**Roland Boer : “Korean Style” of Socialist Governance in the DPRK**

**Author: Roland Boer**

Born in Australia in 1961. PhD in Philosophy from McGill University, Canada. Currently a research professor at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Newcastle, Australia, and a distinguished professor of "Overseas Talents" at Renmin University of China. One of the contemporary Marxist researchers, his main research areas are religion and politics, Marxist biblical criticism, and religious critical theory.

His representative works include "Critique of Heaven: On Marxism and Theology", "Critique of Religion: On Marxism and Theology" (three volumes), "Marxist Biblical Criticism", and "Knocking on Heaven's Door: The Bible and Popular Culture". Due to its novel perspective, this series of books has been translated into Danish, Italian, Russian, Turkish and Chinese. In addition, Professor Boll has published more than 300 articles, chapters or encyclopedia entries, and has been invited to give lectures at many universities in China. Teaches at the School of Literature at Renmin University of China: Western Marxism and Literature (graduate students), Religion and Popular Culture (undergraduate students).

**Opening Remarks**

The history of socialist governance now moves eastward, in terms of the Eurasian landmass. The move is not so great, across the border from the Soviet Union to Korea. After all, the Soviet Union was, like Russia today, a Eurasian country with its own distinct civilisational development. However, when we come to east Asia—the focus of the remainder of the book—we find the most enduring types of socialist gover nance. It would be another task to assess the cultural, social, and historical reasons why Marxism took such deep root in eastern Asia in a way not found elsewhere in the world. The fact that Marxism did resonate so deeply in east Asia explains—in part at least—why socialism continues to grow in strength, albeit not without periodic challenges and problems, in countries such as the DPRK, Laos, Vietnam, and China.

The concern of this chapter is the Democratic Republic of Korea (DPRK), infor mally known as North Korea. In what follows, I will devote most attention to the prac tices of socialist governance in the DPRK. This requires a treatment of electoral and consultative democracy, as well as the leadership of the Workers’ Party of Korea— familiar categories by now. The continuities with other socialist countries is notable, but there are also distinct emphases in light of the DPRK’s concrete conditions. In terms of electoral democracy: while there is only one decision-making body, the Supreme People’s Assembly (along with regional people’s assemblies), there is also the Democratic Front for the Reunification of the Fatherland. This is not a governing body per se, but it plays a crucial role in the electoral process. Made up of all polit ical parties, mass organisations, and religious groups, it proposes multiple candidates, debates their suitability, and approves one candidate for elections. In terms of consul tative democracy (apart from the Democratic Front), we find a comparable role for what the Soviet Union called Primary Political Organisations. These are found in the Chongsanri method in agriculture and the Taean work system in industry, where party cells and local committees engage substantively and robustly with collective farmers and factory workers in the process of making decisions and plans. As for the leadership of the Communist Party, which became the Workers’ Party of Korea in 1946, this is a given, but the statutory processes by which it exercises leadership can be seen most clearly in the unique role of the State Affairs Commission. It is this body that the country’s leader now chairs, although he is chair of neither the SPA nor president of its Standing Committee.

I will also devote some attention to the DPRK’s political philosophy, which reflects the anti-hegemonic emphasis on self-sufficiency and the need for development in light of the DPRK’s specific characteristics. While Juche (people as masters of their destiny) and Songun (military-first) are reasonably well-known, I give greater attention to the people-first approach of Kimilsungism Kimjongilism. Identified and promoted by Kim Jong Un, primacy is given to—as far as possible in light of circumstances—to the comprehensive improvement of the economic, social, and environmental conditions of the common people.

A crucial question concerns the sources. In some earlier work, I waded through all of the available Western material on the DPRK. With rare exceptions, this material can hardly be called “scholarship.” Caricatures, fabrications, falsities, Orientalism, racism, the “Potemkin” assumption, and more, mean that any rigorous scholarly work on the DPRK must put such material to one side. That said, there are a small number of exceptions among Western scholars, based on research visits and archival mate rials, and I will use them where needed in this chapter. However, my prime source is Korean scholarship itself. Fortunately, it is now possible to access a reasonable amount of Korean scholarship in multiple languages on the Naenara website, or—if one prefers—to purchase them from Korea Books. Since I do not read the Korean Hangul script, I am reliant on well-produced English translations. Still, those whose minds are saturated with Western liberal assumptions will need to make an extra effort to overcome an ingrained assumption and even prejudice: Korean scholar ship does not simply parrot the Party line. In other words, it is a distinct scholarly discourse that seeks to explain in detail a country that remains much misunderstood and misrepresented.

Finally, we should be very clear that the Korean revolution was one that established deep roots among the people; it was not imposed from outside or from above.[[1]](#footnote-1) A major factor is that among all east Asian countries, Korea has—perhaps along with Vietnam—arguably suffered most from imperialism and colonialism. Japan’s process of capitalist modernisation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century used the standard capitalist approach: colonise another country (Korea), brutally suppress any resistance, and exploit its resources and labour power for one’s own benefit. At the moment Japan was defeated by the Anti-Japanese War of Resistance—to which Japan devoted 75% of its war effort[[2]](#footnote-2) —the United States turned up as a second wave of colonialism. Here we find one of Stalin’s two mistakes towards the close of the Second World War: he ordered the Soviet Red Army to pause at the 38th Parallel, when it could have taken over the whole of the peninsula with little resistance (the other mistake was to concede significant parts of the Germany to US and UK forces). Meanwhile, the anti-communist Japanese smoothly made the transition to assisting US occupation of the southern half of the peninsula (Brun and Hersch 1976, 75–76). The Koreans north of the 38th Parallel not unjustifiably refer to the south as a “US puppet regime,” as a colonised country with tens of thousands of foreign soldiers on its soil. That the US was subsequently guilty of extensive war crimes—napalm, biological weapons, genocidal efforts to obliterate the country and its people—in the war of 1950–1953[[3]](#footnote-3) only adds to the strong emphasis on anti-imperialist and anti hegemonic sovereignty in Korea. Like Vietnam, Korea’s keen attention to Marxism’s concern with anti-colonial struggles for national liberation determines so much of the approach in the north (Kim Il Sung 1970). In short, “independence, Songun, and socialism” are not simply the necessities of the Korean revolution, but also the realities that accord with its concrete conditions (Kim Jong Un 2015c, 35)

**2.Historical Background**

The components of the system of governance did not, of course, emerge overnight; they are the product of a long process of development and maturation. As with China, there had been a long and bitter revolutionary struggle before the DPRK was established.[[4]](#footnote-4) This experience led to the formation of a revolutionary people’s government that was based for a time in the area around the Tuman River and sought to coordinate the mobile and ever-changing realities of the struggle.[[5]](#footnote-5) It was this experience that led to the proposal to establish a Korea-wide democratic people’s republic. Thwarted these plans were in light of post-liberation realities, so power was initially held by a provisional people’s committee. Not one committee, but many: by November of 1945 people’s committees—11,500 of them—had been formed in all areas, “from provinces to cities, counties, sub-counties and ri” (Choe and Pak 2018, 7; Brun and Hersch 1976, 129–130).[[6]](#footnote-6) These many people’s committees required coordination through ten administrative bureaus that sought to ensure the inter-connection between economic, political, and social policies.

All of this was preliminary, leading up to a consultative conference in February of 1946. Crucially, the conference included representatives from all political parties that had striven for Korean independence, along with mass and social organisations, and the many people’s committees. This multi-party consultative approach would abide in Korea (see below), as it did in China. The conference set in place the basic realities of Korean governance, appointing a Provisional People’s Committee, of which Kim Il Sung was elected chair. The task was twofold, embodied in the term democratic dictatorship: complete elimination of the remnant landlord class, comprador capital ists, pro-Japanese elements, and anti-communists (not a few escaped to the southern dictatorship under Syngman Rhee); develop socialist democracy among the ordinary people, namely, urban and rural workers. Obviously, the first part was a thorough exercise of what Marx and Engels designated as the dictatorship of the proletariat. It was certainly not bloodless, but one wonders whether any other type of transmission was possible in light of the former Japanese colonial system.

The Provisional People’s Committee was—as the term indicates—clearly provi sional. Soon enough, the next step was underway, with countrywide elections held on 3 November, 1946—the first in Korea’s history (Kim Il Sung 1946). The results of the elections led to an initial congress of delegates from all of the people’s commit tees, and it was this congress that formally established the People’s Assembly as the supreme organ of governance. The People’s Assembly met for the first time on 21 February, 1947, and instituted the following measures: the establishment of a People’s Committee to carry on the tasks of the Assembly when not in session; election of Kim Il Sung as chair of the People’s Committee; and the organisation of elections at the lower levels, in districts, neighbourhoods, and villages, with the result that people’s assemblies were established at these levels as well. The final transition of power took place at the first session of the new Supreme People’s Assembly in September, 1948, when the People’s Committee absolved itself (Kim Il Sung 1948).

Although there would be subsequent development of the governance structures, the basic system was now in place.[[7]](#footnote-7) Notably, the early process was not so much an abolition of previous united-front structures and their replacement with new and more socialist structures—as happened in the Soviet Union. As Choe Su Nam and Pak Kum Il observe, “it was unnecessary to do away with the already established government to replace it with a socialist government.” Instead, a “socialist govern ment was established while preserving intact the form of the people’s government” based on the worker-peasant alliance. At a more philosophical level, we can see this process in dialectical terms, in which former structures are preserved and trans formed within the new framework. As a result, the DPRK embodies both multi-party and multi-organisational involvement through the Democratic Front and the socialist governmental forms of the People’s Assemblies and the leadership of the Workers’ Party of Korea.

In light of this historical background, we may turn to the components of the DPRK’s approach to socialist governance.

**3. Electoral Democracy**

The DPRK’s electoral democracy relates primarily to the people’s assemblies, along with local state organs, assemblies, and committees. Every eligible citizen may stand for election, so much so that independent candidates are regularly elected to the people’s assemblies and may even be elected to be the speaker or chair. The history of the DPRK has many such examples. I think here of Ryu Mi Yong (1921–2016), who moved from south to north in 1986 so as to take up her role as chair of the Chondoist Chongu Party (The Party of the Young Friends of the Heavenly Way, formed in 1946). She was elected to the Supreme People’s Assembly and became a member of the Standing Committee (then called the Presidium). Other examples include Gang Ryang Uk, a Presbyterian minister who was a leader of the Korean Christian Federation (a Protestant organisation) and served as vice president of the DPRK from 1972 until his death in 1982, as well as Kim Chang Jun, who was an ordained Methodist minister and became vice-chair of the Supreme People’s Assembly (Ryu 2006, 673). Both Gang and Kim were buried at the Patriots’ Cemetery.

**3.1 The Electoral System**

How do elections to all of the various bodies of governance work? Elections are universal and use secret ballots, and are—notably—direct. To my knowledge, the DPRK is the only socialist country that has implemented direct elections at all levels.

 Neither the Soviet Union (in its time) nor China have embraced a complete system of direct elections, preferring—and here I speak of China—to have direct elections at the lower levels of the people’s congresses, and indirect elections to the higher levels.

As for candidates, it may initially seem as though the DPRK follows the Soviet Union’s approach in having a single candidate for each elected position. This is indeed the case for the final process of voting, but there is also a distinct difference: candidates are selected through a robust process in the Democratic Front for the Reunification of the Fatherland. As mentioned earlier, the struggle against Japanese imperialism and liberation of the whole peninsula drew together many organisations, and it is these that came to form the later Democratic Front. The Front was formed on 25 July, 1949 (Kim Il Sung 1949), and today includes the three political parties, and a range of mass organisations from the unions, youth, women, children, agri cultural workers, journalism, literature and arts, and Koreans in Japan (Chongryon). Notably, it also includes representation from the Korean Christian Federation (Protes tant), Korean Catholic Federation, and the Korean Buddhist Federation. All of these mass organisations make up the Democratic Front, and it is this organisation that proposes candidates. In many respects, this is where the multi-candidate dimension of elections comes to the fore. Here candidates are nominated for consideration from all of the mass organisations represented. Their suitability and merit for the potential nomination is debated and discussed at many mass meetings, and only then is the f inal candidate nominated for elections to the SPA. Now we can see why candidates from the Chondoist movement, as well as from the Christian churches, have been and can be elected to the SPA and indeed the local assemblies. To sum up the electoral process, we may see it in terms of a dialectical both and: multi-candidate elections take place in the Democratic Front, which engages in extensive consideration of suitable candidates; single candidate elections take place for the people’s assemblies. It goes without saying that in a non-antagonistic system of class and group interaction, the criterion for election is merit and political suitability.

**3.2 People’s Assemblies**

As for the bodies of governance, there is a similar continuity and discontinuity compared with other socialist countries. Unlike the Soviet Union, there is a unicam eral Supreme People’s Assembly, which is the highest authority in terms of laws, regulations, the constitution, and all leadership roles. The SPA is also responsible for the national economic plan, the country’s budget, and foreign policy directions (Han 2016, 47–48). At the same time, the Democratic Front for the Reunification of the Fatherland has an analogous function to a second organ of governance. This is a uniquely Korean approach to the question of a second organ of governance. While not an organ of governance as such, it plays a direct role in electoral democracy (see above), as well as the all-important manifestation of consultative democracy (see below). A further reason for this unique role of the Democratic Front may be adduced: while the Soviet Union and China see the second body or organ as repre sentative of all minority nationalities and relevant groups, the absence of minority nationalities in a much smaller Korea means that such a form of representation is not needed.

Further details: the term for a representative elected to the SPA is five years, and representatives are drawn from workers, farmers, intellectuals, and service personnel. Even more, a representative cannot be arrested or subjected to criminal punishment without the consent of the SPA or its Standing Committee. How often does the SPA meet? It meets each year in March or April, but may also have extraordinary sessions, which can be called either by the Standing Committee or one-third of the representatives. A session of the SPA requires a minimum quorum of two-thirds of the number of deputies, and the agenda of each session is extraordinarily full. A speaker and deputy speaker are appointed, a credentials committee examines the credentials of all delegates, and items for the agenda can be proposed by a delegate and by a number of administrative bodies, such as the State Affairs Commission, the Standing Committee of of the SPA, the Cabinet of the SPA, and its committees. As with all such supreme assemblies in socialist countries, the SPA also has the task of amending the constitution from time to time (Han 2016, 49–50). Notably, the chairperson (or speaker), and indeed president of the Standing Committee (see below), are distinct from the role of the country’s president.

When the SPA is not in session, its duties are undertaken by the Standing Committee, which is appointed by the SPA.[[8]](#footnote-8) It follows that the Standing Committee is the highest organ of governance between the sessions of the SPA. Normal meet ings involve the permanent members of the committee, but it may also call plenary meetings when needed. Apart from undertaking the tasks of the SPA, the Standing Committee is also responsible for the functioning of the SPA itself: convening sessions, overseeing elections, and ensuring that decisions made at sessions of the SPA are enacted at local government levels.

The regional structure of governance is similar to the country-wide structure, with elected people’s assemblies and the people’s committee when the assembly is not in session (Han 2016, 55–59). These are found in every province, city, city district, and municipality, with terms of four years for elected representatives. Both bodies deal primarily with local concerns, implementing economic policies in light of conditions, budgets, educational and medical matters, the operation of the local judiciaries and public order, the functioning of cooperatives and organisations, and ensure the rights of citizens. While they must carry out plans and decisions from higher bodies, they also provide vital information and feedback to the higher bodies.

**.3.3 Political Parties**

Other organs of governance also function, such as the cabinet, various ministries and commissions, and judicial organs, although I will not elaborate on these (Han 2016, 59–69). I do, however, need to address a final question concerning political parties. In contrast to the Soviet Union, the DPRK has a number political parties, all of which are represented in the elected people’s assemblies. Apart from the WPK, there are also the Korean Social-Democratic Party and the Chondoist Chongu Party, which is based on the indigenous religion of Chondoism (Han 2016, 36–39). The former is a successor to the Democratic Party of Korea, which was established on 3 November, 1945, on the basis of Korean independence and the need for the people of Korea to determine their own future. Comprised of democrats, anti-colonial nationalists, and religious personnel, this party distinguished itself in promoting the anti-colonial struggle—especially in the war of 1950–1953—and a desire for social justice across society. It was instrumental in making international connections so as to assist the DPRK in rebuilding after the war, and it maintains these connections. The party is particularly instrumental in promoting Korean reunification through its connections with the southern half of the peninsula. Needless to say, the party is committed to Korea’s socialist project, with candidates elected to the people’s assemblies and the provision of robust consultative input to government plans and policies.

The Chondoist Chongu Party is a notable example of a party organised on the basis of an indigenous Korean religion—and it goes without saying that it also shows a distinctly Korean approach to freedom of religion. The party was officially estab lished in February of 1946, during a crucial but brief period when it seemed as though the whole of Korea had an opportunity to determine its own future, but the roots of Chondoism go back to the early nineteenth century and the teachings of Choe Je U, or Su Un (1824–1864).[[9]](#footnote-9) Executed by the landlord class, Choe’s teachings were carried on by successors, drawing upon and reinterpreting traditional Korean symbols, organ ising and publishing scriptures that were written in the popular Kasa poetry style, and a distinct worship practice involving pure water.[[10]](#footnote-10) Arguing that the divine could be lived out on earth, the movement gave the most oppressed and downtrodden peas ants of Korean society a sense of their own worth. The moment when Chondoism gained its revolutionary credentials was its involvement in the peasant or Tonghak Revolution (the initial name for the movement was Tonghak, or “Eastern learning”). In the north, this involvement in the revolution means that the socio-religious move ment of Chondoism is seen as in some ways a precursor to the communist movement (Lee 1996, 105–128). It helps, of course, that Kim Il Sung has written favourably of Chondoism. To explain: a core Chondoist principle is “humans are God [in nae chon]” (Beirne 2009, 158).[[11]](#footnote-11) In his memoirs, Kim Il Sung observes:

*Of course there is something I believe in like God: the people. I have been worshipping the people as Heaven, and respecting them as if they were God. My God is none other than the people. Only the popular masses are omniscient and omnipotent and almighty on earth. Therefore, my life-time motto is “The people are my God” (Kim Il Sung 1994, V, 326).*

It should come as no surprise at all that the religion itself is popular in the DPRK, with about three million members and 800 places of worship. Nor should it be surprising that it is represented by a political party, which has delegates elected to the people’s assemblies and saw the religion’s leader—Ryu Mi Yong (see above)—take significant leadership positions in the SPA.

As a way of summing up this section, let me first observe that every citizen of the DPRK is a member of a political party or one of the many social organisations. But some may still be tempted to ask: what is the purpose of these structures of electoral democracy, all the way from the Democratic Front’s role in nominating and selecting candidates, the three political parties, the people’s assemblies, and their standing committees? Too often have they been dismissed by the misinformed and malicious as “rubber stamps.” If so, it would be a complex and expensive stamp. The full answer to this question requires consideration of further features of the DPRK’s governance, suffice to point out here that they take the whole electoral process very seriously indeed. It is, after all, a key feature of socialist governance.

**4. Consultative Democracy**

As we have already seen with regard to the Soviet Union, from the earliest days consultative democracy was a constituent feature of socialist approaches to democ racy. The DPRK has taken consultative democracy much further, specifically with the Chongsanri method in agriculture, and the Taean method in industry. This section is primarily devoted to these two features, but first I need to address the question of the mass line.

**4.1 The Mass Line**

The mass line’s institutional presence is most obviously with the Democratic Front for the Reunification of the Fatherland, with its 24 mass organisations and its vital role in the electoral process itself. Indeed, the distinction between electoral and consultative democracy risks seeing them as entirely discrete projects; by contrast, they influence one another in a process of dialectical mutual reinforcement. Obviously, this is a more robust form of democracy than that found in capitalist democracies.

However, the mass line goes much deeper, being integral to the structure of revo lutionary struggle and socialist construction. Again and again, one finds an emphasis on the mass line, by which is meant that Party members can “serve the revolution only when they become faithful servants of the masses,” since the revolution itself seeks both the “good of the masses” and can be accomplished “only by relying on the strength of the masses” (Kim Il Sung 1960b, 115).[[12]](#footnote-12) The bond is two-way: collective leadership entails mingling with the masses, living with them, and listening to their opinions, so as to bring forth “new and bright ideas” (Kim Byong Sik 1970, 117).

Dynamic and creative knowledge is always found among the masses. Of course, fragmentary and immature as the opinions of the masses may be at first, it is the duty of Party workers to grasp them in good time, and supplement and systematise them through collective consul tations. The Party’s leading bodies should then disseminate among the masses the opinions thus summarised and systematised, and lead the masses to follow them (Kim Il Sung 1960b, 133–134).

**4.2 Chongsanri Method in Agriculture**

As a concrete embodiment of the mass line, the Chongsanri method is named after a rural commune in the central part of the country, in Kangso County of South Phyongan Province. Why the place name? In 1960, a comprehensive rural inspec tion tour, led by Kim Il Sung, visited the collective. The outcomes of the visit led to a substantial revision of approaches in the countryside. The method developed entailed both robust input from rural Party members and indeed non-Party farmers and thorough implementation of policies developed by the central Party organs.[[13]](#footnote-13) Obviously, the two are closely related, in what may be called a simultaneous “bottom up” and “top-down” approach. Effective policies, along with their implementation and assessment, cannot hope for success without substantive input from those who know what the actual situation is from everyday experience; the implementation of policies, and their adaptation, cannot happen if farmers do not “own” them and see them as appropriate for their local conditions. As Kim Il Sung put it at the WPK’s twentieth anniversary, the essence of the approach is that the “higher body helps the lower” so as to have a profound understanding of “actual conditions and find correct solutions to problems,” while simultaneously enlisting the “conscious enthusiasm and initiative of the masses so as to ensure the fulfilment of revolutionary tasks.” It is not only a “powerful method of work” for carrying out tasks successfully and substantially, but also an essential educational method for “raising the ideological and political level and practical capacity of officials and for revolutionising the masses” (Kim Il Sung 1965b, 439–440).[[14]](#footnote-14) Of course, the whole approach requires competent and informed higher bodies and supervisors, along with educated common people so that they can engage productively and substantively. Ensuring both would require significant further practice, corrections in light of shortcomings, and yet further experience. Notably, much of the material from the time focuses less on grand and abstract statements and more on the specific measures needed to make the method work. Improving work styles, training, education, experience, detailed plans down to small work groups and individuals, realistic mechanisation, and the everyday real ities of pig breeding, cotton growing, and compost—these and more are the constant themes elaborated in great detail.

To step back and provide some background: the precursor to the Chongsanri method is found in the initial dual strategy in the anti-colonial struggle: throwing off the Japanese yoke and abolishing feudal relations in the countryside through land reform, which was itself seen as a crucial feature of democratisation through the rural peasant committees. “After liberation,” observed Kim Il Sung, “the solution of the land problem in the countryside was our most urgent revolutionary task,” since feudal relations of landownership shackled peasants to exploitation and feudal slavery, and limited the productive forces and the potential for social progress (Kim Il Sung 1959, 10). The first step, then, was to redistribute land, which took place in a few weeks in 1946 and entailed moving 76% of the land from landlords to peasants (Brun and Hersch 1976, 133). However, this redistribution was still based on a modified form of land ownership. The second step required a move to cooperatives, which was seen as a transition from individual ownership to more social forms. The third step, in the 1950 and 1960s, was to diminish the gaps between city and country, and between industry and farming, which would eventually pave the way for “all people’s ownership” through complete collectivisation. No strict timelines were set, since each stage would become possible only after considerable experience and education among farmers and cadres on the ground (Brun and Hersch 1976, 199). The Chongsanri method is seen as a way to provide a robust framework for the realisation of people’s ownership.

A key to the Chongsanri method is the role of primary Party organisations and the ri Party organisations, with their direct connections to the county branches (Kim Il Sung 1960b, 109).[[15]](#footnote-15) Already from 1946, large numbers of active peasants joined the Workers Party, so that each village had its own branch. This development enabled a highly integrated and enmeshed structure of the Party within society, providing comprehensive input to policy-making, and ensuring the mechanisms for subsequent transitions (Brun and Hersch 1976, 336). The approach is comparable to the Soviet practices of Primary Party Organisations (see Sect. 3.3.3), with a crucial difference: whereas the Soviet approach focused on industrial workers, with relative weakness in the countryside, the Korean approach began with the reality that rural production was vital and indeed primary at the early stages of economic and political development. In other words, the ri Party organisations sought to ensure that the farming population was involved from the very beginning (Kim Byong Sik 1970, 115–116).

The success of the method depended on the dialectical unity of opposites: substan tial and critically constructive input from the grass roots and rigorous implementation of the decisions and plans arising from this input. The relation between the two is not—as those with Western proclivities assume—in terms of either-or, but rather an Eastern Marxist emphasis on both-and, inspired by the Confucian tradition. To explain: the initial emphasis was to ensure that consultations and meetings were not conducted in a perfunctory and formalistic manner, with the Party committees simply implementing policies from the higher levels. Instead, it required “intensive, substantial, and well-organised” meetings, focused on “constructive suggestions of the Party members” so as to “bring into play their conscious enthusiasm.” Criticism of local leaders was to be the norm, so as boldly to bring “all defects to light” (Kim Il Sung 1960b, 111–112; see also Kim Byong Sik 1970, 113). Regular criticism of defects in work is like “washing our faces every morning,” and if faces are not washed everyday, they “will become crusted with dirt, covered with rashes and, in the end, will be utterly spoilt and disfigured.” Thus, “we should always wash out the defects from our work” (Kim Il Sung 1960a, 50). Active, open, and robust meetings were to become the necessary requirements for the method to work. Indeed, the tone of the many meetings at Chongsanri was one of intensive criticism of all levels of work, including that of the inspection team.

Did this approach lead to tensions with the higher organs—especially at a county level—in implementing decisions and plans? Only if the Party committees and leaders were incompetent—a topic of considerable criticism. With competent leaders, the unity of opposites comes into play: the more robust the consultation and input, the more rigorous would be the implementation of the final decision. The final deci sion—proposed by the county Party committee and then approved by the county people’s assembly—would become law: “All particulars of the local plan for the national economy—agriculture, local industry, capital construction, work organiza tion, financial expenditure, etc.—should be implemented unconditionally once they are approved by the county people’s assembly after the collective deliberation of the county Party committee” (Kim Il Sung 1960b, 132–133). This was not some arbi trary decision from the top—which had been a problem—but a decision “owned” by the farmers themselves, since their extensive input was crucial for the decision in the first place. Of course, the cycle would continue, with further critical input into planning and decisions.

As with the experiences in the Soviet Union in the 1920s, a further factor was the need for constant Party-building. This entailed not merely training in the methods of active democratic participation so that participants could engage productively, but also education in Marxism-Leninism so that the theoretical framework and principles for the approach could be understood.[[16]](#footnote-16) And in a recognition of the long Confucian tradition concerning virtue or moral excellence, education should include this dimen sion as well: “the communist has a higher morality and has a greater regard for the f ine customs of his people than anyone else” (Kim Il Sung 1960a, 79). Party-building is a constant theme through all of the material I have studied for this chapter, and in this respect the DPRK is no different from other socialist countries.

It is hardly necessary to point out the role that the Chongsanri method plays in substantial and widespread consultative democracy. Instituted in 1960 after consid erable development, it was by no means seen as fixed in stone. Further refinements in light of ongoing and new problems, lack of application of the overall method and falling back into old ways, new insights in light of experience, and the ever present need for education in the process and political awareness indicate—as with all aspects of socialist construction—that this feature of Korean consultative democ racy faced continual challenges and is always a work in progress. Examples include the “sub-workteam management system,” initially proposed at the Twelfth Plenum of the Fourth Central Committee in November of 1965 (Kim Il Sung 1965a, 33– 36; Brun and Hersch 1976, 340–341). Trialled in 1966 and rolled out across the country over the next couple of years (Kim Il Sung 1968), this method changed the emerging practice of setting production yields too high for large collective farms, and the sending of rural work teams to work on many different projects. Instead, a team of 10–25 farmers would be in charge of an area of land, a task, or an instrument of production. Not only did this approach provide a greater sense of responsibility and ability to see results, but it also involved every member participating in developing micro-plans in light of concrete conditions. This modification led to greater social, political, and economic involvement of every member of the team, but above all saw a distinct rise in agricultural productivity.

**4.3 Taean Work Method in Industry**

 In the same way that the Chonsanri method developed during an “on-the-spot guid ance” visit to the agricultural collective in question, so also did the Taean work system.[[17]](#footnote-17) These guidance visits were less about the Party leadership descending upon a local work site and telling them what to do; instead, through intensive meet ings and consultations, lasting days and sometimes weeks, they sought critical and constructive engagement from the workers themselves (Brun and Hersch 1976, 351– 352). The mass line, obviously, but also the reality of the substantial leadership team[[18]](#footnote-18) itself being subjected through “vehement speeches” to serious criticism and concrete proposals for improvement (Kim Il Sung 1961a, 411).

On this occasion, Kim Il Sung and his comrades went, in December of 1961, to the Taean Electrical Machinery Plant in what is now—since 2010—Nampo Special City.[[19]](#footnote-19)As with the previous year’s visit to Chongsanri, the process was in-depth, robust, and extremely detailed. However, the results were not simply an application of the methods introduced at Chongsanri and other collective farms, for the situation of a vital electrical machinery plant that produces a full range of products was distinct. The underlying principle, however, was the same: comprehensive involvement of local Party members and factory workers in the full production process, along with increased responsibility for a competent leadership, all the way from the Bureau of Machine Industry to the factory’s engineers and technical personnel in areas of expertise.

In terms of background, the Taean work system was preceded by a number of transitional stages, beginning with the autonomy of enterprises after liberation in 1945 so as to keep existing works operating. This lasted barely a year, before the shift to an industry management committee, which worked with and was overseen by a local people’s committee. Soon enough, this approach shifted to a more Soviet approach, with industries fully nationalised and a specialist appointed to oversee the whole industry and implement the centralised plan. This approach in turn became in adequate, since it entailed copying a template from another socialist country and was not suited to the particular and relatively less-developed situation in Korea. Now two vectors came together: the previous year’s experience at Chongsanri had developed a principle of consultative management in the rural sector (see above) that arose from intensive consultation with farmers, and the industrial sector needed an overhaul to suit Korean conditions. In short, it entailed the dialectical combination of planning and the mass line. As a Korean scholar from the time put it, the Taean work system seeks to “strengthen the leading role of the Party in the economy, to draw broad working masses into active management and control of factories, and to encourage them to display their creative capacity and talent to the fullest extent” (Kim Byong Sik 1970, 129).

The results: first, the previous system in which the ministry of industry appointed an individual manager was replaced with collective management through the Party’s factory committee; second, streamlining the supply of raw materials to the factory and ensuring the welfare of workers; third, the development of more comprehen sive planning based on the input from workers on the factory floor (Kim Il Sung 1961a, 425–442; Brun and Hersch 1976, 352).[[20]](#footnote-20) In the revised system, the highest local authority became the Party factory committee, which—crucially—includes managers and engineers, along with leaders of the working people’s organisations in the factory. It seeks to gain empirical data for decisions and planning by engaging directly and frequently with workers on the shop floor. The inevitable problems arising in the construction process—ranging all the way from machinery break down to disagreements and sickness—are solved directly by the committee. For the sake of efficiency, the Party committee is relatively small, usually numbering 25–35 members, with an executive of about a quarter of the size that carries on the tasks of the committee between its fortnightly meetings. Further, the Party committee is the crucial point of contact with higher levels of Party organisation, so it became the primary conduit between the shop floor and the wider Party and its policies. As one can imagine, all of this work for a small number of executive committee members, or indeed the slightly larger Party committee, would be far too much. The work is both made easier and enables far greater involvement of workers through the Party organisations in each unit within the factory, as well as the work team leaders. Brun and Hersch observe—on the basis of a comprehensive research visit to the Taean Electrical Machinery Plant—that everyone has a “clear understanding of problems and the significance of their efforts in the light of the entire socioeconomic context” (Brun and Hersch 1976, 354). And with understanding comes responsibility instead of buck-passing.

In seeking to rationalise the organisational structure of the factory, one may speak of an appropriate division of labour in a socialist context. The more technical side saw the establishment of a “general staff” which is headed by a chief engineer and assistant directors. This unit oversees all of the many aspects of production, such as ensuring the supply of raw materials, production of goods, storage, and distribution. This is only one of the responsibilities, with a sub-unit known as the “material supply department” overseen by one of the assistant directors. A further sub-unit is the “labour supply and financial department,” which is responsible for work rosters and wages, but also for shifting work teams to other areas where needed and seeking always to improve production efficiency. The final sub-unit is devoted the well-being of workers, including food supply from local collective farms, housing, education for children, cultural activities, health, and so on.

The other dimension is the Party committee, which tends to focus on the Party’s organisational concerns, as well as theoretical and political education across the board (Kim Il Sung 1961b, 391–397). As we have seen with the Chongsanri method, Party building is an inescapable feature of any enterprise in the DPRK. Yet, it is more than simply Party building, for all workers partake of the theoretical and practical educa tional activities. That said, it would be artificial to distinguish simply between the “specialists” and the “reds.” Not only are the “general staff” and its sub-units respon sible for imbuing a revolutionary spirit among the workers, but the Party committee and its cells also have a hand in matters relating to production. For this reason, in the thorough reorganisation signalled at the Taean plant the Party committee itself includes the engineer in charge of the “general staff,” along with the directors of the sub-units (Kim Il Sung 1961a, 442–451). Thus, the division is labour is more one of emphasis or degree than any sharp distinction.

**4.4 Summary: Unity of Opposites**

As with the Chongsanri method, the Taean work system would undergo constant reassessment and revision, such as the shift to more collective guidance some twenty years later (Kim Il Sung 1981). Yet these two key features of consultative democracy continue today, seeking to embody at a very concrete level in agriculture and industry the Marxist dialectical principle of the unity of opposites: the extensive engagement of workers within the processes of problem-solving and decision-making goes hand in hand with a rigorous implementation of the decisions reached at the level of county and factory Party committees, and indeed of planning at higher levels. Of course, one should not assume that this is always a smooth process, for substantive criticism and self-criticism are meant to make one sweat and squirm. But this is precisely the point: instead of blaming someone else for a problem, or passing it up the line, problems are owned and solved on the shop floor. So also with decisions and plans, for these are owned by workers who can see their input into the decisions. In his long speech at the Taean Electrical Machinery Plant, Kim Il Sung observes: “we can say that this is a pleasant meeting, rather than a troublesome one, to discuss how to scrub quickly the dirt off our bodies and how to do a better job and advance more rapidly in the future” (Kim Il Sung 1961a, 413).

Two final points of a more economic nature, which I cannot address in full here. First, in both the Chongsanri and Taean methods, one find a resolute emphasis on the socialist principle of “from each according to ability and to each according to work” (Boer 2017). Within limits, remuneration for work is commensurable with the amount of work and contribution made (Kim Il Sung 1960a, 57–61, 1960b, 140–147). Second, as with other socialist countries that achieved national liberation through anti-colonial struggle, the importance of liberating the productive forces for the sake of economic development was never forgotten or neglected. On this matter, let me quote Kim Byong Sik: “In any society the form of production relations and economic structure must correspond to the level of development of productive forces and the nature of the economic base of society.” Thus, the significance of both the Chonsanri and Taean methods is that they seek the “economic management system best suited to the expanding productive forces,” improving the “superstructure, the administrative system of the Party, state and economic organizations in such a way that these may be adapted fully to the established base” (Kim Byong Sik 1970, 111 and 133).

**5 Leadership of the Workers Party**

As with other socialist countries, an inescapable feature of governance is the lead ership of the Communist Party. In Korea, it was called the Communist Party until August–September 1946, when the name was changed to the Workers’ Party of Korea (Kim Ji Ho 2016, 47–49). I am less interested here in the historical development of the Party,[[21]](#footnote-21) and more in the key question as to how its leadership relates to the struc tures of governance analysed above. On a broader level, we find the repeated point that it is only through the Workers’ Party that the people can be “masters of the state and society” and “responsible for the revolution and construction” (Han 2016,1). In more detail:

Party leadership is an intrinsic requirement in the building of a socialist State and a lifeline of its activities. A party is the incarnation of the demands and interests of the masses, and only under its leadership can the socialist State perform its mission as their servant with credit and properly organize and undertake unified guidance over all realms of social life and all regions, as well as overall socialist construction (Kim Jong Un 2019, 82)

This dialectical point we have already seen emerging in the Soviet Union, but it is enhanced in East Asian countries such as the DPRK and China with their dialectical traditions and emphasis on the people’s needs.

**5.1 The State Affairs Commission**

As a case study, I would like to focus on the State Affairs Commission (SAC), which is made up exclusively of members of the WPK. The key question to be addressed is how the SAC relates to the other structures of governance, such as the local and country-wide people’s assemblies, the standing committee of the SPA, and the Democratic Front. To put it more sharply: given the wide-ranging powers of the SAC, how does it relate to the structures of governance analysed above?

A little more detail: the SAC is a successor of the National Defence Committee, which restricted its concerns to military matters. With a change of name in 2016, the SAC’s mandate has been expanded considerably. As the 2016 constitution observes, the SAC is the “the supreme policy-oriented leadership body of State power,” with the following responsibilities:

1. discuss and decide important policies of the State, including those for defence building;
2. exercise supervision over the fulfilment of the orders of the Chairman of the State Affairs Commission of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea and the decisions and directives of the State Affairs Commission, and take measures for their fulfilment;
3. abrogate decisions and directives of State organs which run counter to the orders of the Chairman of the State Affairs Commission of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea and the decisions and directives of the State Affairs Commission (Supreme People’s Assembly 2016, article 109).

These are rather significant powers, and when we add that the chairperson of the SAC is also the country’s supreme leader—and now designated internationally as president—we have a very powerful body indeed. Recall that the SPA and its Standing Committee also have—respectively—a chairperson and a president, but that the country’s leader does not take on that role. Further, the chairperson of the SAC “controls all the political, economic and military affairs” of the DPRK (Han 2016, 50). In more detail, the chairperson has the following duties:

1. direct the overall affairs of the State;
2. personally guide the work of the State Affairs Commission;
3. appoint or remove key cadres of the State;
4. ratify or rescind major treaties concluded with other countries;
5. exercise the right of granting special pardon;
6. proclaim a state of emergency, a state of war and mobilization order within the country;
7. organize and direct the National Defence Committee in wartime (Supreme People’s Assembly 2016, article 103)

Extensive these powers are, so we are led to ask why any other governmental structures exist. Why bother with the complex processes of selecting candidates by the Democratic Front, with the electoral processes of the SPA and its Standing Committee, if the SAC’s chairperson holds all the power? Here we need to be careful indeed, and avoid falling into trap of viewing the rest of the world through the distorted Western liberal lens.

A proper answer to this question begins with the point that the SAC and its chairperson are “accountable to the Supreme People’s Assembly”, and their terms are the same as delegates to the SPA (Supreme People’s Assembly 2016, articles 105 and 111; Han 2016, 50–51). Accountability is the operative word here: if the SAC and its chairperson do not live up to the high expectations of the SPA they can be dismissed from office. And it is the SPA that determines whether the SAC has lived up to the heavy responsibilities placed upon it. We may speak here of the democratic supervision of the SAC by the SPA and its Standing Committee. Further, the SPA delegates powers to the SAC. Even the supreme leader must be appointed to the SAC. This is by no means a given and certainly not hereditary. Let me put it this way: it is precisely because the SAC and the supreme leader have the powers mentioned above that the delegated and supervisory power of the SPA must be rigorous and thorough.

**5.2 The Regulated Order of WPK Leadership**

I have used the example of the SAC as a microcosm of the role of the WPK within the structures of socialist governance. Obviously, the WPK does not rule by fiat, simply giving orders that everyone must obey. But how does it work? According to HanSuYong (2016, 13), the system of governing bodies “regulates the order in which the state power is established and exercised.” There are three points in this brief observation. First, the whole system of socialist governance “regulates the order.” It provides a regulatory framework, or what are called in China the “statutory processes” for governance and the leadership of the WPK. Second, this is the means by which state power is established. This is a reference to historical legitimacy, in the sense that the WPK was—in its earlier forms—primarily responsible for the revolutionary struggle and the establishment of the DPRK itself. As Kim Jong Un observes (2015b, 54), the WPK drew on the strength of the masses in a “land where centuries-old backwardness and poverty had prevailed” and built a “powerful country in the face of pernicious blockade imposed by the imperialists.” In other words, socialist state power was established by the WPK in the face of immense opposition. Third is the exercise of state power. We may speak here—and I deploy a Chinese distinction—of the present realities, of the practical legitimacy of the WPK within the system of socialist governance. It is precisely this exercise of state power that is regulated through the many bodies of governance and their functions. The WPK cannot work outside the whole system of which it is a part; indeed, the possibility and reality of its leadership is determined by the whole system.

To sum up, this is a profoundly dialectical reality. To begin with, the governing bodies provide the appropriate channels or structures for state power, the necessary statutory processes that seek to ensure—crucially—that the common people have a say in the many aspects of governance and administration. At the same time, the whole system of governing bodies regulates the order in which the WPK exercises its leadership. Even more, the leadership of the WPK is not simply determined by the structures of socialist governance; instead, this leadership is enhanced and strengthened by the statutory processes of governance, enhancing what is often called the “single-hearted unity” and the “strict revolutionary discipline” of the Party (Kim Jong Un 2012a, 10–11). So also is the whole socialist governing system enhanced and guaranteed by the leadership of the WPK.

**6 Summary: Human Rights and the Administration of Things for the True Interests of Society**

In summing up this detailed examination of socialist governance in the DPRK, I would like to return to Engels’s principle concerning the administration of the stuff of life for the true interests of society (Sect. 2.5.3) and Lenin’s emphasis on developing the appropriate structures for administering and managing the economy so as to improve the everyday lives of workers and peasants (Sect. 3.4.1). In the DPRK this feature is not only emphasised but has been developed further. They speak of a “well-knit work system” in which governance as a whole manages all aspects of society (Han 2016, 14). Further, the people’s government and socialist system may together be seen by the people as an “administrator responsible for their livelihood and the protector of their independent and creative life” (Kim Jong Un 2015c, 44). This emphasis is particularly notable in the Chongsanri method in agriculture and the Taean work method in industry, which I have analysed in terms of consultative democracy. We should also recall the important role of the Democratic Front, as well as the full range of people’s assemblies from the local levels to the SPA. Again and again, it is reiterated that the purpose is to develop the productive forces and constantly adapt the relations of production to such development, as well as constantly reforming the superstructural features of governance and society as the economic base improves. That this takes place in a context of more than seventy years of embargoes and sanctions makes the task even more arduous, or as a young Korean person in the DPRK pointed out in a conversation: “socialism is struggle.”

In many respects, the emphasis on the true interests of society is also a manifes tation of the Marxist approach to human rights. We have already seen some initial developments of this approach in the Soviet Union, with the emphasis on freedom from exploitation and the proactive nature of rights (see Sect. 5.3.3). It is, unfortu nately, not so well-known that the DPRK has a more thoroughly developed approach to human rights, and I recommend in particular a work by Kim Ji Ho (2017). The emphases of this work should be noted carefully. It predicates human rights on anti colonial or anti-hegemonic sovereignty, which offers a thorough redefinition of the concept of sovereignty in light of the struggle against colonialism. Without national sovereignty, any other right is meaningless. However, the core human right is that of socio-economic well-being, or the right to a prosperous and happy life—although this is noticeably missing in the thin definition of human rights arising from the Western liberal tradition. Closely related are the rights to dignity, existence, and inviolability, but from here all other rights may develop, whether the rights to work and leisure (so also in the Soviet Union), equality between women and men, to land, labour, education, health, religion, political involvement, and so on. I mention this material here, since readers need to be aware of the DPRK’s approach. A full study, however, would require a separate work.

**7 Theory: “Believe in the People as in Heaven”**

Earlier, I mentioned that Kim Il Sung had appropriated the Chondoist-inspired slogan, “the people are my God,” or “believe in the people as in heaven” (Kim Il Sung 1994, V, 326). When studying material concerning the DPRK, this saying recurs again and again, especially in the more recent works by Kim Jong Un. Instead of a full exposition of the three phases of political theory in the DPRK, I will focus primarily on the new era that began with Kim Jong Un’s election in 2012. I do so since it is most relevant today, and also because the two earlier stages are relatively well-known.

7.7.1 Juche and Songun

The first was Kim Il Sung’s Juche, or a people-first philosophy in which the masses are masters of their destiny through the struggles of revolutionary construction, independence, and self-sufficiency (Kim Il Sung 1955; Kim Jong Il 1982; Kim Song Gwon 2014).[[22]](#footnote-22) We may also see Juche as a clear identification of socialism with Korean characteristics (Kim Il Sung 1955, 411–412; 1960b, 114). The second phase was Songun, which was promoted by Kim Jong Il and arose in response to the immense challenges of the 1990s, and identifies the military as the prime revo lutionary force that is able to drive economic recovery and preserve sovereignty (Kim Jong Il 1992; Kim Chol 2002; Kim Chang Gyong 2014). One may find much material on these two approaches (some of which are cited), although I would like to emphasise a particular feature of their development—apart from their desire to designate a more autochthonous socialism. Each phase does not seek to negate the one that had gone before, for this would be somewhat self-defeating and would reek of capitalist democracies in which one political party spends all its time undoing the actions of the other whilst in governance. Instead, the developments in the DPRK may be described as continuity with differing emphases. Thus, Kim Jong Un speaks of a “new era of the Juche revolution” and has affirmed the important role of mili tary modernisation, especially in terms of nuclear deterrence. At the same time, he stresses a renewed emphasis on a concrete people-first approach that is now known—tellingly—as Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism.

Before moving to consider this approach in greater detail, not a few readers may remain puzzled by the apparently hereditary nature of the DPRK’s leadership. Korean scholars emphasise that the hereditary system of old was based on property, privilege, and exploitation, and that this is certainly not the case in Korea today. Instead, the focus is on the continuation of revolutionary leadership in practice and theory, and a new leader needs to be affirmed by the people’s trust. It is notable here that it was Kim Jong Il’s third child, who actually became the new leader, and this was only after a considerable period of assessing whether he would in fact be accepted by the common people.

**7.2 People First: Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism**

Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism was identified very soon after Kim Jong-Un’s election as the first secretary of the WPK (Kim Jong Un 2012a). The continuity is notable, but so also is the “new era” with a distinct emphasis: “Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism is, in essence, the people-first principle” (Kim Jong Un 2015b, 58). But what exactly does this mean?

Let us focus on what may be considered Kim Jong Un’s inaugural manifesto, which was delivered to the WPK’s Central Committee in April 2012 after he was elected as first secretary. After reiterating the importance of both Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il, and stressing the need to maintain military development in the face of hostile imperialism,[[23]](#footnote-23) Kim Jong Un turns to the tasks at hand. The bulk of the speech signals the emphases of his tenure as general secretary, specifically the improvement of the socio-economic conditions and well-being of the people. Many are the dimensions, such as food security, housing, drinking water, and fuel (important for a cold climate). Not to be excluded here are education, health, literature and the arts. But how are these to be achieved in a country subject to decades of sanctions and threats? Kim Jong Un speaks of a knowledge-based industrial revolution in the new century, involving the core roles of science and technology in developing the vanguard heavy industries (power, metallurgy, coal, rail), and a whole new phase of IT development along with light industry for the production of everyday necessities (Kim Jong Un 2012a, 17–26).

In many respects, this speech would set the agenda for the decade to come (Kim Jong Un 2019, 84–98), as is evident when we study the speeches and texts that emphasise and develop points from the initial manifesto: land management, in terms of agriculture, pollution prevention, reafforestation, coastal areas, and housing that suits local traditions (Kim Jong Un 2012b, 2015a); rural revitalisation for the sake of food self-sufficiency (Kim Jong Un 2014a); educational development, whether in science and technology, social sciences, or universities (Kim Jong Un 2012c, 2016a); a comprehensive building project that develops the unique architectural tradition of the DPRK for the sake of improved housing (Kim Jong Un 2013b); and—last but by no means least—Party-building (Kim Jong Un 2014b). A notable theme throughout this material is the emphasis on young people—such as himself—who are the future of the Party and the country, and the need for improved education and living standards for coming generations (Ro 2020). Indeed, the three-point strategy he proposes is to focus on the people, the army, and young people as the foremost weapons in the DPRK’s development (Kim Jong Un 2015b, 57–58; see also 2016b, 15–16).

Socialist countries have always stressed the need for economic self-sufficiency. Hostile external environments play a role, but these are not the determining factors. Instead—and here we need to deploy dialectical materialism—it is internal processes that bring about qualitative transformation. Let us go further: of all socialist coun tries, the drive to economic self-sufficiency has arguably had the greatest emphasis in the DPRK. Thus, the “primary effort to improving the people’s living standards” so that the people “enjoy the benefits of socialism to their heart’s content and lead a happy life” is to be achieved through their own efforts (Kim Jong Un 2015c, 47). This is by no means an easy task, especially in a relatively small, mountainous country, rich in mineral resources for industry but with limited arable land. In this light, we should also recognise the roles of historical partners, such as the Soviet Union and now Russia as well as China. Many have been the innovations in food production and technology in the DPRK, so much so that the attentive visitor cannot help being impressed, but the inescapable role of China in its relative prosperity should not be ignored. For example, between my two research trips to the DPRK, I noticed some distinct changes. In 2015, early in Kim Jong Un’s tenure, there were still many residual problems from the devastating decade of the 1990s: running water was still not plentiful, ageing public transport, many buildings in need of repair and mainte nance, and the products of light industry few and far between. The contrast in October of 2018 was noticeable everywhere. The roads were bustling with vehicles, many new electronic products could be found everywhere, food problems were well and truly being overcome, shelves in the shops were full, and the effects of a continuing and massive rebuilding program were evident. In the countryside, new houses—simple, solid, and comfortable—continued to be constructed. In the city, vast new building projects were underway, deploying the DPRK’s unique architectural tradition (Kim Kyong Chol and Kim Kum Hui 2019, 23–58; Thak and Jang 2021). One of our guides said that she had spent a year on a building site, as all students do at some time. Noticeably, in the standard hotel in which we stayed in Pyongyang there were many Chinese delegates busy developing trade and business opportunities.

With all this in mind, a careful study of Kim Jong Un’s texts reveals a candidness that is reminiscent of his grandfather. He is quite willing to admit failures to achieve the desired goals, remonstrating with himself and the Party for their shortcomings. A good example is to be found in Kim Jong Un’s opening and closing addresses to the WPK’s eighth congress in early 2021. The congress was convened in the wake of the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, when the country shut its borders completely (they would reopen to trade with China in late 2021, only to close again April 2022 when the pandemic finally broke out in the country), and then a series of devastating floods that required the emergency rebuilding of tens of thousands of homes.[[24]](#footnote-24) It seemed as though all of the plans put forward in the initial years of his tenure has fallen well short of their goals, with living standards in regional cities and the countryside still at undesirably low levels. The opening and closing speeches are peppered with references to the “unprecedented, worst-ever trials” that put “great obstacles” in the way, with the “bitter lessons” to be learned from failing to achieve the economic targets set at the previous congress (Kim Jong Un 2016b), with criticism in a “detailed and severe manner” of the mistakes and even deviations of the last five years, and of his heavy heart in setting out to solve the “knottiest problems” (Kim Jong Un 2021a,1,3,4,6, 2021b, 1). Of course, there is a rhetorical style here, in which the dire problems becomes the basis for a call to a renewed effort, but it is the candidness of the criticisms and admissions of falling short that are most notable.

**8 Conclusion: From the Unity of Opposites to Communism**

In drawing this chapter to a close, I would like to address two issues, one of a more philosophical nature, and the other concerning communism. Philosophically, let us recall one of the core principles of dialectical materialism, as identified by Engels and developed by Lenin: the unity through struggle of opposites. For Lenin, the struggle of opposites was the norm as unity contingent, as we also see with Mao Zedong’s lectures of the 1930s (1937a, 1937b). Another vector also plays a role in a country like the DPRK, with the long philosophical influence of Confucianism and the dialectical emphasis on opposites as also complementary. We may speak of a both-and approach, embodied metaphysically in yin-yang.

However, in the DPRK the emphasis is clearly on the unity of opposites. Many are the aspects, whether the Chondoist notion of heaven manifested on earth, or the people as God, the constant emphasis on the “single-hearted,” integral and “harmonious whole” of the WPK and the masses (Kim Jong Un 2012a, 3), albeit not without regular reference to the need to overcome factionalism and opportunism. We may go further, specifically on the question of governance: of all socialist countries the distinction between state and society is simply not valid, so much so that the DPRK embodies to a high degree Engels’s principle that the organs of governance should stand in the midst of, should be enmeshed with, society (Kim Ji Ho 2016, 7–8). All of this takes in the context of a profound bifurcation of the Korean peninsula and indeed—if I may use such terms—of the Korean spirit, marked by the 38th Parallel. Ever since the initial project of a liberated Korea that could decide its own destiny was frustrated by imperialist impositions, the approach developed has been realistic: reunification should be undertaken without outside interference, peacefully and in terms of a federal system, socialist in the north and capitalist in the south in what would be known as the Democratic Confederal Republic of Koryo.[[25]](#footnote-25) This position was made explicit in the Communiqué of 1972, after the leaders of both countries had met secretly (Kim Il Sung 1972). These would form the core of many subsequent iterations and developments (Kim Il Sung 1993), and reunification remains an inescapable topic in speeches today (Ma 2010). Waves of hope—the most recent being 2018–2019 (Kim Kyong Chol and Kim Kum Hui 2019, 58–95)—are followed by disappointment. Clearly, unity of opposites will retain a significant element of struggle until such reunification is achieved.

Finally, what is the ultimate aim in the DPRK? Let us give Kim Il Sung the final word:

 The transition from socialism to communism requires a further development of the productive forces, the production of goods in ever larger quantities and also communist remoulding of people’s consciousness. To make communism a reality goods must be abundant enough to fully gratify the desires of the people (Kim Il Sung 1960a, 58)

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1. The study by Suzy Kim (2013c) shows this reality very well, based—somewhat perversely—on archival documents from 1945–1950 that were stolen during the brief US occupation of the north in 1950. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The United States’ efforts in the Pacific was a sideshow, accounting for less than 25% of Japan’s war effort. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. That the initially civil war was begun by the anti-communist hit-man and dictator, Syngman Rhee, is by now historical fact—despite US and southern Korean propaganda (Brun and Hersch 1976, 90–98; Liem 1993;Ryo 1995). Rhee’s southern regime was riven with revolt and was on the verge of economic and political collapse. The USA saw an opportunity to strike not merely at the emerging socialist society in the northern part of the peninsula, but also at the newly established People’s Republic of China. The US’s resounding defeat, and indeed rout, at the hands of Chinese and Korean forces that had vastly inferior weapons technology, has led to this episode being known as the “forgotten” or “unknown war,” in the USA at least (Cumings 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The following draws on Choe and Pak (2018, 6–11). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For a useful overview of the era of revolutionary struggle led by Kim Il Sung, see Cumings’s otherwise patchy book (2004, 103–127). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. 6 A ri is an administrative district based on the village. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For overviews of subsequent developments, including the constitution of 1948, the establishment of the National Defence Commission in light of Songun politics, and the transition to the State Affairs Commission in 2016, see Choe and Pak (2018, 70–73, 100–103, 134). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. In 1998, the original Standing Committee was abolished and a new Presidium with a president was established. In 2021, the name of the Presidium was changed to the Standing Committee of the SPA and continues the roles of the former Presidium. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. I have dealt with Chondoism and Kim Il Sung’s engagement with and assessment of the religion in an earlier work (Boer 2019, 216–222; Kim Il Sung 1994, V, 332–356). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The “five commandments” of Chondoism have a worship focus: Jumun (a 21–word formula), Chongsu (offering of clean water), Siil (church worship on Sundays), Songmi (rice donation) and Kido (prayers) (Kim Il Sung 1994, V, 321). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Other principles also have traction: “my heart is your heart,” with reference both to others and to “heaven”; “treat humans as God” in a challenge to Confucian hierarchies; “protect the nation, secure peace for the people” with reference to Korea in relation to foreign powers; “all people evolve to unity” which is relevant for Korean reunification; and “the Kingdom of heaven on earth.”. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. One of the more well-known expressions of the mass line at an artistic level are the mass gymnastics, known more informally as the “mass games” (Collective 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. A number of key texts from Kim Il Sung are pertinent, and I have drawn on two studies by scholars who have engaged in extensive research in the DPRK (Kim Il Sung 1960a, b; Kim Byong Sik 1970, 113–118; Brun and Hersch 1976, 336–341). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Competent “cadres should learn from the masses,” for without going among the masses, a super visor cannot learn, but this does not mean that everyone should draw their own conclusions, since this “would lead to a state of anarchy” (Kim Il Sung 1960a, 69). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. The 1953 reforms abolished the intermediate level of township, so that the county committee was directly connected with the ri Party committee. The number of ri was also reduced from 10,666 to 3,772. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. The question of education is beyond the remit of this chapter, save to note that the DPRK—in light of shortages in technical and educated personnel due the colonial and wartime depredations— developed a unique on-the-job educational system, as well as the concrete integration of theory and practice in the school system (Brun and Hersch 1976, 227–256). Bourgeois models would simply not work, since many bourgeois intellectuals “possessed advanced academic knowledge but a somewhat retarded ideological and political consciousness” (Brun and Hersch 1976, 248). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. The material in this section draws on a number of key resources and empirical research (Kim Il Sung 1961a; b; Kim Byong Sik 1970, 119–135; Brun and Hersch 1976, 331–360). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Substantial it was, with Kim Il Sung “accompanied by vice-premiers, heads of departments of the Party Central Committee, ministers and other officials” (Kim Il Sung 1961b, 371). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. The advance in industry should be noted. Upon liberation in 1945, there was very little production of machinery useful for economic construction; by the beginning of the 1960s substantial heavy industry had been established (Kim Il Sung 1961a, 411–412). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. These arose from detailed identification of previous problems, especially the chaotic and ad hoc nature of management (Kim Il Sung 1961b, 372–383). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. For a detailed study of the Party’s history, see Kim Ji Ho (2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. The meaning of Juche is drawn from the Chinese 主体 zhuti, which initially functioned as a translation of Marx’s use of Subjekt. It was explicitly appropriated and reshaped by Kim Il Sung for the first time at the Kalun Conference of 30 June, 1930, after which it became a consistent theme throughout his writings. Many thanks to Keith Bennett for this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Although subsumed within the people-first emphasis, the policy of Songun would be developed in terms of upgrading the military and developing nuclear deterrence capabilities (Kim Jong Un 2013a). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. The comparison between two works, one from 2019 and the other from 2021, reveals a notable change of tone. Whereas the first, by Kim Kum Hui (2019), is notably upbeat in light of the significant achievement of the previous few years (and as I noticed in late 2018), the second, by Ri Yong Ok (2021), is forthright in addressing the extraordinary turn of events in 2020 and the profound challenges faced. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. After much study, it is also increasingly obvious to me that the DPRK has the more robust and stable system of governance than the dysfunctional one in the south, so many changes would need to take place there. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)