Journal of Peace and Unification 12(1), pp.5-27
ISSN: 2233-9671
doi: https://doi.org/10.31780/jpu.2022.12.1.5

Struggle on Demand: Shaping contemporary North Korea's Public Sphere through Memory Politics

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Received on 28 December 2021. Accepted on 26 February 2022.

Abstract

This research aims to fill a gap in discussion of societal control in North Korea. By employing a framework built upon authoritarian public sphere theories, the paper analyses whether Kim Jong-un's memory politics have been different from those of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-Il in the context of shaping the public sphere. The study argues that while 'memory' has become a more critical tool of societal control in Kim Jong-un's North Korea, it seems inevitable paradoxically for him to navigate towards creating a legacy of his own that is detached from 'memory' due to the changing societal environment.

Keywords: North Korea, Kim Jong-un, Memory Politics, Public Sphere, Memory of Struggle

I. Introduction

The North Korean strategy of reconstructing its history is characterised by the tethering of national memory to historical traumas of occupation, war, and

division. The practice finds its origins in the early years of Kim Il-sung's regime when media, culture, and art were converted into a tool to legitimise his personal power through the construction and diffusion of antagonistic memories to the masses. The North Korean state raised Kim Il-sung's figure as a hero and revolutionary mastermind who successfully managed to mobilise the masses and liberate the country from the enemies, Japan, and the United States (US). North Korea's first mass mobilisation campaign, the Chollima Movement, inspired workers to volunteer additional hours and increase production (Harrold, 2004). The short-term successes and increase in living standards that followed provided Kim Il-sung's regime with effective propaganda for his leadership (Kim, 1965).

Mass media became a key conveyor belt for delivering the regime's ideology when Kim Jong-Il tethered his political practices to the press. In 1974, he emphasised its usage as a 'strong tool' to deliver *Jucheism* (Song, 2005). Kim Jong-Il's commitment to mass communications became irrevocably affected by his other interest, cinema. His prescribed films feature a core theme that he minted as 'seed' (*jongja* in Korean), the 'guiding criterion [...] which provides the principles for the organization of content and the unification of all formal elements of the work in conformity with the content' (Kim, 1973). This 'seed' became key in Kim Jong-Il's political didacticism and control of the public sphere through the use of the press and cultural productions as it taught North Koreans how to live, think, and communicate in line with the monolithic narrative of the state (Kim, 2018).

History, as told during Kim Il-sung's regime, was characterised by a hostile international environment perpetuated by the US and the successes of North Korea under his own leadership. Kim Jong-Il inherited this narrative and subordinated the role of the North Korean people and the Party to the role of his father (Song, 2005). The press recalled past victories to actively promote Kim Il-sung's involvement, and transient successes were correlated to his revolutionary teachings and *Juche* ideology. This strengthened the cult of personality of Kim Il-sung who was designated as North Korea's Great Leader, and in death, Eternal President.

The designation of the Eternal President appellation was manifested in physical form through the decision to transform the Kumsusan Assembly Hall into a giant mausoleum in which Kim Il-sung's embalmed body would be placed on permanent display. Although Kim Jong-Il never inherited nor appropriated these titles, his rule consolidated the Kim family line as leaders of North Korea. Succession for Kim Jong-Il therefore did not represent an ascent to replace the deceased head of state. Rather, it was an elevation to occupy

the same space (Kwon & Chung, 2012). In death, the physical body becomes a manifestation and representation of the body politic. The duty of continuing that body politic is that of the heir. This is a form of legacy politics (*Yuhun Jeongchi* in Korean) whereby Kim Jong-Il drew his political legitimacy from positioning himself as the defender of Kim Il-sung's success and authority, and therefore, memory (Kwon, 2010).

However, thorough research has not yet been conducted on Kim Jong-un's memory politics, especially in terms of how this form of control is defined in North Korean society. With this in mind, this research aims to examine the role of Kim Jong-un's memory politics in shaping society and culture during his first decade of leadership. It asks as to how memory politics are conducted in Kim Jong-un's regime and whether there have been distinguishable features compared to previous leaders, and what changes can be identified in North Korean society. By answering these research questions, the paper intends to fill the gap in existing research on memory politics and public sphere discussion about North Korea's Kim family.

This research has involved reviewing and analysing existing literature on memory politics and the public (society and culture). Using authoritarian public sphere and memory politics as the theoretical framework, a case study of North Korea as a qualitative research method has been conducted. Due to the current limitations arising from the continuing COVID-19 pandemic on conducting surveys and interviews with experts and North Korean defectors, the paper has mostly employed data from academic research and documents, media publications, and statistics. Some of the primary data has been collected from online workshops and conferences. Based on the case analysis, discussion and argument are provided in the paper's concluding remarks.

II. Memory Politics and the Public Sphere

The public sphere can be defined as a neutral space where all members of society come together to publicly discuss matters of concern and ideas for the common good (Habermas, 1991). This definition relates to a political 'reading public' involving citizens that actively engage with transient news, with their engagement being akin to criticising the government and debating improvements for society (Hartley & Green, 2006). The public sphere requires means to disseminate information and exert influence on society and the elites (Habermas, 1974). The media has thus become the mouthpiece of the public

sphere and become a platform for openly accessible information about social matters (Starr, 2005).

This public sphere can be understood in two ways: the political public sphere and the literary public sphere (Habermas, 1991). The political public sphere is composed of discussions and matters that connect citizens with the state. It encompasses mass media channels as a public vehicle of communication of information and transient news, and public opinion, which can either be informal with citizen groups or formal through institutionalised elections (Habermas, 1974 & 1996). This definition closely resonates with the two interrelated components of Hannah Arendt's (1958) description of the public sphere as incorporating a space of appearance of political freedom and the consolidation of a common world that is shared with all citizens – the public. Moreover, Arendt (1958) identifies the key features of the public sphere for the emergence of a 'full-fledged citizenship' to be its connection between private property and the public realm. In comparison, the literary public sphere has metamorphosed into the cultural public sphere, described as 'the articulation of politics, public and personal, as a contested terrain through affective – aesthetic and emotional – modes of communication' (McGuigan, 2005). Simply put, rather than focusing on news and societal concerns, the cultural public sphere reflects on representation and life's problems.

Whereas the political public sphere has historically restricted the participation of certain groups in society, particularly women, the cultural public sphere is accessible to everyone through mass media and the routinization of its propagandistic structure. Citizens engage with the cultural public sphere actively or introspectively. Active participants produce art and works, such as books, paintings, and soap operas. The consumers of cultural works – readers and watchers – experience life vicariously through them and relate with characters and their problems, and then reproduce and reflect on them in real life (McGuigan, 2005). The cultural public sphere is a vehicle for expression and self-interpretation. Unlike the relevance of private property emphasised by Arendt (1958) within the political public sphere, it is private matters and experiences that resonate in the cultural case. Private matters are of public interest through cultural consumption and thus are brought into the political public sphere. In other words, private and personal affairs become political (Starr, 2005).

On the one hand, the democratic public sphere is an accessible space to debate public matters comprised of the political public sphere and the cultural public sphere. The public sphere is only strong when both spheres act in concert (Habermas, 1991). A political sphere that is disengaged from the public

and distorted does nothing but hinder society's opportunities in the political realm – this scenario is what Arendt (1970) describes as the 'dark times' of the public sphere that bring to the fore the 'invisible government' characteristic of authoritarian public spheres and their blurred credibility. Although state authorities are not part of a democratic public sphere, they act as its executors by being influenced by it and acting upon areas of interest (Habermas, 1974). Conversely, the state is the not-so-invisible hand pulling the strings of the authoritarian public sphere.

On the other hand, the authoritarian public sphere does not intend to transmit information and influence the government. Instead, the regime designates society's matters of interest and constructs the nation's past (Dukalskis, 2017). The authoritarian public sphere dominates culture and the cultural public sphere. The way citizens articulate politics through art is interfered with, or heavily inspired, by the state as the public sphere executor. Cultural pieces act as cultural weapons, which is to say they have the potential to reshape the knowledge and values of ordinary citizens (Wakabayashi, 2008). Art and cultural productions have been used as political tools throughout history. Regimes such as Nazi Germany's and Stalin's 'degenerated' art and converted it into a political tool – that is, propaganda (Hartley & Green, 2006). In the authoritarian public sphere, cultural works available to the masses are reduced to what the state commissions, and thus, cultural consumers are socialised into a dictated reality (Steinhardt, 2015). This is not to say *samizdat* literature or dissident spheres do not exist, but they are inaccessible to society at large and relegated to the private realm, though groups may attempt to insert nonconformist messages in 'hidden transcripts' within the public spheres (Stegmann, 2016).

The authoritarian public sphere legitimises the ideology of an authoritarian state while simultaneously limiting political debate, amplifying pro-regime messages, and channelling political ideation. In this way, the public sphere loses the 'public' as a space for open debate about genuine matters of concern (Starr, 2005). The survival of an authoritarian regime depends on the ability of the incumbents to maintain the right to rule. The public sphere plays a key part in this endeavour by using different tools such as forgetting undesirable aspects of the state and its past, framing the government's actions as adequate when unpopular, shifting the blame for negative outcomes to the country's citizens and other countries, and mythologizing the origins of the political leaders (Dukalskis, 2017).

Authoritarian regimes manipulate the public sphere through politicised cultural productions including propaganda, state-endorsed media, and political

speeches. Mass media, in particular, is the playground of the regime to recreate the past and present to influence society in different ways: corroding the ability of citizens to articulate their own ideas and reflexive identities (Sik, 2015; Steinhardt, 2015); neutralizing society and manipulating their consciousness (Arifkhanova, 2010; Clements, 2012; Sheffi, 2004); reconstructing national and cultural identities (Sala, 1994); maintaining conflicts between the nation and the 'other' (Bull & Hansen, 2016; Jamal, 2009); and creating a historical narrative that is not remembered but memorised (Assmann, 2008).

In essence, the authoritarian public sphere is maintained through a top-down effort at reconstructing memory. (Re)interpreted memories are thus political vehicles for the elites to influence society through the practice of memory politics. Memory politics refers to the political means by which history is framed, articulated, and forgotten to organise collective memory for political usage (Wang, 2018). The idea of a 'collective memory' was first theorized by sociologist Maurice Halbawchs in the 20th century. Halbawchs (1992) viewed history as an overly rationalised version of the past: history offers a comprehensive, factual account of the past, inclusive of multiple synthesised perspectives which are divided into distinct time-based configurations. This is in contrast to collective memory which can be socially constructed. It can be an invention of culture, customs, traditions, and conventions (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Collective memory is a shared set of memories, a joint construction which inhabits the minds of a group of individuals. It reflects the social identity of the group that framed it, within which events are viewed from a single, committed perspective which leads to a solidarity and continuity of thought (Misztal, 2003). The active construction of a past to suit present dominant interests can be achieved through education, propaganda, public ceremonies, rituals, and monuments – all of which provide identity to a group (Fentress & Wickham, 1992). Collective memory therefore is not inert or passive, but 'a field of activity in which events are selected, reconstructed, maintained, modified and endowed with political meaning' (Said, 2000).

Unlike history, collective memory is not a passive vessel but one which is actively constructed and reconstructed. Elements can be retained, reordered, and suppressed (Fentress & Wickham, 1992). In this sense, collective memory can be understood as a necessary political building block that circumscribes what behaviours are acceptable to the government within society. It defines such key ingredients as pride, shame, fear, revenge, and comfort for a large number of a country's citizens (Markovits & Reich, 1997). Moreover,

political elites recognise the 'use value' of the past to confront contemporary preoccupations (Lowenthal, 2015). Hence, memory is transmitted whenever and however a regime needs it. Citizens memorise their past as it is presented to them not only in mass media through discursive and visual signs but also through localised forms such as commemoration rites, participative events, and relics of the past like sites and monuments (Assmann, 2008; Clements, 2012). The construction of a totally collective memory is rarely entirely successful in creating a complete homogeneity of views. It is not entirely the subject of manipulations of those invested in its maintenance, because individual experiences, even if private or hidden, prohibit a limitless malleability of collective memory which can be seamlessly indoctrinated through artificial constructions (Beiner, 2017).

The mass distribution of images and narratives in the realm of memory naturalises the perspective of incumbent regimes. Albeit not entirely successfully, authoritarian regimes easily exploit and reconstruct memory through an antagonistic lens that remembers unreflexively and monolithically (Wang, 2018). Citizens are taught to use 'the past as an antidote to present disappointments and future feats' as history becomes omnipresent (Lowenthal, 2015). The act of remembering is of utmost political importance as it mystifies the nation's past, turns the rulers into heroes, and places the blame for the country's suffering on demonised enemies (Bull & Hansen, 2016). Authoritarian regimes see memory politics as the way to legitimise their right to rule when suppression is not enough (Dukalskis, 2017; Steinhardt, 2015).

Legitimisation is achieved through discourses of we-ness and they-ness that justify and extol contemporary struggles as well as the cultural politics of commemoration. Transient insecurities and 'signs of malaise' are remedied through the construction of symbolic boundaries dividing the nation's sameness and collectiveness (we-ness) from antagonistic narratives against 'them' (they-ness) (Bull & Hansen, 2016). The scheme engenders a passion for belonging to society at large through designating outsiders as perpetrators and insiders as glorified victims (Bull & Hansen, 2016). Memory politics manipulate the past by building from it and simultaneously choosing which events and positionings are omitted, and thus, forgotten. When a nation's actions can be understood as partially or fully in collaboration with the 'others,' narratives are organised to construct a sense of collective trauma that further reinforces the role of the victim as opposed to the perpetrator (Sik, 2015). Thus, mass media's systematic dissemination of state-endorsed memory politics attempts to curve society's independent thought and glorify obedience. Discordance amongst the political and cultural public spheres triggers dualization, that is,

regular citizens keep appearances in public but enjoy other forms of entertainment and 'freedoms' in private (Dukalskis & Joo, 2021). This contradiction bleeds into the notion of hypernormalisation. Hypernormalisation refers to the way in which the rhetoric of the state in late socialism in the Soviet Union became increasingly removed from the daily lives of its citizens. During this period, citizens would act in ways previously unimaginable in the system but continue to remain publicly loyal to Soviet state socialism. This reflected the belief that the Soviet system was eternal and therefore thinking otherwise was unimaginable, even despite the inherent contradictions which were becoming increasingly apparent in their everyday lives (Yurchak, 2005).

Furthermore, memory politics affect culture by shifting from reassigning what is important to re-deciding what becomes irrelevant (Olick & Robbins, 1998). As the sole commissioners and gatekeepers of art and cultural media, authoritarian regimes make cultural production, and thus consumption, adapt to shifting memories and narratives. Therefore, culture becomes a tool to organise collective memory and commemorate the past as a means to influence society. Society in turn either consumes media uncritically, letting power dynamics and manipulation go unchallenged, or rejects it and looks for information and entertainment elsewhere, in private. Narratives engendered from memory politics dominate the two dimensions of the public sphere: firstly, by designating the relevant transient concerns of society in the cultural public sphere, and secondly, by organising what is normal political action and behaviour in the political public sphere. Memory politics are thus key political tools for authoritarian states as the not-so-invisible state endorsement of the cultural realm mediates society's worries and interests whilst simultaneously curving political action.

III. North Korea under Kim Jung Un

Following Kim Jong-Il's death in 2011, much of the memorialisation of him took place on the cultural front. Often the focus of cultural productions was the hagiographical birthplace of Kim Jong-Il, Mount Paektu. North Korean media was used to further propagate the mythical nature of Kim Jong-Il's ongoing presence after death. The Korea Central News Agency (KCNA), North Korea's national press service, reported several 'natural wonders' being observed, such as the sky turning red at Mount Paektu, with the autographic scribing carved into the mountain glowing brightly (KCNA Watch,

2012b). There were also fables about animals mourning Kim Jong-Il's passing, including reports that bears were seen wailing in the road (KCNA Watch, 2012a).

Like his father Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-Il's body was embalmed and put on permanent display at the Kumsusan Palace of the Sun in Pyongyang. By its very nature, this act consciously attempted to elevate Kim Jong-Il to a similar level of sacredness as his father. As was the case with Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-Il's physical life may have been over, but his political life was to last for eternity. The elevation of Kim Jong-Il was coupled with the promotion of his brand of *Songun* politics, which Kim Jong-un combined with *Byungjin* policy that draws on his grandfather's legacy.

1. First Phase of Kim Jong-un's Memory Politics: From Songun to Byungjin

Kim Jong-un's leadership can be characterised by the policy trends he has pursued in the last 10 years. The first period of Kim Jong-un's leadership, between 2012 and 2017, began with a New Year's statement that vowed to build a 'socialist civilised state' for North Koreans to enjoy. The phase was distinguished by a new focus on the present rather than the past (Jeon & Chung, 2021). Media, culture, and art conveyed Kim Jong-un's policies and ideology to the masses. In absolute subjection to power, culture and mass media became propaganda tools dedicated to creating, recreating, and maintaining national narratives (Ryang, 2021). This conversion was formalised with the Propaganda and Agitation Department of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) taking charge of the press as well as cultural productions (Collins, 2019; Song, 2005).

This period was characterised by the continuation of legacy politics through hagiographic narratives of Kim Jong-un's predecessors, the ideological construction of Kimilsungism and Kimjongilism, and the immortalisation of Kim Jong-Il with the posthumous title of Eternal General Secretary. Kim Jong-un's relationship with the past continued with his attempt to revive Kim Il-sung's *Byungjin* policy of pursuing economic development on par with military and nuclear progress. The combination of military-first (*Songun* in Korean) with economic progress, the new *Byungjin*, was characteristic of his early years, as noted in Figure 1. The three keywords of this first period were 'innovation', 'enlightenment', and 'urban construction' (Hong, 2019).

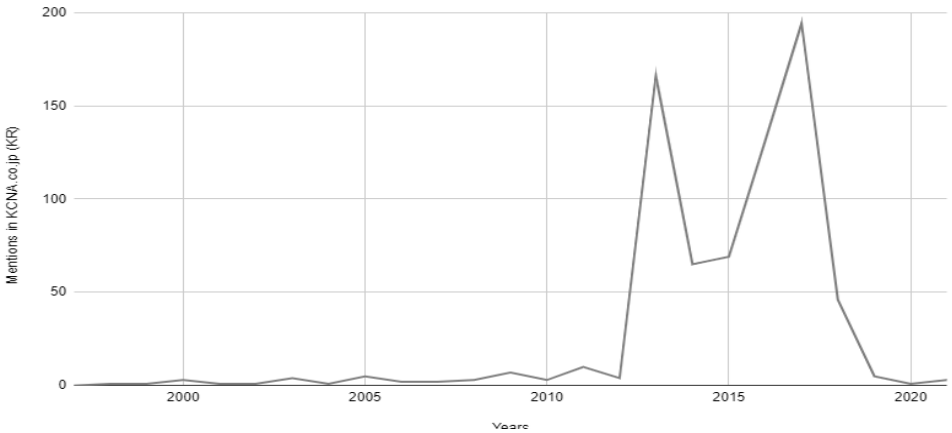

Figure 1. Frequency of Mentions of *Byungjin* from 1997 to 2021 (Compiled by Authors based on KCNA Watch Database)[1]

Accordingly, Kim Jong-un's early years were characterised by an emphasis on economic development and on the *Songun* policy as a state ideology (Ahn & Hirai, 2021), which had been introduced to address and overcome crises. Economic goals did not replace threats, and international hostility remained North Korea's reality until the end of 2017. The pursuit of *Songun* was framed as a necessary condition for North Korea to defend its independence and secure its survival as it had been, and still was, bullied and threatened by outsiders, an aspect of the regime's narrative that is as historical as it remains perpetual. The media, as Kim Jong-un's mouthpiece, promoted two counterpart narratives with regard to North Korea's enemies, namely the US and Japan.

One narrative designated them as the historical enemies of Korea through recalling traumatic events from the past, such as the American involvement in the Korean War: 'the US imperialists perpetrated merciless destruction and killing through indiscriminate bombing and shelling while crying out for completely removing 78 cities of north Korea from the map' (KCNA Watch, 2015). The other narrative was fearmongering that constructed the present and the nature of these antagonistic nations as corrupt and violent. While the US was referred to as the 'only superpower' heading the international system (Uriminzokkiri, 2016), it was also presented as being both the object of criticism by the international community for historical abuses and a security threat

[1] https://kcnawatch.org/

for every other country. The enemies were demonised through media representations, with the US, for example, described as a place 'where a large number of women even kill their own children, not to mention the fact that they abandon and maltreat their own children, regarding them as an odious burden' (MFA, 2021). Similarly, Japan's present-day hostilities towards North Korea were linked to its colonial history and past abuses, and continuing discrimination against Koreans in Japan (KCNA Watch, 2021b). The effect of these antagonistic depictions was to reinforce the view that North Koreans are unified and resilient, while portraying the outside world as vile, dangerous, and untrustworthy.

In comparison, economic development, overseen by Kim Jong-un as part of his *Byungjin* policy, was avowedly focused on creating a 'socialist civilization'. The construction boom that followed largely centred on projects located in areas of cultural significance in North Korea. As a series of events experienced by millions and linked inexplicably to the foundation of the North Korean state, the Korean War serves as one of the most prominent elements of North Korean collective memory. Early in his leadership, Kim Jong-un oversaw the construction of the huge Victorious Fatherland Liberation War Museum in Pyongyang. The museum is a monument to the promotion of the orthodox North Korean version of history that depicts the US as the aggressor responsible for beginning the Korean War. Kim Jong-un made multiple visits for onsite inspection during the museum's construction. This personal involvement by Kim Jong-un in the construction of the Victorious Fatherland Liberation War Museum depicts how the presentist approach to memory is of particular utility when studying North Korea.

The approach concentrates on how public notions of history are manipulated by those dominants within a society through means such as public commemorations, mass media, and education (Bentley, 2016; Lowenthal, 2015). New traditions and rituals are invented, and deliberately designed and produced with a view to creating new political realities or sustaining existing ones (Misztal, 2003).

The end of the *Songun* policy as a state priority coincided with rapprochement with South Korea and the summit with US President Donald Trump. These events had a clear effect on the hostility conveyed by the media on both historical and transient grounds. The KCNA is a pivotal tool of the regime not only for conveying news and policies to the masses but also for memory politics. By manipulating the media, the government attempts to designate transient discourses for the public sphere to focus on (Wang, 2018). Figure 2 depicts the number of times particular words have been used by the KCNA

to construct North Korea's history and emphasise those who have perpetrated trauma against the nation and threatened its independence: imperialist(s), hostile, puppet(s), and threat. Figure 3 displays the references to Japan and the US, and it is noteworthy that the trends reflect the changing nature of Kim Jong-un's foreign policy.

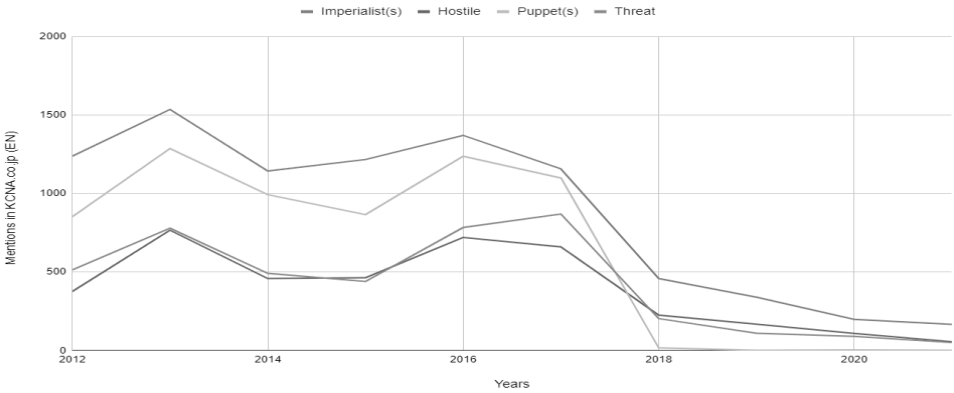

Figure 2. Comparing the Frequency of Mentions of Hostile Words throughout Kim Jong-un's 10 Years in Power
(Compiled by Authors based on KCNA Watch Database)

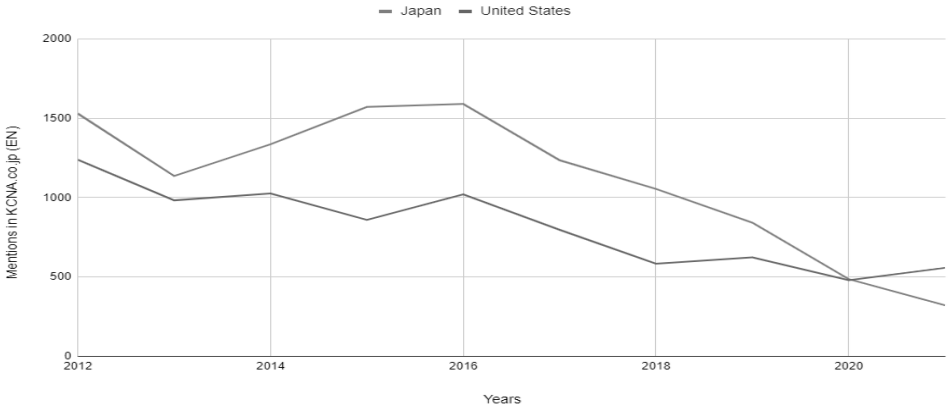

Figure 3. Comparing the Frequency of Mentions of Japan and the US throughout Kim Jong-un's 10 Years in Power
(Compiled by Authors based on KCNA Watch Database)

2. *Second Phase of Kim Jong-un's Memory Politics: Mobilising through Memory*

During Kim Jong-un's second phase of memory politics, a people-first approach relocated the government's focus from security issues and nuclearization to the people, which translated into an emphasis on North Korea's economy, development, and culture (Jeon & Chung, 2021). The new direction of the regime borrowed from Kim Il-sung's Chollima Movement (Chollima is a horse said to travel 1,000 *li* [a Korean unit of distance] a day) by introducing the Mallima Movement (Mallima is a horse said to travel 10,000 *li* a day), in 2017. The new mass mobilization campaign aimed to spur the enthusiasm of North Korean workers by evoking the economic success and improvement in living conditions that had followed Chollima. The movement also appropriated both the slogan – Mallima speed – and the symbol – a winged horse accompanied by Mallima riders (Korhonen & Mori, 2020). In a reminder of the successes produced by Kim Il-sung's collectivisation, Kim Jong-un's 2018 New Year address hoped for North Koreans to become Mallima riders just as Chollima had inspired them after the war.

At the same time, in 2018, the Arirang Mass Games returned to the Rungrado May Day Stadium in Pyongyang, following a five-year hiatus. The mass games are one of North Korea's largest and most spectacular forms of cultural expression. They are performed in a series of acts, often beginning with a focus on the country's past, as well as its civilian and military achievements, such as Kim Il-sung's liberation of Korea from the Japanese (Kosciejew, 2018). The festival is designed to demonstrate the uniqueness and success of the country's political system and the popularity of its leaders, providing legitimacy to their continued efforts towards achieving the utopian 'socialist civilization' (Burnett, 2013). As with the ritualistic performances that take place at statues and monuments across the country, as well as those in Kim Il-sung Square, expressions of theatrical mass state culture serve to act as a pillar that unites citizens in a form of embellished collective expression. This collective expression is performed in a way designed to sustain and promote the sanctity of the Kim family.

The use of Korean War memory has also been frequently observed. Direct mentions of the Korean War by Kim Jong-un are not uncommon. North Korea's media regularly publish articles or show television programmes about past events in which North Korea was either victorious or mistreated by one of its enemies. Recalling past antagonism inescapably reconstructs it under a new light that is linked to the present (Bull & Hansen, 2016; Kim, 2018). Two

episodes have been consistently re-presented to connect the idea of struggle with that of victory and survival: the Battle of Pochonbo against the Japanese occupation and the Korean War against the US (Aum, 2019; Donovan, 2019). Moreover, according to the state's narrative, North Korea was victorious in both conflicts because of Kim Il-sung – a narrative used to legitimise his leadership (Ryang, 2021).

In this articulation of memory politics, the reconstruction of North Korea's collective memory dominates narratives in the public sphere, which emphasise national struggle and mobilisation as a means to reach different goals. Kim Jong-un's approach to memory politics is not a new addition to the North Korean repertoire, but rather has been a constant feature since the inception of the state. The re-imagined past of North Korea placing the Kim bloodline at its centre has been solidified by its transmission through cultural productions (Kim, 2018; Ryang, 2012).

The renovation of the Victorious Fatherland Liberation War Museum in 2014 showed the new direction of Kim Jong-un's government. The museum, which presents the North Korean narrative of the Korean War, added a wax statue of Kim Il-sung with a striking resemblance to Kim Jong-un (Kim, 2018). The similarities of the two Kims have arisen again in the second period of Kim Jong-un's rule, as he has been shown to revere and look after children just as Kim Il-sung did (Demick, 2009). The slow reshaping of Kim Jong-un to resemble his grandfather progressed into the young leader's omission of his predecessors in his New Year address in 2018. A more recent and telling event during Kim Jong-un's third phase, which is strongly defined by the effects of COVID-19 and the lockdown, has been the appearance of the term Kimjongunism (Parry, 2021).

3. Third Phase of Kim Jong-un's North Korea: Memory as a Tool of Societal Control

The economic crisis, drought, and famine of the 1990s, known in North Korea as the Arduous March, have become a platform for the evocation of memory politics. North Koreans have been implored to recall how Kim Il-sung commanded a small unit of guerrilla fighters to victory against thousands of enemies, braving freezing temperatures and starvation (Demick, 2009). Notwithstanding the evocation of revolutionary memory, this period has had lasting effects on the way in which the North Korean state functions and on the everyday lives of its citizens. The public distribution system no

longer caters adequately for most North Koreans, many of whom have become reliant on *Jangmadang* – a network of shadow markets – to get basic goods. These shadow markets have also become a source for the proliferation of foreign media, such as K-drama and K-pop, which has widespread popularity particularly amongst younger generations (Lim, 2021). The state itself has recognised the threat posed by such dissemination of foreign ideas. In April 2021, Kim Jong-un wrote a letter to the 10th Congress of the Youth League, in which he outlined the danger of 'anti-socialist' behaviour and called on the Youth League to mobilise maximum effort in the 'struggle against these practices' (KCNA Watch, 2021a).

In order to counter subversive influences in society, the North Korean state tightly controls the public sphere, the realm in which people come together to discuss ideas. In North Korea, the ability to do this freely is severely limited, and the public sphere is dominated by the state, which owns or approves all radio stations, films, newspapers, and television programmes. This state-dominated realm is the 'authoritarian public sphere' and based on the testimonies of those who have left North Korea, depicts a space where citizens report having virtually no political discussions in public (Dukalskis, 2017). Some of the tools used by the North Korean state to enforce the authoritarian nature of the public sphere are laced with history and memory politics. Great emphasis is placed upon the mythologised origins of the North Korean state. The sacred hagiography of the leaders is wrapped up in their revolutionary exploits and in their links to founding wars and figures. The intended effects of mythologising origins are to inspire reverence and legitimacy, whilst marginalising those who may question the narrative of the state (Dukalskis, 2017).

North Korea frames events within the ideological constraints of the state. The Arduous March is mentioned in reference to Kim Il-sung's exploits in Manchuria during the winters of 1938 and 1939, whilst the Korean War is framed as an act of aggression carried out by the US. The Korean War in particular is commonly used as a conduit of memory politics that encompasses society in North Korea. The historical and continued aggression of the US is used as a tool of blame, allowing the state to attribute undesirable outcomes to an external power. Just as Kim Il-sung's legacy did not die in 1994, nor can the foundational fables of the state be relegated to history. They must remain in the hearts and minds of contemporary North Korean society.

By keeping memories of struggles such as the Arduous March and the Korean War in the forefront of the North Korean collective psyche, the state is able to evoke these events as required, whether it be to instil a wider sense of

North Korean victimhood or to exhort the masses to struggle towards a socialist civilization through a Stakhanovite speed campaign. Kim Jong-un has evoked the traumatic history of the 1990s to demand that the Central Committee of the WPK wage another Arduous March (Lim, 2021). As fewer and fewer North Koreans who lived through the Korean War remain, the rhetorical resurrection of the Arduous March may be seen as an attempt to inculcate a sense of struggle and victimhood among younger generations in North Korean society. The proliferation of foreign media amongst this group is a threat to the ideological control of the state. The risks that many young people are taking to access this subversive material, suggest that not all of the tools being used by the state to command unquestioning loyalty are working.

How much of a threat this poses to the stability of the state is questionable. The theory of hypernormalisation depicts late-stage Soviet society in which young people went from proclaiming their allegiance to communism one moment to seeking out 'bourgeoisie' Western vinyl records the next, without actively recognising the contradiction inherent in such behaviour (Yurchak, 2005). There is a carrot-and-stick element in the North Korean approach to youth in the Kim Jong-un era. Beyond the use of state tools designed to police the proliferation of ideologically dangerous ideas and content, Kim Jong-un has actively promoted attempts to revive the North Korean social contract between the state and younger generations. He has overseen state investment in children's leisure and entertainment, building new funfairs, ice rinks, a dolphinarium, and a riding school (Ford, 2014). In 2021, following the letter to the Youth League admonishing anti-socialist practices, Kim Jong-un took part in a group photo with thousands of young North Koreans to celebrate Youth Day.

Beyond being an attempt to counter the risks to internal ideological adherence amongst the group most susceptible to the influences of external ideas and content, Kim Jong-un's youth drive is a tool that can bolster his own personal legitimacy. It represents a calculated effort to reaffirm the idea that revolutionary virtue and devotion begin in youth. The construction of Kimist memory politics passed down from father to father is a story of being blessed from childhood with a particular destiny and ability to continue the revolution (Richardson, 2017).

IV. Conclusion

When Kim Jong-Il died in 2011, Kim Jong-un was less prepared for his succession compared to his father, whose succession from Kim Il-sung had been planned for a longer time and went smoothly (Shin, 2018). Accordingly, it took almost a decade for Kim Jong-un to establish Kimjongunism. Kimilsungism was replaced by Kimjongilism soon after Kim Il-sung's death in Rodong Sinmun (North Korean National Newspaper); however, Kimjongunism has only recently been promoted after around 10 years of Kim Jong-un's leadership. Kim Jong-un's succession pathway seems to have been more challenged than his father's. With that in mind, this research has analysed how Kim Jong-un's 10 years have been so far in terms of using memory politics and the public sphere to control North Korean society.

During the first phase, Kim Jong-un ended an emphasis on *Songun* policy alone, and pursued his *Byungjin* policy by using the KCNA as a tool for manipulating the media. The second phase has been reflected in a reduction in the use of antagonistic rhetoric, which has coincided with détente and calming of hostilities with the US and South Korea. By articulating memory politics, the North Korean regime has managed to reconstruct collective memory, which has not been unique or new to Kim Jong-un's approach. In the third phase, Kim Jong-un has re-employed the memory of struggle by framing the recent food crisis within the ideological constraints of the state.

However, with the recent promotion of Kimjongunism, it seems that Kim Jong-un may be preparing to revise the current scheme of memory politics upon which he relies. As mentioned earlier, at the time of writing, Kim Jong-un was facing new circumstances: in particular a decreasing population with shared past memory; and the new threat posed by the proliferation of external information among the youth. Paradoxically, while the research findings suggest that 'memory' has become a more critical tool of societal control in Kim Jong-un's North Korea, it seems inevitable for Kim Jong-un to build a legacy of his own that is detached from 'memory' due to the changing societal environment. In this regard, it would be interesting for future research to examine whether Kim Jong-un's memory politics have evolved from the traditional style of using memories of struggle in North Korea at the end of his second 10 years; and, if so, which factors have influenced the changes.

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