

North Korea: Beyond Charismatic Politics

Byung-Ho Chung

The following interview of Byung-ho Chung Professor at Hanyang University and President of the Korean Society for Cultural Anthropology, was conducted by American Association of Anthropology Executive Director Ed Liebow prior to the DPRK-US summit. It is revised and updated here with an epilogue reflecting on the summit.

EL: I recently came across your book, *North Korea: Beyond Charismatic Politics*. I was intrigued by the main argument about the durability of charismatic politics in North Korea due to its reliance on theatrics. As you might imagine, in the run-up to this week’s meeting between Kim Jong Un and Donald Trump, the US media have a simple-minded outlook that treats this encounter as though it were a sports match, with one side inevitably a “winner” and the other a “loser.” Your emphasis on theatrics, and the powerful modern “theater state” that sustains the North Korean leaders’ multi-generational authority, is a thought-provoking lens through which to observe Kim’s leadership.

In common parlance, the theater metaphor would involve conventions of compressed time, exaggerated gestures, recognizable character types, a script to follow, symbolic props, and so forth. What do you mean by labeling North Korea as a modern “theater state”?

BHC: Geertz argues that political power can be a question of display of power and “the ordering force of display, regard, and drama.” The partisan state of North Korea, directed and designed by Kim Jong Il, takes on some of the

characteristics of what Geertz calls the theatre state. The charismatic power of North Korea was transmitted by heredity, for the first time in the communist countries, partly but evidently, due to its reliance on theatrics. Kim Jong Un, the third generation successor in charismatic power, reenacts his grandfather Kim Il Sung with a tunic suit, high-cut hairstyle, stride, facial expressions, and speech manner at the age of 34 (28 when he came to power). From the start, he appeared like a heroic actor in an epic revolutionary theater production and is continuously playing the role in the contemporary political drama.

He has inherited not only the looks but also the political symbols and styles of the earlier charismatic leaders. He is modifying them as the situation requires. The methods of representation of power remain the same. However, its contents and style have changed with the times. His father, Kim Jong Il choreographed mass spectacles, such as the Arirang Festival, involving large numbers of immaculately trained citizen actors, amounting to more than one hundred thousand schoolchildren, women and soldiers annually. The spectacle delivers formative moral and political slogans to the domestic population and key diplomatic messages to the international community. The son, Kim Jong Un, changed it to a popular concert with pop music and idol performances. He also introduced ski resorts, amusement parks, western style restaurants, department stores, high rises and neon signs — the symbols of western consumer culture.



Kim's On-the-Spot-Guidance to the Neongra Waterpark in Pyongyang

style. The heir to Kim Jong Il, who chose to defend the system with the Military-First policy in the face of severe famine, decided to model his appearance on Kim Il Sung, who was once called, “a messiah rather than a dictator,” by the Cambridge economist Joan Robinson for prioritizing North Korea’s social economic development during the 1950s after the Korean War. Kim Jong Un identifies himself with the charismatic leader of economic prosperity rather than with nuclear might. Depending on how the international community, especially the United States, responds to his changes, he will restructure his role. In the near future we could be watching Kim Jong Un, a lean young leader in suits speaking fluent English in the international community.



EL: What is the role of nuclear weapons technology in the North Korean theater state?



BHC: The gun is the symbol of the legitimacy of power in North Korea. According to the legend of the North Korean state, two pistols that Kim Il Sung inherited from his father turned into thousands of guns of partisans who liberated Korean people from the Japanese Empire. The guns again turned into countless arms of the People’s Army which defended the nation from the American imperialists. Kim Jong Il’s missiles and nuclear bombs are again the symbol of the gun that defended the ‘Juche (self-reliance)’ system in the middle of the collapse of international socialism. Kim Jong Un, the heir, developed nuclear bombs into a hydrogen bomb, and missiles into ICBMs. The world was shocked and North Koreans were wildly excited. The leader made the whole world watch their display of power, and made the world, especially the US, regard them seriously. From their perspective, the North Korea-US summit is not a sign of surrender but a success based on self-reliant military might.

Night Opening of the Theme Park and Pizza Resturant in Pyongyang

It is highly symbolic that Kim Jong Un is re-enacting his grandfather Kim Il Sung rather than his father Kim Jong Il in appearance and



Missile Launching Displays/ Missiles and Idols

Many countries in the world have the ability to make nuclear weapons. What is special about North Korea is that they actually did it. Ironically, it is because of the international blockade and pressure that a poor country like North Korea has made such destructive smart weapons. In a prolonged state of national crisis, all their resources and talents were concentrated on the project. Thus, Bruce Cumings called the North Korean nuclear bomb “Bush’s Bomb” with reference to the president who labeled and isolated North Korea as one of the Axes of Evil.

Guns, missiles, and nuclear bombs are the national identity of the theater state of North Korea. They are the core symbols and tools of

political power. Will they give it up? Will they survive without it? A drama becomes shocking when it betrays common assumptions. That is why we are watching anxiously.

EL: What is the role of the North Korean people in this theatrical setting?

BHC: A few main actors usually get the spotlight. For a country like North Korea, where the political process is not revealed to the outside world, we are likely to assume that the leader or the few political elites move society in perfect order. However, in the theater state North Korea, most of the 25 million people actively participate in the drama as directors, actors, staff, and audience. They have considerable influence on the composition and construction of the drama.

After the great famine in the late 1990s, people opened spontaneous street markets and crossed the border as refugees, illegal traders, or migrant workers. The amount of transnational communication of information, goods, and people made it impossible to achieve societal consent simply with closed socialist style theatrics. Government-initiated entertainments and performances have begun to mix capitalist popular culture. For the survival of political power, the elite group cannot postpone the open-door policy. They only hope to enact it in an orderly manner to maintain the existing hierarchical system.

EL: And what about nation-state actors on the global stage, like South Korea, Japan, China, Russia and Syria, among others?

BHC: Currently, the leaders of South and North Korea and the related four states (United States, China, Russia and Japan) are all charismatic leaders playing roles according to their own political situations and cultural styles.

Among them, South Korean President Moon Jae In’s active role is especially remarkable. His

charismatic power derives from the fact that he was elected by the millions of candlelight demonstrators who succeeded in impeaching President Park Geun Hye, the daughter of the authoritarian leader Park Chung Hee. She was a pair to Kim Jong Un, the heir of hereditary power in North Korea, and was consolidating the antagonistic co-existence of two Koreas. The candlelight demonstration which broke down one of the axes of the division system was a “social drama,” which symbolically showed the power of popular sovereignty in South Korea. Moon Jae In, who understands the power of theatrical presentation has accomplished cultural exchange at the Winter Olympic Games, and South-North Korean Summit, and has helped to make the NK-US Summit a reality. As a designer and mediator, he is putting the two contrasting charismatic powers of North Korea and the United States in the spotlight in the global political arena.



Moon Jae In at the Candle Demonstration in Seoul Moon and Kim Crossing the Line

EL: Finally, how does the character of Donald Trump figure into this theatrical production?

BHC: Trump is an expert at the theatrics of power. His reality show style performance, speaking with an air of importance, and his unpredictable improvisation, make him a notable dramatic actor. He has the stereotypical qualities of an American hero. Unlike most politicians, his logic is simple and his emotional expression is straight forward. He is not afraid of being a joker and a show-off. These could lessen his authority in a traditional context, but they also make him stand out from the status quo as an unconventional and unpredictable actor who can open new possibilities.

Though most of these characteristics are in contrast with the secretive charismatic power in North Korea, the unpredictability of both parties increases tension and draws attention. What will be the contents of the drama by these two actors? Trump would like to be the hero of a historic social drama like Richard Nixon’s 1972 visit to China, “the week that changed the

world.” The Cold War has not ended in the Korean peninsula. We only wish that the two leaders’ desires and needs will converge in ways that allow them to choose a path toward peace.

EL: Anything else that we as anthropologists should pay special attention to as this drama plays out?

BHC: Ruth Benedict observed that the symbolic power of the emperor system in Japan can be very effective in dramatically changing the direction of the nation. This is the time that the theater state North Korea needs a dramatic change. With the Japanese experience in mind, we can think of a few scenarios. Like the Japanese emperor at the end of the War, the impresario and main character in the drama can stop and change the scenario (and director). Or, like the Meiji Restoration, new directors may carry out a rapid reform utilizing the traditional political symbols. Highly trained actors, staff, and audiences can be immersed in the new drama with the same level of enthusiasm. In any case, theater state North Korea can open a new stage with minimum sacrifice.

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After the Summit

North Korean media are reporting the NK-US Summit extensively. This is exceptional for North Korea, which has maintained a thoroughly secretive policy about the leader’s activities. Especially, the leader’s contacts with the outside world were discretely edited and subsequently reported. In this summit, however, not only the conference but also the casual interactions involving the two leaders were reported very rapidly. The handshakes with the head of the very enemy that has isolated North Korea for decades were shown

to the people without artificial editing or interpretation.

This reporting itself is indicative of the willingness of the North Korean regime to change domestically and internationally. In particular, North Korean people and the elites will feel that, this time, the changes are far-reaching and historical. For the North Korean system, revealing the whereabouts and the casual behavior of the secretive leader entails risks. The leadership is betting everything on this. Therefore, it will be very hard to turn back.

In North Korea, a theater state, people are sensitive to the changes in such official stance and change their own attitude accordingly. I visited North Korea before and after the first South-North Korean Summit in 2000. With changes in the official stance, the North Korean people, who had kept their distance with suspicion and wariness before the Summit, waved their hands and even engaged in conversation with a smile, as if the script were changed. In the near future, Americans visiting Pyongyang may encounter citizens approaching them with a big smile.

Trump and Kim’s understanding of the theatrics of power made the Summit possible. Theatrics set the mood, emotion, and consensus. This is a necessary foundation on which to start a relationship with someone who has been the target of prejudice and stereotyping. We need to feel first that the other party, the devil in our imagination, is not a totally different human being from ourselves. Through dramatic production, the theatrics of power can induce a widespread empathy for the process.



Trump touching Kim at the NK-US Summit in Singapore Kim Touching Trump Back

In the Agreement at the Singapore Summit, “mutual confidence building” was emphasized. The substance of the Agreement will be revealed as each party fulfills the promises with actions. For politicians who prioritize the legally binding power of a written treaty, it would have been hard to accomplish this. Unlike the US, with its culture of contracts, in many societies around the world, reciprocity, more than written contracts, has great binding

power. Gifts, favors, friendly gestures, relationships, and face-saving can build trust. Trump, the experienced international businessman, grasps these aspects of multi-cultural negotiations.

This Summit has a great cause - the achievement of peace in the Korean peninsula and beyond. Clever analysts are looking at the Summit as if it were a sports match with a winner and a loser, or a zero-sum game between the two nations. What many are ignoring, however, is the quintessential fact that millions of human lives are at stake. Koreans in North and South are desperate to find ways to achieve the long-awaited peace. When Trump said, in the press conference, that he wants to remove the threat of war for millions of lives, it touched many people in Korea. Chung Se-Hyun, former Minister of Unification and an expert on North Korean affairs, said that Trump’s statement, more than any line in the agreement, is the real fruit of this Summit. History sometimes chooses an unexpected character to perform a role of transformative hero. We wish Trump and Kim success in the historical roles and social drama that they have embarked on to bring peace in this region and the world.

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