. But, after the topological shift that I am proposing to investigate, Kim became an entity of which almost nothing came to be expected. In other words, his existence itself represented meaning, purpose, and an end in itself. Thus, he simply had to exist—this is precisely the notion of the sovereign proposed by Georges Bataille (1993).

Bataille’s exploration of the sovereign emphasizes his capacity to pursue consumption for the sake of consumption, pleasure for the sake of pleasure. He does not produce and does not consume as a reward for production. He does not love others—does not find worth in others—and loves only himself. He is not bound by necessity. He lives in excess. He lives for the sake of living, not for the sake of achieving a set of goals. His life itself is the end, not a means (1993, 178–79). And it is on this point of understanding Kim Il Sung as sov-
ereign that I part from the currently pervasive understanding in South Korea and the United States of North Korea as a neo-Confucian state with Kim Il Sung as its ancestral founder—as I shall argue below. What I mean here will be more clearly understood by turning to Kim Il Sung after his death.

A Perpetual Ritual State

In July 1994, just a few days before his scheduled second meeting with former U.S. President Jimmy Carter, the news of Kim Il Sung’s death took the world by surprise. At 82, he was well advanced in years. But, as he had not been known to the outside world as having been suffering from any serious conditions or illnesses of note, rumors inevitably followed. Whether Kim Il Sung was assassinated or not is neither my concern nor within the scope of this study. More interesting is what followed Kim’s death, notably, the situation I call a “perpetual ritual state.”

As mentioned, Kim Il Sung’s body is preserved and exhibited for regulated public display. An expansive structure named Geumsusan Memorial Palace was built for the purpose of housing Kim Il Sung’s relics as he used them while he was alive: the limousine in which he was chauffeured around, his desk with the desktop stationery arranged exactly as he left it, the train carriage that was reserved for his travel, his uniforms and other items of clothing, his books, his notebooks containing his handwritten notes, his eyeglasses, fountain pens, hats, shoes, gloves, and so on. North Koreans are given the “privilege” of visiting this palace as a reward for hard work and devotion. Every day, group tours visit the palace, forming long lines, proceeding in a slow, orderly, yet emotionally overwhelmed manner through rooms and halls filled with serene music. At a glance, this ritual of mourning appears to go on literally forever in the scheme of the North Korean concept of remembering Kim Il Sung.

But what separates North Korean practice from the usual mortuary rites is that these individuals would have approached their leader in a similar manner—solemn yet emo-
tional, overwhelmed with awe—even while he was alive, and as such, rather than simply being remembered, Kim Il Sung is perceived as still being there with them. Indeed, in state discourse, the Great Leader or suryeong never dies, and neither does his preserved body. It concurs with the slogan adopted by the North Korean state shortly after Kim’s death: Widaehan suryeongnimeun yeongwonhi uriwa hamkke or “The Great Leader lives eternally with us.” Accordingly, the state has designated Kim as Eternal President. This event is worthy of note, as it follows that the tenure of the office of president was made permanent along with Kim’s life itself—in other words, that his death has earned him eternal life.

With this inversion (the Great Leader’s death being an eternal life), North Korea entered an ongoing ritual for celebration: rather than mourning Kim’s finished life in what Heonik Kwon (2010) characterizes as “national bereavement,” North Korea is celebrating Kim’s eternal life, granted by way of death. No matter how many people are starving, the million-strong Arirang mass games go on. The capital Pyongyang is filled with lesser versions of Arirang, held indoors and outdoors, all year long. Men and women, old and young, participate in parades, dance nights, and festive evenings of song and music. People stay after hours at their places of work to practice repertoires and dance steps, choruses and rounds, in order to participate in such events. Enormous amounts of time, energy, funds, and human effort have continued to be expended on a wide spectrum of activities and large-scale mass celebrations following Kim Il Sung’s death.

Diverse genres of performance art are unified by themes depicting the epic history of North Korea, beginning with the birth of the Great Leader and ending with his eternal life. In between, there are depictions of his early anti-Japanese activities, his guerrilla warfare and postcolonial leadership, the military and political victory in the Korean War, the period of post–Korean War economic and social reconstruction, the consolidation of his ideological corpus under the keyword juche (“self-reliance”; see below), and so on.
North Korea’s perpetual ritual state today would be better understood in terms of the dual morphology portrayed by French ethnologist Marcel Mauss, whose interpretation of the circumpolar life cycle of the arctic Eskimo led him to conclude that Eskimo life was divided into two radically opposed seasonal forms. During summer, when game was plentiful, the collection and consumption of food was carried out with each family making up one unit. Families gathered and consumed food separately and there was no need to distribute game beyond immediate household boundaries. Scattered in their family tents, members of the village only rarely gathered in one place.

In wintertime, life took on the form of a collective, extended ritual. More precisely, life was saturated by ritual. Whereas summer rituals were reduced to a simple and cursory format, in winter, even small events were loftily celebrated, and the smallest transgression thoroughly cleansed. Longhouses accommodating multiple families (which Mauss suspected as sharing kinship relations) were built, with a cluster of such longhouses forming a settlement. Typically, each settlement would contain a large assembly house where villagers frequently gathered. Sheltered from severe weather and sub-zero temperatures, they spent their time engaged in fiestas, plays, and rituals. Often, couples exchanged partners during this period, although the exact details of the patterns and principles involved are not known. As such, winter life presupposed different kinship relations, reproductive arrangements, and (economic) units of consumption, to those found during summer. Mauss (1979) termed these two forms of Eskimo life a “dual morphology.”

Turning to North Korea, we can see that the current continual staging of mass games and performances resembles the winter life of the Eskimo. Life involves engaging in mass ceremonies. In this space of ongoing ritual, non-ritual or ordinary social relations are suspended. Rather than remaining bound by this-worldly relations such as kinship and marriage, individuals, as participants in ritual, assume close and direct
relations with gods or a sacred being. In North Korea in the aftermath of the death of Kim Il Sung, the supreme social relationship in society came to be unequivocally designated as that connecting the individual with the Great Leader. According to this schema, no other connection should interfere with this connection, and no form of social relationship should stand between the two parties.

As such, I am in fundamental disagreement with the proposition that North Korea is a neo-Confucian state, tending to explain its social relations in terms of kinship with Kim Il Sung as the national ancestor (Kwon 2010; Kang 2001). Certainly, Kim Il Sung was referred to as Father Marshal, abeoji wonsunim, until Kim Jong Il came to take the term father, as in Father General, abeoji janggunnim. Kim Il Sung is more often referred to as eobeoi suryeong, the leader that is both father and mother to people. These terms appear to pertain to the realm of kinship. But that does not warrant Kim’s positioning as the national ancestor. For one thing, this characterization is overly logocentric. Moreover, if we look at the system of traditional Korean kinship relations, in what way could a father be the ancestor of the nation? According to Korean tradition, the (male) members of the entire lineage are collectively related to the ancestor. And, importantly, each lineage is independent and, therefore, unrelated. Thus, men (traditionally, women were disenfranchised) had to pledge dual loyalty toward the ancestor on one hand and the monarch on the other. It was only in the case of members of the royal family that the seat of loyalty coincided: in relation to both the father/ancestor and the king. Furthermore, as I will show in the following pages, ideas such as “family” or “collective” are not very helpful in understanding social relations in North Korea and the relationship that North Koreans have with Kim Il Sung, the sacred: North Koreans are each alone in their relationships with Kim (see Chapter 3 of this volume). Introducing the notion of Confucianism, in my view, not only muddies the waters here, but also shows a misunderstanding of the core nature of relations between the North Korean people and their leader (see the Conclusion of this volume).
Two Crucial Decades

How was a society such as today’s North Korea formed? This state of affairs did not come into being overnight. In my view, a reasonable amount of preparation took place during the 1970s and 1980s, although there was a notable shift in emphasis between these two decades. It was during this period that Kim Il Sung was transformed from a theoretico-ideological leader into an ethico-spiritual one. It was also during these years that Kim Il Sung came to be viewed as the center of people’s souls rather than as the focus of their ideological identification as North Koreans. Let me offer a few examples in order to substantiate this claim.

We have seen that it was at the Fifth Congress of the Workers’ Party of Korea in 1970 that North Korea came to uphold yuilsasang chegye, Kim Il Sung’s sole ideological system of ideas, otherwise known as juche (Cheung 2000). This concept insists that the destiny of the nation lies in the hands of its own people, and hence places the utmost emphasis on political independence, economic self-reliance, and military self-defense. During the early 1970s, North Koreans were made to memorize the works of Kim Il Sung (including public speeches, committee reports, and so on) by heart, word-for-word. This period also saw absolute logocentrism established in relation to Kim Il Sung’s very existence itself. All public self-criticism sessions, the standard form of ideological training in North Korea, were required to be opened with correct and exact quotations from Kim Il Sung’s published works. One was required to avoid even the slightest misquote, as this would be seen as evidence of insufficient or false loyalty towards the Great Leader. Men and women avidly studied Kim’s teachings, memorizing hundreds of pages, including speeches, annual New Year’s greetings, and entire party congress reports. Perfect memorization was rewarded with public recognition in addition to the awarding of prizes and medals.

From around the late 1970s through to the time of Kim Il Sung’s 70th birthday in 1982, however, this national passion quietly faded away. No longer did North Koreans engage in
exact reproductions of the utterances and writings of Kim Il Sung as if they were mantras, and the practice of quoting his teachings verbatim was dropped from self-criticism sessions. Instead, more artistic and iconoclastic methods of representing and disseminating Kim Il Sung’s image became the norm. As I shall show in the chapters to follow, this can be seen in literary works produced in the 1970s and 1980s. Unlike in the 1960s, when mainstream literature in North Korea was dominated by autobiographies and memoirs of former anti-Japanese guerrilla fighters, with Kim Il Sung depicted as a fellow fighter or comrade, the 1970s and 1980s saw an increase in the number of novels being published, and this genre becoming the major object of leisure consumption as well as voluntary self-education. Similarly, the 1980s saw an increase in the number of feature films produced, together with the expanded use of performance art, such as musicals.

This trend can, in part, be ascribed to the aging of the leadership. Kim Il Sung delivered a massive quantity of reports and speeches right up until his 70s. After entering old age, however, there was a reduction in the number of speeches and written works he produced, and accordingly a fall in the number published. Similarly, as noted earlier, former participants in anti-Japanese guerrilla warfare were dying out by the end of the 1970s.

Simultaneously, and in some ways more importantly, it was during the late 1970s and early 1980s that Kim Jong Il began to display real power in the political arena. His artistic proclivity, particularly his visual and sensory-oriented approach (through dance and film, for example; see Kim Jong Il 1992), contrasting with the previous logocentric approach aimed at disseminating Kim Il Sung’s teachings through an emphasis on reading and memorizing, appears to have played a key role in shift of Kim Il Sung’s image in North Korea from sagacious to benevolent, theoretical to ethical, and ideological to spiritual.

Needless to say, both representations of Kim Il Sung existed in North Korea from the outset, long before the 1970s. Kim was referred to as warm, virtuous, and loving toward people,
while at the same time wise, knowledgeable, politically experienced, and so on. The shift, therefore, was rather subtle. Nevertheless, it was an important transformation. In the 1980s, unlike in the late 1960s and early 1970s, people no longer had to intellectually understand Kim Il Sung, speaking his words and reproducing his teachings in public. It became more important to sense or feel Kim Il Sung’s potency. Accordingly, his original theoretico-ideological formula, *juche*, came to assume a different form. Previously, everyone had been supposed to study *juche*, reading about it, memorizing its theory, and becoming familiar with its standard vocabulary. In the 1980s, it became more important for people to be able to competently perform songs from feature movies and reproduce catchall phrases and slogans in public—in other words, North Koreans became more performance oriented. Previously, citizens had spent hours reading and memorizing the works of Kim Il Sung, but from the 1980s, they came to spend more time practicing dance steps for public performances and goose steps for parades.

The 1980s saw another important change in the environment, this time explicitly concerning North Korea’s relationship with Koreans living in Japan. A substantial number of overseas Koreans in Japan had supported North Korea from the very early days of the expatriate movement immediately following World War II, when the peninsula came to be divided into two opposing camps. At the time of Japan’s surrender to Allied forces in August 1945, there were said to be about 2.4 million Koreans living in Japan. Most of them had moved to Japan after the outbreak of the Pacific War due to wartime economic demand in Japan proper. Many among them were brought to Japan against their will, while others semi-voluntarily opted to move to Japan in order to gain a better livelihood. For the majority of Koreans in both groups, however, once the war was over, their sources of income vanished, precipitating them to be repatriated to the Korean peninsula. Although this took place in a rushed and haphazard manner due to the insufficient provision of repatriation facilities by the Allied forces then occupying
Japan as well as the Japanese authorities, by 1946, the number of Koreans living in Japan had fallen to approximately 600,000 (Ryang 1997, 80).

From early on, Koreans remaining in their former colonial metropolis were starkly divided into two camps, each respectively supporting North and South. For many decades following the partition of Korea, the former group benefited from a mass support base and effective ideological apparatuses. These included the organizational network known as Chongryun, the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan, and a network of Korean ethnic schools. Chongryun members proclaimed themselves to be overseas citizens of North Korea, despite the fact that the majority of its followers originated from southern provinces of Korean peninsula that were now incorporated into South Korea.

Reflecting the tensions of the Cold War era, the treatment afforded Chongryun-affiliated Koreans by the Japanese government consisted of civil and political deprivation. Not until the early 1980s did this population have any form of permanent residence in Japan. This was in contrast with those Koreans in Japan who pledged loyalty to South Korea by applying for South Korean nationality in the midst of Cold War tensions; the latter were able to obtain permanent residence in Japan from 1965.

Early in 1959, as a result of negotiations between the Japanese and North Korean Red Cross organizations, and with the active assistance of the International Committee of the Red Cross, Japan and North Korea opened up a one-way repatriation route to North Korea for Koreans in Japan (Morris-Suzuki 2007). Repatriation was on a strictly voluntary basis, but once an individual had left Japan, he or she was not allowed to reverse their decision. This was because Koreans in Japan had no such civil rights in Japan at the time and Japan and North Korea did not have formal diplomatic relations (a situation that continues to the present day). A pro-repatriation campaign run by Chongryun combined with the enthusiastic maneuverings of a Japanese government eager to rid the country of Koreans
led to a total of about 90,000 Koreans choosing to be relocated to North Korea from the 1960s through to the mid 1970s, never to return to Japan (Ryang 1997, 113–15; Ryang 2000). This number included a diverse range of people—from families impoverished to wealthy and politically dedicated; from children abandoned and orphaned to well-provided and gifted—all sharing one common fate: they would never return to Japan. Families and friends left behind in Japan consequently had to give up any hope of ever seeing them again—until the day when Korea would be reunified through the initiative of North Korea, or so they believed.

The granting of permanent residence to Koreans in Japan in the early 1980s was one of many legal reforms implemented by the Japanese government due to its ratification of the International Covenants on Human Rights in 1979. With permanent resident status, most Koreans in Japan (and not just those who supported South Korea) were now eligible to apply for re-entry permits to Japan. This enabled the families of those who had earlier chosen to be repatriated to North Korea to visit their long-lost kin there. Ordinary citizens of Japan are prohibited from visiting North Korea, but in 1981 the Japanese government began permitting such visits (and re-entry to Japan) for the Korean families and relatives of repatriates based on humanitarian principles, the same argument deployed in 1959 when originally opening up the repatriation route (Ryang 2008, Chapter 3).

The post-1981 visits to North Korea by Koreans living in Japan were, in many senses, groundbreaking. Initially, they greeted the opportunity to make such journeys with great enthusiasm, believing that finally they would be able to actually see their political fatherland with their own eyes. Furthermore, for many, it offered the chance to be reunited with their repatriated family members and relatives for the first time in decades. On multiple levels, therefore, the initial visits were emotionally overwhelming. But soon, it became clear in the eyes of the visitors from Japan that North Korea was not exactly “a paradise on earth,” as the propaganda would have it.
In the face of the dire needs of their repatriated family members, families in Japan began avidly sending Japanese-made goods and cash. On the other hand, with the involvement of Korean entrepreneurs in Japan, trade between Japan and North Korea expanded in a covert fashion, the so-called repatriation route now transformed into an active channel for the flow of goods, cash, and humans between the shores of Japan and North Korea. The pro-North Korea Chongryun also took advantage of this opening, building its own facilities on North Korean soil for the re-education of its cadres, in addition to hotels for Korean tourists from Japan.

It was via this channel that, from around the early 1980s, stores for the North Korean cadre began filling up with Japanese-made goods, including electrical appliances, entertainment systems, luxury items, and precious goods. While this marked a real beginning in the nation’s opening up to the outside world, albeit in an unconventional and restricted way, it was also true that, for North Koreans at large, this window of contact with Japanese products engendered much envy, desire, and frustration, in some ways necessitating more effective population control by way of restriction on one hand, and on the other, enabling North Korean authorities to be able to materially reward model citizens by giving them limited access to the Japan-made products and advantageous service-sector positions dealing with visitors from Japan. Unlike most of Pyongyang citizens who were subjected to compulsory Friday labor or keumyordong (weekly all-day field labor on Fridays), waitresses and cleaners in the newly-opened hotels for Chongryun visitors from Japan were exempt from this chore—they were selected on the basis of pedigree as well as good behavior and achievement. The massive flow of visitors and goods from Japan starting from the early 1980s was represented in North Korea as a reflection of the fervent loyalty of Koreans in Japan for the Great Leader. Indeed, upon Kim Il Sung’s 60th birthday in 1972, it is said that Chongryun collected a total of 5 billion yen from Korean residents in Japan (Matsubara and Tokita 2007), which was turned into gifts for Kim,
including Mercedes-Benz automobiles, color television sets, various kinds of industrial machinery, home electrical appliances, trucks, bulldozers, excavators, agricultural machinery, an assortment of Japanese and other foreign luxury goods, jewelry, silk, delicacies, and even foodstuffs such as abalone and the famed Koshihikari rice (from Niigata prefecture).

The Emergence of Kim Jong Il

The 1980s were also important in the advancement of Kim Jong Il as the nation’s new leader. The differences between Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il are numerous—as in any comparison of father and son. Four points are perhaps most noteworthy: Kim Il Sung’s diasporic and uprooted upbringing as opposed to Kim Jong Il’s sheltered and protected one; the former’s Christian-influenced formative years contrasted with the latter’s secular, Soviet-influenced infancy; the former’s military experience and the fact that he genuinely risked his life for his nation and the latter’s lack of such a personal history of publicly displayed bravery; the former’s intellectual rigor and his copious literary production and the latter’s visual, artistic, and sensory orientation.

Kim Jong Il was born in 1942. There are contradicting theories regarding his birthplace—whether it was in the former Soviet Union or on Mount Baekdu in the northern border region, the locale now associated with the sacred imagery of the guerrilla battles against the Japanese. According to today’s North Korean political mythology, Kim Jong Il’s childhood was filled with virtuous episodes and noble sagas. Basically, however, he had an extremely secluded, protected, and comfortable childhood, far out of touch with reality, to say the least. He was educated at a select boarding school in Switzerland, lavished with exquisite items from Europe, Japan, and the United States, and generally not given any kind of discipline. I do not, however, suggest that he was responsible for this upbringing—there are more than a few world leaders who are completely out of touch with the day-to-day realities of their own peoples. My point is simply that he did not earn his current position
of leadership by his own efforts or as a result of his elevation to such a position by his comrades, as was the case with his father, but was accorded his position entirely due to the fact that he was the first-born son of Kim Il Sung.

After graduating from Kim Il Sung University in 1964, Kim Jong Il emerged as a key player during the 1970s, especially in the field of artistic production. Politically speaking, however, it was during the 1980s that Kim Jong Il was given positions of national importance: during this decade he was appointed to the Politburo, the military commission, and the secretariat of the Workers’ Party of Korea. In 1982, he was made a member of the Seventh People’s Assembly, and in 1991 made supreme commander of the North Korean military. It was during these years that Kim Jong Il began putting his name on what were seen as important œuvres on the principles of *juche* (Kim Jong Il 1982, 1984, 1985). The period from 1980 to 1991 saw the steady emergence of Kim Jong Il, firstly as heir apparent, then as heir designate, and finally the only living heir of the now deceased Great Leader. (As stated earlier, however, since Kim Il Sung was declared Eternal President after his death in 1994, Kim Jong Il is not the North Korean president.)

In the 1980s Kim Jong Il was involved in the production of innovative new movies, as well as the development of new musical genres and performing arts in North Korea, and it is no coincidence that the aforementioned shift in emphasis from a logocentric to a sensory-oriented relationship with the leadership took place. As feelings replaced logic in North Korea’s public discourse, the arts, and especially the performing arts, took on a distinctly different meaning for North Koreans.

At the same time, this was also the period when North Korea came to be associated with or suspected of involvement in a series of high-profile abductions and terrorist attacks. In 1978, influential South Korean director Sin Sang-ok and his wife, leading actress Choe Eun-Hui, were captured and taken to the North, where they were held until 1986. In 2002, it was confirmed that North Korea had kidnapped a large number of citizens of Japan from its shores during the late 1970s and
early 1980s. North Korea was later implicated in the 1983 Rangoon bombing, in which many South Korean dignitaries were killed, as well as the bombing of Korean Air Lines Flight 858 in 1987. The first case noted above is of particular interest in the context of this discussion, as it was said that the abduction of Sin and Choe was carried out upon a directive from Kim Jong Il himself. Indeed, it is said that he planned to set up a world-class film industry in North Korea, and that he had decided that bringing in Sin and Choe would boost such efforts. Regardless of the authenticity of this story, it is true that the 1980s were boom days for North Korean films—with diverse storylines, sophisticated character construction, substantial budgets, and popular success (Choe and Sin 1988).

The world professes to know little about this reclusive and unconventional leader. It has been said that he is “amazingly well-informed and extremely well-read” and “can talk about almost any subject” (Cumings 2004, 47), is ignorant and awkward with people, has a bad temper, loves shooting and hunting, and is overweight while his nation is gripped by famine (Oh and Hassig 2000, 92–93). He is also said to be a debauched womanizer with multiple mistresses, one of whom lives in Japan with his secret daughter and visits him with the daughter every year (“Kim Jong Il’s Mistress” 2009). Further, he is said to possess a “shining ability to look toward the future” and a “sense of mission that enables him to be thoroughly responsible for the fatherland and the revolution” (“Widaehan” 2009), in addition to having “outstanding political ability,” “extraordinarily ideological and theoretical brilliance,” and the “highest human virtue” (“Keullodanchedeureseo” 2009).

Who Kim Jong Il truly is and what he is really like, in my view, are not as important as where he stands in the overall cosmological scheme of North Korean society. My concern is not about his position in the government, the party, or the military; rather, my focus lies in the symbolic topography of leadership in North Korea. How Kim Jong Il is related, in terms of his position or placement, to the Eternal President, his father Kim Il Sung, is therefore of primary interest to me.
in the context of this work. If Kim Il Sung’s death “froze” the office of presidency, does it then follow that North Korea is to be eternally ruled by a dead man? And, if so, what is the positional value of Kim Jong Il? While I do not claim to have answer to these questions, I believe looking at 1980s literature in North Korea might give us an interesting clue.

Kim Il Sung, the Eternal President

Kim Il Sung is the fourth and most recent world leader to have his body embalmed for preservation and public exhibition—following Lenin, Ho Chi Minh, and Mao Zedong. The embalming and eternalizing of a leader’s body is, in my view, of great significance, as it fundamentally alters the corporeality of the sovereign. In thinking about this issue, it might be helpful to consider a debate that raged among lawyers in Tudor England. According to the Tudor English judges, the king had two bodies—the body natural and the body politic. The latter, often also referred to using the term “mystical body” (Kantorowicz 1957, 15), is seen as knowing no infancy, old age, imbecility, or disability, and it never dies (Kantorowicz 1957, 7–14). Thus, even though the king’s natural body is dead, his politico-mystical body does not die—it lives forever. This parallels to some degree Tibetan thinking as it relates to the Dalai Lama: after the body in which the Dalai Lama’s soul has been residing ceases to breathe, his soul travels in order to reincarnate in another person’s body. Thus, the holiness represented by the Dalai Lama never dies.

On the other hand, the embalmed body of the king (the king’s body natural) does not die either. Its organs and cells may cease to function, but the body (if not the life) continues to exist. Embalming resembles mummification, in that in both cases, the eternity of life is encapsulated in the body—a physical, material, corporeal entity—as opposed to an immaterial entity, such as the soul. Since ancient times, humans have viewed body and soul in separation, particularly at the time of death. In ancient Japan, when someone died, the bereaved sponsored a ritual called tamagoi, meaning “begging for the
soul.” This ritual reflected the idea that death meant the departure of the soul from the body and that, therefore, by beckoning the soul back to the body, the dead would come back to life (Ryang 2006, Chapter 1). Mummification has been a source of human fascination since ancient times. Death took a person’s soul away, but as long as the body was preserved, it was believed, the dead would be brought back to life some day. As such, even though the body’s functions might have ceased, preserving it carried significance, as no dead person could be revived without a body to which to return. The body natural of the dead, thus, did not die at all times in history, just as the body politic or mystic body of the Tudor monarchs never died either.

It was the ancient Egyptians who nearly perfected mummification techniques (Pettigrew 1834), in the belief that life went on after death, albeit in a different form. As such, death was a transition from one form of life to another. In China, historically, a dead parent’s body was kept in a coffin and placed in a quiet and cool part of the family dwelling for years, this being deemed the utmost form of completion of the duty of filial piety (Pettigrew 1834, 19–20). While this may not strictly imply eternity of life, its end was not clearly marked, either. Indeed, even today, many cultures do not view death clearly as the end of life. Even in our secular, late-capitalistic contemplations, death more often than not presupposes continuity rather than discontinuity.

In North Korea, Kim Il Sung is revered as an exceptionally supreme and sacrosanct being. It is also true, however, that every individual aspires not only to be loyal and dedicated, but also to be close to him, in the belief that such an effort will earn that person eternal life, or more precisely, eternal political life. Death that occurs while dedicating oneself to the Great Leader or suryeong is, in other words, equivalent to eternal life. In this sense, Kim Il Sung’s embalmed body, as it were, is a reminder of this mechanism: since Kim Il Sung never dies—not only in terms of body politic but also body natural—dedication and loyalty toward him need also to remain eternal. As such,
his embalmed body is not a mere symbol, but an actual and ma-
terial reminder of the necessity for eternal and endless loyalty. Thus, Kim Il Sung alone is eternally the president and not even his biological first-born son can replace him. Let me reiterate: Kim Jong Il the *ryeongdoja* (the Leader) can be replaced, but Kim Il Sung the *suryeong* (the Great Leader) is irreplaceable.

This brings us to the question of the positionality of Kim Jong Il. His father is not replaceable, but he is, and his succes-
sor may or may not be his own son or kin. Despite his current position of authority, he can be replaced, as the distinction be-
tween Kim Jong Il’s body politic and body natural is more easily discerned when compared with Kim Il Sung. In other words, his body natural (unlike that of Kim Il Sung) will die when he dies, while the exact whereabouts of his body politic is not clear as long as his father presides over North Korea as the one and only Eternal President.

On December 18, 2011, Kim Jong Il was announced dead. In the ensuing national funeral ceremonies, Kim Jong Un, the youngest son, was referred to as the leader who has embodied Kim Jong Il’s ideas and guts. Born in 1984 to Kim Jong Il and his now deceased mistress Ko Yeong-Hui, who was repatriated from Japan to North Korea during the 1960s and became a top dancer, he is only in his late 20s. The youngest Kim did not deliver a speech at the state funeral, following his father’s precedent; Kim Jong Il did not speak at Kim Il Sung’s funeral in 1994. What was striking in Kim Jong Un’s public appear-
ance was that a deliberate effort was made to approximate Kim Jong Un with Kim Il Sung, rather than Kim Jong Il, as far as his presentation was concerned. Jong Un wore a dark *inminbok*, a Mao-inspired suit jacket, which his grandfather favored, rather than his father’s signature zip-up jacket. His hairdo was modeled after the young Kim Il Sung’s photo taken at the welcome rally for him in Pyongyang in October 1945, when Kim Il Sung was 32 years old. It will be interesting to observe how this young man with virtually zero credentials will hold up during these times of stress in North Korea and in the future. One thing is clear: like his father, Kim Jong Un will
never be suryeong, the Great Leader, as this title is reserved solely for the Eternal President Kim Il Sung.

**Chapters**

As mentioned, the main body of this book consists of three chapters, each exploring one aspect of North Korean society and each based on a particular theme: love, war, and self. Across these chapters, I introduce, analyze, and interpret about fifteen North Korean novels published during the 1970s and 1980s. While each chapter pursues different sets of inquiries, their three themes are closely interconnected. Chapter 1, “Love,” looks at how the concept and discourse of love became a pivotal element in the ethos of North Korea during the 1970s and 1980s. Sensory reactions, such as tears, trembling, excitement, heightened voices, and other non- or extra-linguistic forms of bodily behavior often depicted in 1980s literature in situations where individuals were receiving the overwhelming love of the Great Leader are, in fact, reflections as well as constitutive parts of a highly disciplinary regimentation of “love education” implemented from a very early age. The language of love, as clustered around Kim Il Sung, is interpreted and analyzed by using a selection of literary products that circulated in North Korea during the 1970s and 1980s. Inspired by Simone Weil’s notion of love, I will inquire as to how love can be so useful, yet so burdened by semantic complexity. Consequently, I will also look at the need to adjust or simplify this complexity in a society like North Korea with respect to the way individuals are connected to the leader.

Chapter 2, “War,” looks at the consistency and constancy of the discourse of war at the core of North Korea’s national and political identity. Ever since the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950, North Korea has maintained that it has never ceased to be at war—with the United States. A state of emergency declared during the Korean War has thus become a normal condition of existence in North Korea (Armstrong 2009). As I shall also argue, a peculiar ethos has emerged as a result of North Korea’s ongoing self-identification as a nation at war.
Drawing on the works of Giorgio Agamben, I will explore how the state of emergency becomes a core element in North Korea, acting as an important adhesive between the people and their leader. This state of affairs did not, however, arise overnight. By comparing selected short stories published from the early 1950s (during the Korean War) through to the 1970s, we can see that the emergence of this emergency consciousness (so to speak) in North Korea actually postdates the ceasefire of 1953, becoming consolidated in the 1970s and 1980s.

Chapter 3, “Self,” addresses a question that can be applied to all of the chapters of this book, since the notion of self—its transition and transformation—encapsulates the development of North Korea itself before, during, and after the 1970s and 1980s. In this chapter, I focus on the way in which the self, or more precisely, the language of the self, paradoxically exists outside of the self. It belongs with the sacred being—in the case of North Korea, the Great Leader. This does not mean that the self does not exist or is irrelevant in North Korea. In contrast with the commonly held assumption that the self is subsumed in totalitarian societies, erased in the name of the collectivity, the self in North Korea has become an extremely important element in securing the continuity of this society.

Using Michel Foucault’s notion of care for the self as a starting point, I shall discuss how the self came to play such an important role in North Korea, as it is care for the self that enables North Koreans to be positively connected to their leader.

In the Conclusion, “On the Social and the Political,” I will look at the way in which the social and the political overlap in North Korea, and inquire as to whether this is an important aspect of what we understand to be totalitarianism. In today’s world, characterized as it is by diverse forms of state intervention, whether it be in relation to disaster recovery, home loans, the “war on terror,” or border controls, hitherto clear-cut differences between totalitarian and liberal-democratic states have become far more difficult to establish. Unlike during the era when Hannah Arendt (1974) wrote on totalitarianism with Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union in mind, we no
longer have a clear understanding of an uncontrollable desire to enter into fusion with a particular political movement as evil. Here and there in the world today (including in the so-called free world and democratic societies), we can find individuals and groups committed to radical movements and causes—whether they be South American guerrillas, Islamic extremists, or American religious fundamentalists. In the face of what appears to be an excess of the political, an intellectual reconfiguration becomes necessary in order to understand, or at least achieve a satisfactory interpretation of, the very notion of the political. A political commitment to the radical requires a destruction of the ordinary, which resembles abjection and/or transgression. In North Korea, transgression occurs in the form of an excess of the political as embodied in what I earlier called the perpetual ritual state. Here, ritual is not primarily religious, but it bears a distinctly political nature. I hope to present a discussion on the political, or more precisely, the excess of the political, and the way in which this aspect of human life dominates other aspects of life for North Koreans.

By entitling this Introduction “A Journey into the Abyss,” I refer to the Greek term denoting a bottomless sea. North Korea has appeared to be entering such a place since the death of Kim Il Sung. The world community bears moral responsibility for facing this society squarely, not from a sense of philanthropy or altruism, but because, ultimately, the rest of the world is not free from North Korea, what happens there, or how people live and die there. I am not, however, alluding to the possibility that North Korea’s crude nuclear arms program can destroy the rest of the world. Rather, it is the uncertainty that the world feels in attempting to grasp North Korea that should prompt us to show deeper interest in, and concern for, this nation. I chose the term “abyss” in order to allude to the uncertain journey, in intellectual terms, on which we are about to embark in the pages that follow. Whether North Korea will yield to our conventional wisdom and repertoire of understanding and comprehension will become clearer as we work toward the completion of our journey.