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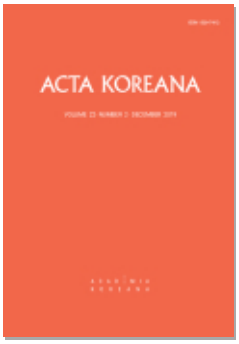

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The government of Kim Jong Il (Kim Chŏngil) modified the meaning and purpose of during the North Korean famine and the early Military-First period (1994–2002). During the economic recession after the Soviet bloc collapsed, the North Korean government was incapable of providing material rewards to workers. Thus, the state attempted to transform labor into a spiritual rather than material practice. Despite the shortage of material resources and energy, the regime had to make the workers stay in their workplaces to maintain social stability. At that time, North Korean fiction often described people who worked for spiritual enlightenment rather than for material gain. In the novel and historical prose of this period, protagonists work not for their livelihoods, but for their honorable death; they voluntarily martyred themselves for their country, party, and leader Kim Jong Il. This study explores Song Sangwŏn's *Ch'onggŏm ŭl tŭlgo* (Taking up bayonets) (2002) to examine how North Koreans worked, lived, and died at the turn of the twentieth century.

Keywords: Kim Jong Il, North Korean famine, Military-First, labor, North Korean literature

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Sŏn'gun (Military-First) politics transformed North Korean daily life in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The government of Kim Jong Il (Kim Chŏngil) (1994–2011) sought to redefine how people lived and their reasons for working by launching the policy of Military-First and Labor-Second that gave primacy to the armed forces rather than to the working classes. The meanings of labor along with the lives of the people changed in accordance with that policy. This study examines the ways in which North Korean workers lived and died during the early Military-First age (from the late 1990s to the early 2000s) and how they were described in North Korean literature of the time.

As Robert Bellah has pointed out, working is the most practical or pragmatic way to live (Bellah 2011, 1–2). Humans earn their livelihoods by working, but working also has a spiritual or emotional quality. According to Bellah's ontological account of labor, humans work for their freedom or enlightenment. Fear of death is their emotional motive for working, and they work to free themselves from the fear of death. In other words, "wide awake, grown-up men"—to borrow Alfred Schütz's words—are aware that they cannot feed themselves and eventually could die if they do not work (Schütz 1945, 537). Their fear of death, as well as their desire to be free of this fear, keeps them working (Bellah 2011, 2). In some cases, however, these aspects can be separated from each other. That is, humans can work only for their freedom from the fear of death without material gain. During the great famine in the 1990s, the North Korean government attempted to transform labor into a spiritual practice by which workers could achieve freedom from their fundamental fear of death. Incapable of providing material rewards to workers during the economic recession after the collapse of the Soviet bloc, the North Korean state highlighted the spiritual quality of work over its material reward. Despite shortages of material and energy resources, the government forced workers to stay in their workplaces to maintain social stability. Tasked with persuading them to do so, the state propaganda apparatus was responsible for changing the meaning and purpose of labor from material gain to spiritual enlightenment. This study analyzes the historical case of the North Korean famine, primarily as portrayed in the North Korean novel, *Ch'onggŏm ŭl tŭlgo* (Taking up bayonets) (2002), to explore the emotional aspect of the fear of death and the spiritual quality of the freedom from the fear of death coeval in labor at the turn of the twentieth century in North Korea.[1]

The Military-First Revolution

Before the great famine of the mid-1990s, the form of production in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) was similar to that in other countries, including its socialist allies but, unlike in the capitalist world, the state owned the means of production. Yet North Korea was the same as its capitalist counterparts in that the state mobilized its population at

[1] Kim Ŭnjŏng (2006) analyzed *Taking Up Bayonets* with a focus on the patriarchal aspect of North Korean political culture. However, my study focuses more on working as a meditative practice.

industrial sites. Its highly mechanized manufacturing industry required a colossal number of workers. Cheehyung Kim (2014) wrote that the state mobilization of the population in the large-scale mechanized manufacturing industry was a worldwide phenomenon after World War II and called it "industrialism." To Kim, this form of production flourished based on the "surplus" that was created by workers in excess of their own labor-costs. Labor power was celebrated as the only source of the surplus, and was the reason states exploited their workers.

The meaning, function, and status of labor, however, changed in the late twentieth century in North Korea when the great famine struck, and the government began to enforce its new Military-First policy to respond to the national catastrophe. Meanwhile, the Third Industrial Revolution exerted a massive effect on the entire capitalist world. Labor was no longer the primary source of surplus, not only in famine-stricken North Korea and but also in the capitalist world where information technology eliminated many jobs in the manufacturing, agricultural, and service sectors.[2] Lower wages and poorer working environments were the universal conditions for laborers in the last decade of the twentieth century. The post-Cold War economic recession damaged the workers' power of producing any surplus in the DPRK, whereas technology and capital—along with labor power—became the sources of surplus in the capitalist world. North Korea, however, was a unique case. The DPRK lost its former Soviet trade partners, had difficulty in repaying its debt to China, and failed to rebuild its old infrastructure after the collapse of the Eastern bloc. It was evident that the state needed the foreign capital and the new technology to further the maintenance and improvement of its productive capacities. The state, however, attempted to tackle the devaluation of labor—caused by the post-Cold War economic recession—by emphasizing the emotional motive and the spiritual quality of work.

The end result was horrendous. Between 240,000 and 1.17 million North Koreans died of famine-related illnesses from 1994 through 2000. The number of victims was 1-5% of the total population (Yi Sŏk 2004; Spoorenberg and Schwekendiek 2012). It was common for North Koreans to witness the death of family members or neighbors at the time. As Sandra Fahy observed, however, North Koreans scarcely believed that they were experiencing famine, although they described what they witnessed as "shocking" (Fahy 2015, 1–17). Death was everywhere but the state somehow adjusted people's emotions—particularly their fear of death. The government's strategy to allay workers' fear of death during the great famine was to transform workers into combat soldiers who were ready to die. The government called this strategy *Sŏn'gun* (Military-First) politics.

In his fictional biography of Kim Jong Il (1942–2011), *Ranam ŭi yŏlp'ung* (The craze from Ranam) (2004), North Korean writer Paek Pohŭm writes that Kim first disclosed the idea of "Military First, Labor Second" one autumn day in 1994.[3] This was the initial stage of the

[2] In the mid-1990s, Jeremy Rifkin argued that the worldwide unemployment caused by the growth of the information industry would result in the decline of market economy and the global labor force (Rifkin 1995, 3-15).

[3] The North Korean media claimed that Kim Jong Il officially declared the idea of *Sŏn'gun* politics on January 1, 1995, at Taboksol Guard Post. *Rodong sinmun* (The workers' newspaper), November 18, 2001. But Paek's (2004)

Military-First revolution, which was a paradigm shift from the traditional sense of a socialism theoretically based on Marxist political economy to the Military-First idea that put the armed forces before laborers. This shift signifies the emergence of a new form of production—the subordination of labor not to capital but to the military.

During the economic crisis of the 1990s, the DPRK had great difficulty producing surplus value through the labor process.[4] The state, however, did not open its market; it made little effort to import the latest technology and bring foreign investment to the country. Instead, the North Korean government endeavored to transform working into a meditation. Through this conversion, the process of labor produced a kind of spiritual value which contributed not only to individual mental enlightenment but also to social stability. This spiritual practice of working has religious ontological overtones. Indeed, just as monasteries did on its cenobites in medieval Europe (Agamben 2013, 21–22), Kim Jong Il's tactic in ruling the DPRK was to impose "a temporal scansion" on everyday life. Through that temporal scansion, everyday life transformed into a ritual.[5] Therefore, people in the DPRK were a part of a great cycle in a cosmos that the state built, imagined, and narrated. North Koreans followed the daily routines that the state designated and assigned, by working and sometimes participating in various meetings and government-inspired demonstrations (Lankov, Kwak, and Cho 2012, 193–214). Through temporal scansion, they were expected to experience spiritual development and edification.

The North Korean state heavily sanctified labor in the 1990s and the first decade of the twenty-first century. Yet the militarization of labor is a precondition of its consecration. In the age of Military First and Labor Second, the state wholly militarized labor. Laborers became warriors, while workplaces were akin to battlefields. In other words, the scansion of daily life changed into the rhythm of gunshots, artillery fire, and military marches. The militarization and consecration of labor is also in early North Korean written materials. The militarization of the economy intensified in the industrial and agricultural sectors from 1974, when Kim Jong Il initiated *Soktojŏn* (Speed-Battle or Speed Campaign) at the eighth full session of the fifth Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK). The state forced workers at factories, mines, and farms, to accelerate production; North Korean writers often depicted the workers as soldiers risking their lives to their mission. Just as soldiers on the frontlines are trained to be ready to die, soldier-workers in workplaces transformed into battlefields were expected to give their lives. Nietzsche's (1968) prediction during the Second Industrial Revolution—from the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century—

fictional biography suggests that Kim Jong Il presented his *Sŏn'gun* idea to the high-ranking generals one day in *mal kaŭlch'ŏl* (late autumn) in 1994. In 2009, however, the North Korean media began to make the questionable assertion that *Sŏn'gun* politics originated in Kim Jong Il's visit to an armed forces tank unit in 1960 (Yi Kyehwan 2019).

[4] In Marx's (1976) terminology, "the labor process" is "purposeful activity aimed at the production of use-values" (290). I deliberately use the terms "the labor process," "value," and "surplus value" to juxtapose Kim Jong Il's notion of Military-First and Labor-Second with Marx's idea of labor.

[5] Turning to Marcel Mauss's study of the artic Eskimo, Sonia Ryang (2012) terms the DPRK as "a perpetual ritual state" (23).

proved to be correct, at least in North Korea during the early Military-First age: "The workers should learn to feel like soldiers" (399).[6]

The North Korean militarization of labor during Kim Jong Il's rule, however, went even further: The workers should learn to feel like "bombs" and "bullets." What is distinctive in the Military-First age is that the concept of working to die—as in a North Korean song quoted in Song Sangwŏn's *Taking Up Bayonets*, "working to billow as smoke," and "working to be burned to ashes"—became dominant over the notion of working to live on the battlefields of production. This narrative of working to die maximized the disposability of the body.[7]

Production, surplus value, and economic prosperity were depicted as less important for workers at that time. Rather, North Korean authors praised the concepts of *yukt'an* (human bomb or human bullet) and *chap'ok* (suicide attack) as virtues. For examples, a North Korean social scientist Kim Ch'anggyŏng (2003) described workers as bombs and bullets ready to be fired at enemies and used as weapons (13–21). In his definition, North Korean soldier-workers were not only as combat troops but also as bullets and bombs that have the intention and consciousness of exploding and burning. They were willful weapons. This is a critical difference between the Military-First age and its previous period in terms of the militarization of labor; Kim Jong Il's government reinforced the ownership of bodies for use as weapons. To that end, North Korean media and literature highlighted the rhythm of weapons and urged workers to internalize it. This entire process of internalization is a kind of meditation; the soldier-workers repeat the daily processes of labor while they chant pro-government slogans, recite Kim Il Sung or Kim Jong Il's words, and sing paeans to the Kim family. By doing so, the workers gain a sense of serenity and peace and transcend the fear of physical pain and death. This religious and spiritual aspect of labor uniquely characterizes North Korean culture and politics under Kim Jong Il's rule.

Requiem for the Living and the Sound of Conscience

The story of Kim Namch'ŏl is an exemplary portrayal of the militarization and consecration of working. Namch'ŏl is a fictional North Korean soldier assigned to do tunneling work in Song Sangwŏn's (b. 1940) *Ch'onggŏm ŭl tŭlgo* (*Taking up bayonets*) (2002), a fictionalized biography of Kim Jong Il. His rank is "*chŏnsa*," which literally means warrior but he is actually a private (Song 2002, 70, 189, 212). He is the epitome of a North Korean solider-worker.

Namch'ŏl's division is dispatched to the site where the Kŭmgangsan Hydroelectric Power Plant will be built. His commanders order him to dig through a mountain to make a passage that will be used as a waterway but when he hears that "Official Order #0026" has come down to the division, he is devastated. The order is to move the deadline to complete the

[6] "*From the future of the worker*—Workers should learn to feel like soldiers. An honorarium, an income, but no pay! No relation between payment and achievement!" (Nietzsche 1968, 399).

[7] Kim Sŏngsu (2005) pointed out that North Korean literature did not change significantly during Kim Jong Il's rule in terms of style and theme even though Kim promulgated the new state idea of Military-First.

grand-scale dam forward, which means Namch'ŏl's job will become even more labor-intensive.

> There was, however, one soldier who was reluctant to carry out the unprecedented decision order; carrying a bucket at his side, Private Kim Namch'ŏl lay down on a heap of spoil (Song 2002, 70).[8]

This is where Song first introduces Kim Namch'ŏl in Kim Jong Il's biography. He has labored in the tunnel and knows how hard it is to do the tunneling work. By his estimate, and in reality, it will take ten years to finish the project. Yet the order is to complete the work in only one year. The order is beyond all possible reality. Therefore, he turns pale with fright and dispiritedly falls down "on a heap of spoil." Even when he returns to work, he is mentally exhausted.

> 'OK! The pit's mouth comes into sight! There, I can breathe in fresh air, as I dump out the rocks but after the short break I must come back into this tunnel. Tomorrow will be the same as today.' He continued to think. 'What about my dream? I would not be able to achieve my blissful dream of being a marine and distinguishing myself in war beyond the ocean. My military career will come to an end in this pit' (Song 2002, 73).

"Digging up," "dumping out," "taking a short break," and "digging up" again: the tedious rhythm of the labor leaves Namch'ŏl in despair. He is from a prestigious military family and dreams of distinguishing himself in war, not working in a dark, dusty tunnel; he wants to be a revered military officer like his father.

His father, Kim Tonghwan, is a navy Colonel, who composes a paean to Kim Jong Il. Colonel Kim's song for "General" Kim Jong Il is as follows:

> If I burn myself for you, I will billow as red smoke.
> If I burn myself for you, I will be burned to red ashes.
> Oh, General! I will be a human bomb for you! (Song 2002, 45)

This paean foreshadows its composer's fate. In the latter part of the biography, Colonel Kim Tonghwan killed his ten subordinates and committed suicide rather than surrender to the South Korean army after his submarine ran aground on the South Korean coast. This account is based on a real event, the Kangnŭng Submarine Infiltration Incident in 1996. According to an American source, the Director of the Maritime Department, Colonel Kim Tongwŏn, killed eleven North Koreans, including himself—or was killed along with his subordinates by someone else— on a hilltop approximately eight kilometers southwest of where the submarine had run aground (Dies 2004, 30, 32). It is quite likely that Song modelled the fictional Kim Tonghwan after the real Kim Tongwŏn but it is not certain that Colonel Kim Tongwŏn's son worked at the construction site of the Kŭmgansan Hydroelectric Power Plant. Suffice it to say that Song attempted to connect Kim Tongwŏn, who committed

[8] All translations are the author's unless otherwise indicated.

suicide to remain loyal, to the soldier-workers—both those who survived and those who died at the construction site—to create a genealogy of loyal warriors and to shift the narrative from military operations to construction.

In *Taking Up Bayonets*, Kim Tonghwan—the fictionalized character of Kim Tongwŏn—and his company perform a paean before Kim Jong Il. Listening to the song, General Kim Jong Il is deeply moved and becomes more confident of the military's fidelity. Thus convinced that his loyal army will obey and carry out all his orders, he announces the unrealistic directive to finish the construction of the dam in one year. The young soldiers, however, turn out to be less loyal than the old officers and veterans. Colonel Kim's son, Namch'ŏl, returns to P'yŏngyang on vacation and attempts to transfer his post from the construction site to a combat unit. The Colonel is furious that his son wants to avoid his mission and escape from his place of duty assigned by the Supreme Commander Kim Jong Il. For Colonel Kim, the construction site is another front line and he orders Namch'ŏl to return to his unit. In a sense, it is already too late because Private Kim encounters his own death near his place of duty.

> Then a sound came from somewhere. It sounded like a song, a crying, a murmuring. Namch'ŏl realized that it was a part of "The Partisan's Requiem" (Ppalch'isan ch'udoga) and believed that it came from the bottom of his heart and resonated in his mind but the sound was coming from elsewhere.
> There were three burial mounds on a patch of dried grass on a hill. A boy placed a branch from a green pine tree on the graves and stood before them.
> [. . .]
> "Who died?"
> "Namch'ŏl."
> The boy answered.
> "Who?"
> Namchŏl didn't hear and asked again.
> "Namch'ŏl is buried here."
> The boy spoke the name of the deceased (Song 2002, 99).

Namch'ŏl hears a requiem on the way back to his place of duty. Standing before the graves, a boy sings an elegy once sung for fallen anti-Japanese guerillas during the Japanese Occupation of Korea.[9] At first, it sounds like "a crying or a murmuring" but Namch'ŏl realizes that someone has been killed and buried on a hill at the entrance to the construction site. Thus, he asks the singing boy about who is dead. Then the boy's answer is quite shocking: Namch'ŏl himself is buried in the grave.

But, in fact, it is the boy's father who died. The tunnel in which the construction corps worked caved in and a company commander, the boy's father, was killed. The head officer of the construction site, however, lied to the boy's family to gain time to restore the body, which

[9] *Ppalch'isan ch'udoga* was used as the requiem for Kim Jong Il's funeral in 2011.

was severely damaged under the rocks. The only thing the head officer can give the bereaved family is the victim's body restored to almost the same state as when he was alive. Thus, the head officer delays handing the body to the bereaved until the recovery work is done, telling the lie that Namch'ŏl has been killed. This is why the boy is singing the requiem for Namch'ŏl. Yet, before talking to the boy, Namch'ŏl already thought the requiem came "from the bottom of his heart" and resonates "in his mind." He has "*choe ŭisik*" (a guilty conscience) (Song 2002, 102). If he had been at work with his company, Namch'ŏl would have been crushed to death under the rocks along with his company commander. He repents his absence from work, despising himself for being a survivor of his company. Finally, Namch'ŏl comes to "consider himself to be a dead man" (Song 2002, 102).

Labor and Communal Life

In the latter part of the biography, Namch'ŏl is reformed into a diligent and self-sacrificing man. This is because he preserves *ryangsim* (conscience) in his mind and regains *ŭiji* (determination or will) through an act of penance, which is labor. First, his conscience enables him to repent of his wrong-doing and of regarding himself as a dead man. His inner voice pronounces a death sentence on himself. Second, his fault is attributed to lack of will or determination. In other words, it is because of his weak will that he could not withstand the hard labor and ran away from the tunnel in which he should have died with his company's soldiers. The second half of the biography, thus, focuses on how he is reformed and how he achieves his purpose that was given to him by the state.

Therefore, it is necessary to examine the two keywords—*ryangsim* (conscience) and *ŭiji* (determination or will)—to understand the meaning of Namch'ŏl's story. These interrelated notions remind us of a Hasidic proverb, "Be the master of your will and the slave of your conscience," cited in the North Korean magazine *Chosŏn munhak* (2014). This means that human action is at once invigorated by the will and checked by the conscience. In the case of North Korea, this psychological system is embedded in the labor process; through work and the rhythm of labor people develop their willpower and expand their consciences.

Kim Jong Il urged writers and artists to internalize the rhythm of labor by dispatching them to workplaces such as farms, factories, mines, and construction sites. Before forcing other people to incorporate the psychological system, he imposed it on writers and artists whom he called "the engineers of the [human] soul" in socialist states (Zhdanov 1950).

As leader of the Department of Agitation and Propaganda since the late 1960s, Kim Jong Il revised almost every important notion in North Korean art and philosophy to emphasize fidelity to his father, Kim Il Sung as the highest virtue.[10] Kim Jong Il even modified the concept of *ryangsim*. He accentuated "ch'angjakchŏk ryangsim" (creative conscience) in a

[10] Kim Jong Il dismissed Kim Toman, who had been reluctant to establish Kim Il Sung's cult of personality, as the Secretary of the Agitprop at the Fifteenth Plenary Session of the Fourth Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) in 1967 (Yi Chongsŏk 2000, 498–99).

speech in 1992 to evaluate the serialized film, *Minjok kwa unmyŏng* (Nation and destiny), calling "artists and writers" the mouthpiece for "ryangsim" of "sidae" (the age) and "inmin taejung" (popular masses).

> Writers and artists should prepare (*chunbi*) for being upright and innocent persons who have party conscience (*tangchŏk ryangsim*). This conscience sprouts from their loyalty to the party and President Kim Il Sung… Their conscience should be concretely represented in their writing and art. Writers and artists are the mouthpieces for the conscience of the age and of the popular masses. . . In order to have creative conscience (*ch'angjakchŏk ryangsim*), they need humanistic self-cultivation (*suyang*) (Kim Chŏngil 2012, 46–47).

He employs a unique notion of "tangchŏk ryangsim" (party conscience), claiming that this kind of conscience "sprouts from their loyalty to the party" and his father Kim Il Sung. It seems that "the party" indicates Kim Jong Il himself, who was once called "tang chungang" (party center). For the writers and artists who are loyal to his father and himself, Kim Jong Il highlights preparation (*chunbi*) and self-cultivation (*suyang*) but what did Kim Jong Il mean by these terms? What preparations do the writers and the artists need to make? And how can they engage in self-cultivation?

The answers are in labor and communal life. Writers should live and work together with the people. Even in the late 1960s, Kim Jong Il had urged prospective writers and artists to "lead a sound organizational life" and "perform a great deal of physical labor for society." On October 8, 1968, at a talk to graduates from the Department of Korean Language and Literature of Kim Il Sung University, he stated that North Korean society required "healthy people who are ideologically and mentally sound and forged physically like steel" (Kim Chŏngil 1982a, 391). He attested that communal life and labor ensure the future writers' and artists' mental and physical health. These processes of preparation and self-cultivation became institutionalized and systematized as Kim Jong Il exercised leadership in the field of North Korean art and literature.

The following is an example of this institutionalization process. A renowned Korean-American journalist, Cho Kwangdong (b. 1945), interviewed North Korean writers Rim Chongsang (b. 1933) and Nam Taehyŏn (b. 1947), when he visited Pyongyang in 1991. Hearing that writers in North Korea receive special treatment, including high salaries from the state, Cho expresses concern about the writers' being a privileged class. Rim, differing with Cho, said, "You cannot see the writers in P'yŏngyang because they go on-site to work with factory workers, farmers, and fishermen. Because they live together with the common people in factories, farms, and fishing villages, they cannot be a privileged class" (Cho 1996, 157). Nam added, "The writers are not a privileged class, but a revolutionary class. I worked in the Hwanghae Steel Mill for three years to write *Ch'ŏngch'un songga* (*A Hymn of Youth*)" (Cho 1996, 158). This interview clearly illustrates how North Korean authors cultivated their minds and prepared to write. Labor and the communal life were the way of self-cultivation

and preparation.[11] This was applicable not only to writers but also to people across the social spectrum. These activities helped the workers, including writers in the industrial sites, to gain will power and nurture conscience. In this vein, labor transformed into a meditative practice that cultivated workers' inner strength.

Labor as a Meditation

Labor was a meditation during the early Military-First age and the great famine in North Korea. Meditation is a spiritual practice for self-control, self-cultivation, or governing the self. Labor, including office work and manual labor in the modern age, performs a function as a spiritual practice to train one's mind and suppress one's negative feelings. In other words, doing work is a manner of both individual and communal meditation. Meditation can be a solitary action. Yet if it is practiced in the form of labor—however individual or cooperative the labor is—it will contribute to building a sober and rational community. This well-designed mode of social control and self-regulation was not invented in modern times. As Giorgio Agamben has pointed out, monasteries in medieval Europe devised manual labor as a way of meditation. Citing *The Institutes* by John Cassian—also known as John the Ascetic—Agamben argued that manual labor was not separated from meditation; more accurately, it was not separated from the recitation of Scriptures (Agamben 2013, 25).

The entire genealogy of work ethics is beyond the scope of this study. It is enough to see Max Weber's study of the capitalist spirit, or Protestant ethic, to understand how labor is intertwined with spiritual, religious cultivation. Just as Nietzsche said that there is no relationship between payment and achievement, Weber argued that wages cannot correspond to labor. This is somewhat distinct from—but not directly opposite to—Karl Marx's (1976) discussion on labor in which he attempts to clarify how "labor process" contributes to the "production" of "use-value," and thus highlights fair shares for workers (283–306). Weber, like Nietzsche, believes that spiritual impetus is more important than material stimulation in the labor process. According to him, material gain is the outcome of labor but should not be its end. He cites an example of "traditionalism," which is contrasted with "capitalism," as a standard of the work ethic. Weber (1948) says that, when the "modern employer" adopts "a system of piece-rates" for "speeding-up harvesting," he faces the problem of the laborer's work ethic; the system is designed for "the increase in results and intensity of the work", but the traditional worker reacts to the increase "not by increasing, but by decreasing the amount of his work" (58–61) by increasing his leisure time. The rhythm and the speed of his life are different from those of the worker with a capitalist spirit. Thus, Weber contrasts the capitalist—Protestant—concept of labor with the traditionalist attitude to work.

[11] In Kim Jong Il's speech (1992), "suyang" particularly refers to the process by which writers develop the capacity to withstand and embrace harsh criticism of their works from their audience, peer writers, and most importantly the party and the leader.

> [Labor] must [. . .] be performed as if it were an absolute end in itself, a calling. But such an attitude is by no means a product of nature. It cannot be evoked by low wages or high ones alone, but can only be the product of a long arduous process of education (Weber 1948, 62).

Weberian labor is characterized by a certain kind of rhythm. High wages or "a system of piece-rates" cannot accelerate the speed of work. Instead, the quick and steady pace of the labor is ensured by "a long arduous process of education." As a result, it is considered to be and performed as a sacred "calling." This sacred labor cannot be a subject of doubt, because that is forbidden. According to the Durkheim's (1995) definition, "sacred" means something "set apart and forbidden" (44). Once something becomes sacred, it is forbidden to doubt and challenge it. Hence, sacred labor cannot be an object of contemplation or suspicion, but should be regarded as an ultimate end.

Marx also shed light on the spiritual aspect of labor by emphasizing the willful purpose of the process. He defines the laborer as the willful conductor of production, comparing "the worst architect" to "the best of bees." He says that the former "builds the cell in his mind," while the latter is not conscious of his purpose (Marx 1976, 284). Here is the difference between Weber and Marx: contrary to Weber, Marx does not absolutize labor. Rather, he differentiates purposeful labor from mindless work. For Marx, labor is not an absolute end but can be categorized according to whether or not the worker has purpose. Marx extols human dignity vis-à-vis "the materials of nature" in his description of labor: the interaction between man and nature. Marx (1976) argues that labor is a movement through which man transforms the materials of nature and even his own nature (283). Through labor, he adds, man is able to place nature and its changes under his rule.

Kim Jong Il's core principle of Juche is related to Marx's ontological understanding of labor. Kim Jong Il attests that the Juche idea sheds an epoch-making light on the relationship between man and nature and man and society by defining "man" as the agent who "transforms nature and society to be more useful and beneficial to him" (Kim Jong Il 1982b, 12). However, Kim Jong Il's thinking about man's mastery of the world is not his original idea at all. He highlights three elements—not only man and nature, but also society—that comprise the world and history. This is similar to what Marx and Engels (1906) portrayed in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, originally published in 1848, which asserts that the fall of the bourgeoisie and "the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable" (32). Yet, Kim's thought is not an exact replica of the Marxist idea. There cannot be aimless work in a socialist state from the Juche point of view, whereas workers can reject involuntary labor in Marxist logic. North Korean socialism excludes the possibility of the passive proletariat since they are the masters of production in the state. The subject of Marx's study is capitalism in which labor can be involuntary and should be commoditized. Kim Jong Il's theory of labor is based on the distinction between capitalism and socialism. Socialism itself is the purpose of labor. This is to say that the construction of a socialist country through labor is essential to the proletarian revolution. If a worker is deliberately absent from work, he or she should

be considered to be reactionary or anti-revolutionary. In other words, Kim Jong Il prohibits doubts about and challenges to labor itself or its purpose, labelling sabotage or refusal to work as counterrevolutionary behavior. Interestingly, Kim's idea of labor is rather similar to the Weberian concept because both sanctify labor.

This is not to say that the Juche idea has been influenced by Weberianism. There are differences between the two in terms of the idea of labor. Kim Jong Il consecrates the purpose of labor, whereas Weber sanctifies labor itself. For Kim, labor should be performed for the sake of building a socialist economy, the completion of the revolution, and, most of all, the party and the leader who defines its aims. In this way, the party and the leader—Kim Jong Il and Kim Il Sung—become sacred. They become the objects of workers' unconditional loyalty. In this regard, Kim Jong Il (1992) said in 1967:

> It is important to teach the workers to love labor. The workers are the masters of production. But it is not the case that they take such a Communist attitude by nature. We must strengthen education about labor so that all the people in our country regard labor as that which is most sacred and most honorable and consider that they devote all their power and knowledge to their work for their fatherland (*choguk*) and people (*inmin*), for their society (*sahoe*) and community (*chiptan*), as the most sublime duty (*sunggohan ŭimu*) (221).[12]

The main argument of the lecture given on June 13, 1967, is that moral-political impetus is more important than material-pecuniary stimulation to make people "love labor." Although, Kim Jong Il also said that he does not refuse the strategic use of "material" rewards.

Kim Jong Il claimed that North Korea had undergone a transition from socialism to communism. Kim argued that the vestiges of capitalism and imperialism in the socialist economy diverted the workers' attention from building a communist society, and thus the state could strategically please the workers' pecuniary interests. The key point of his address, however, was that the spiritual impetus to work is more critical so the state should teach and enlighten people to love to work. Here again, Kim underlined the relationship between labor and communal life. The will, which is trained through labor, is entwined with the conscience, which is nurtured by communal life. Workers should "regard labor as that which is most sacred and most honorable." There is "no relation between payment and achievement," as in Nietzsche's *Will to Power*. Labor itself should be considered as "an absolute end," as Weber also claims in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Kim absolutized labor by attaching sanctity to its purpose. In so doing, labor is sublimated to a sacred practice for the sake of the fatherland, people, society and commune. This "most sublime duty" is exactly what the warrior Kim Namch'ŏl's voice within tells him.

[12] It is possible that the speeches Kim Jong Il gave in the 1960s were manipulated later by North Korean propagandists. There is no creditable source proving that Kim Jong Il gave those speeches when he was in his twenties.

Dying to Self and the Theater of Cruelty

Sanctified are the purpose of labor, the leader who defines it, and the labor itself. And finally, the conductor of labor, the worker, becomes sacred. Yet before he is made sacred, the worker is excommunicated or experiences the fear of excommunication in North Korean literature under Kim Jong Il's rule. Central characters in *Ryŏksa ŭi taeha* (*The Great River of History*) (1998), *P'yŏngyang ŭn sŏnŏnhanda* (*A Declaration from P'yŏngyang*) (1997), *Kyesŭngja* (*The Successors*) (2002), and *Yeji* (*Wisdom*) (1990; 1995), and many other protagonists in North Korean literature undergo the horror of excommunication or ostracism from the organizations with which they are affiliated. Namch'ŏl in *Taking Up Bayonets* is one such cursed hero. After meeting the boy singing the requiem for him and hearing the voice within, Namch'ŏl is seized with the hallucination of his excommunication.

> Namch'ŏl closed his eyes. Then the people he pictured in his mind started to ascend to a noble and beautiful world he dared not approach, and soon they disappeared. That world left Namch'ŏl and flew farther and farther away… He sighed deeply. He thought that the world would not accept or embrace him anymore. He had lost his previous right to work and he was stripped of the right to die because he had already died (Song 2002, 103).

Namch'ŏl considered himself to be already dead; not biologically extinguished but at the end of his social life: excommunicated. This is a recurring motif in North Korean literature. A protagonist makes a mistake and is expelled from his community or punished to such an extent that he feels ostracized. Kim Jong Il, however, gives Namch'ŏl another chance to redeem himself; Kim sends him a new social life. This new life is "the right to work" and "die." As in the typical North Korean novel at the turn of the twentieth century, Kim Jong Il confers the right to work and die on Namch'ŏl when he meets the leader. The meeting with Kim Jong Il is a prerogative that a minimal number of soldiers can enjoy. Thus, the supervisor of the tunneling work urges Namch'ŏl to share his glorious and honorable experience with other soldier-workers. Namch'ŏl, now a born-again worker, delivers an address, or more accurately, he gives his testimony to tens of thousands of soldier-workers.

> "Comrades! Die to self! And try to emulate him! Be a General Kim Jong Il-type soldier! Then, and only then, you can put the slogan, 'Repay his trust with our loyalty,' into practice."
> Experiencing unusual mental elevation, he could not see the tens of thousands in the audience or hear the sounds of their hands clapping.
> Namch'ŏl held the microphone more tightly and cried out enthusiastically:
> "Yes, verily! Only the Juche-type blood must run through our bodies. Even if it is given by your parents, wrong blood must not be mixed in. Never let it happen! If any of you allows that to happen, he will become a diminished being (*nayakhan chonjae*), a forsaken

> being (*pŏrim pannŭn chonjae*) excommunicated from the ranks of the singular heart and shared body (*ilsim tongch'e ŭi taeo*)" (Song 2002, 214).

This is the North Korean version of *The Gospel of John,* in which Jesus tells Nicodemus, "You must be born again" (The Gospel of John 3:3–7 *King James Bible Online*). As Sin Hyŏnggi put it, "the loss of the self" is "the precondition of the rebirth," and this universal motif is what North Korean literature has striven to narrate (Sin 2003, 69). In other words, the concept of dying to self is a main theme in the North Korean version of confession. Destruction and creation of the body—death and birth of life—forms a great cycle that the leader defines and controls.

It is tempting to say that Christianity influenced the North Korean practice of self-destruction. While there are philosophical aspects to consider that relate the North Korean version of "dying to self" to Christianity, this kind of narrative is quite pervasive in several religious traditions. Some might recall the Chinese Chan (Zen) monk Huineng (638–713) asking about the "original face (benlai mianmu in Chinese; pollae myŏnmok in Korean)" from Namch'ŏl's testimony. Huineng, the sixth and last Patriarch of Chinese Chan Buddhism, told a person who sought enlightenment from the revered monk, "What did your face look like before your parents were born?" North Korean art and literature make a great effort to portray the faces of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il. They become the original faces for all North Koreans by erasing people's individual faces. In *Taking Up Bayonets*, Namch'ŏl urges his audience to return to the "original face," which is more crucial for their life than the "blood" that their parents have given them.

Thus Zen Buddhism, Christianity, and the North Korean practice of dying to self may have something in common. This similarity is also found in Deleuzian thought on "body without organ (BwO)" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 158). Yet if we introduce the Deleuzian concept to the terminology of self-destruction and returning to the original face, it would be obvious how distinctive the North Korean or the Christian narrative of dying to self is from Huineng's teachings. Concerning this difference, it is helpful to turn to South Korean philosopher Yi Chin'gyŏng's examination of "body without organ." Yi juxtaposed Huineng's anecdote to body without organ. To be more specific, Yi deployed Huineng's teaching of original face to clarify the meaning of body without organ as the early, premature stage of life—such as eggs—that still preserves possibility, potentiality, and power (*potentia*; *puissance*) (Yi 2002, 436–37). This notion can also be understood as "desire" for "one's own annihilation," and "the power to annihilate" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 164–65). Yi Chin'gyŏng shed light on the possible lineage from Huineng's original face to the Deleuzian body without organ. The body without organ and returning to the original face are opposed to the notion of dying to self. Namch'ŏl dedicates all the power (*potentia*; *puissance*), which has been generated by the practice of self-destruction, to the Leader Kim Jong Il, by suggesting that the audience should resemble "General Kim Jong Il." The "General Kim Jong Il-type" body is what Deleuze and Guattari meant by "organization of the organs called the organism," which they term "the enemy" of "the body without organ." The two French thinkers pointed out God's monopoly

on organs, saying that God "cannot bear the body without organ, because He pursues it and rips it apart so He can be first, and have the organism be first" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 158–59). In the Christian and the North Korean narrative of dying to self, all power is monopolized by the absolute being—God or leader—and the organs are inosculated into an "organism."

> BwO (Body without Organ). Yes, the face has a great future, but only if it is destroyed, dismantled. On the road to the asignifying and asubjective (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 171).

In another chapter of *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) examine the term "faciality" and relate it to the notion of BwO. "The face" that "has a great future" is what Huineng meant by "original face." This earliest form-of-life can be anything in the future. The North Korean narrative of "dying to self," on the contrary, destroys the future. The present is already the future and the end of "the road to the asignifying and asubjective." Kim Jong Il's face already exists. In Kim Namch'ŏl's testimony, the soldiers are told to transform themselves into "organs" and form the "organization of the organs called the organism." They all are signified by Kim Jong Il and expected to undergo a metamorphosis into an organ under Kim Jong Il's face.

Here it is important to note that, in North Korean literature, the notion of "dying to self" is intertwined with the narrative of "working to die." In this cosmos of Juche, human beings must exhaust their lives by working in order to be born again. They are the arms and the feet under Kim Jong Il's face, and labor is the "calling" of those organs. Thus amputation and inosculation must be described as purification and consecration. The North Korean version of the "Theater of Cruelty" requires "blood," and this cruelty is "identified with a kind of severe moral purity which is not afraid to pay life the price it must be paid" (Artaud 1958, 124).

Private Kim Namch'ŏl appeals to the audience for self-purification, suggesting only Juche-type blood run in their bodies. Only after purifying their bodies with the blood of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il, Namch'ŏl says, the soldier-workers are able to be a part of the ranks of the singular heart and shared body (*ilsim tongch'e ŭi taeo*). The process of purification changes a life into a part of a great being's body—sublimates it into Kim Jong Il and Kim Il Sung's blood, bone, flesh, and cells. The irony, however, is that this sanctification degrades the human body into a disposable form and human labor into a suicidal practice. To protect a life, blood can be shed, bones can be broken, flesh can be cut, and cells can be lost. To protect *sunoebu* (the leaders), life, body, and labor can be treated in such a way.

This form-of-life is almost the same as what Giorgio Agamben means by "*homo sacer*, sacred man, who may be killed and not yet sacrificed" (Agamben 1998, 12). The difference, however, is that the North Korean sacred man, unlike *homo sacer* as bare life, is deemed not a bare life but a qualified life. This qualification appears as education and enlightenment, which are conducted through labor and communal life. Just as, to borrow Max Weber's phrase,

labor must "be performed as if it were an absolute end in itself, a calling," death must "be performed as if it were an absolute end in itself, a calling" in the narrative of the North Korean *homo sacer*. Here the speed of life, or the life-span, matters. Just as the Weberian notion of labor connotes a heightened working speed, the North Korean concept of death connotes an accelerated speed of life and death. This acceleration is enabled by making death a voluntary action. Even death by accident, disease, poverty, and war should be described as self-directed and willing actions. During and after the great famine (1994-1998), North Korean literature often praised suicide—in fact, forced or accidental death—as the noblest and the most heroic finale of a life. For the country, for the people, and for the leader, soldier-workers were portrayed as *chap'ok hada* (exploding themselves), expending their lives. This is the main plot that North Korean literature reiterated in the wake of the "Military-First revolution" (1994 or 1995), and this is the way the Kim government reformed North Korean mentality and interiority.

The North Korean official idea of Military-First places laborers in the conditions of war. Even if a worker is killed in an industrial accident, he or she would be considered to have been killed in action. This is qualified death for bare life/*zoē*. Once one dies to self, one is stripped of the right to live. One must be born again, as Jesus says to Nicodemus in *The Gospel of John*. One is not a normal being, but an exceptional being. Yet this exceptionality becomes a basic condition of life during the *Sŏn'gun* era. This seemingly "qualified" but actually "bare life" should accomplish the purpose of one's life by accelerating the speed of life—in other words, dying willingly.

"The Reservoir of Death"

In 2005, a P'yŏngyang-born South Korean journalist, Han Yŏngjin, interviewed a North Korean defector who used the alias Im Yŏngsu. Im worked as a ditch-digger in Kosŏng Prefecture in Kangwŏn Province, North Korea from 2002 through 2004, to construct the Kŭmgangsan Hydroelectric Power Plant, later renamed the Anbyŏn Youth Hydroelectric Power Plant. This is the setting of *Taking Up Bayonets*. According to his statement as a witness, Kosŏng Prefecture turned into "a city of the dead" due to the excessive labor imposed on the workers and the extremely tight construction schedule.

> A mountain in front of my base was covered by a great number of tombs. Thirty-thousand workers were buried there. Their unit was affiliated with the 615th Supervision Bureau, which was responsible for building the Anbyŏn Youth Hydroelectric Plant. My fellow soldiers and I worked as ditch-diggers in the unit. We called the Imnam Dam "the reservoir of death" (*chugŭm ŭi ŏnje*) and the ditch "the tunnel of death" (*chugŭm ŭi kul*) (Han 2006).

This reveals the sequel to *Taking Up Bayonets*. Kim Namch'ŏl's unit was finally rescued and

most of them survived. The factual account, however, was more horrendous than the fictionalized history. Im Yŏngsu attested that, by 2004, thirty-thousand workers were buried at the mountain in front of his base while building the Kŭmgangsan Hydroelectric Power Plant. Although not mentioned above, ninety-five out of one-hundred soldiers in Im's unit were killed, severely injured, or moved out due to malnutrition. The construction of the power plant consumed them. Only five remained healthy during their tour of duty.

The fictional Private Kim survives while the defector revealed that thirty-thousand died at the actual construction site. It made no difference whether one lived or died during the Military-First age. What was important was whether the workers completed their mission. This study has examined how the North Korean government persuaded people to believe this idea, how the state transformed them into combat soldiers, and how the regime made them give up their lives. In sum, Kim Jong Il's government attempted to devise labor as a means of self-destruction and urged the people to shorten their life-spans by working to death. Labor was at once a collective meditation and productive activity during and after the great famine. In North Korean literature, workers overcome their fear of death. They willingly martyr themselves. The defector's interview, however, indicates that North Koreans never conquered their fundamental fear of death. Rather, they were overwhelmed by the rhythm of working and the cycle of daily life. The state could transform labor into a spiritual practice to keep laborers working but it was almost impossible for the state to free workers from their fear of death.

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