**Anthropological Study of Totalitarianism: North Korea**

Project outline

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**INTRODUCTION**

After more than a century of practice, cultural anthropology as a scholarly discipline has made tremendous contribution toward understanding humanity, informing us of diverse mechanisms by which societies recreate themselves. Its primary method has been and continues to be ethnographic fieldwork, which is becoming increasingly innovative, with the use of digital data as well as more creative and interpretive uses of traditional media. The question, then, would be: what if cultural anthropology were to try engaging with a society that does not grant fieldwork access—notably, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, or North Korea? This research concerns such case, by attempting to place North Korea within the grid of cultural anthropological knowledge. Three specific aims are involved in this research: One—To place North Korea in the context of currently existing anthropological knowledge; Two—To render the mechanism that secures the connection between the people and the leader in North Korea intelligible in the anthropological context; Three—To explore the agency, with the focus on the concept of self, in North Korea. The attainment of these aims constitutes the intellectual merit of this research.

In this project, I will explore mechanisms and liturgy of North Korea’s state rituals, rules pertaining to everyday lives and their generative processes in work place and organizational unit, and contents of study materials North Koreans are assigned to
read. Rather than labeling North Korea as totalitarianism, the researcher will take a detour and look at the similar processes of institutionalization of normative self, in this case, the example of early Christian monastic order, in order to interrogate North Korean culture and its production of self in an original and effective manner.

By studying North Korea, this project simultaneously addresses one branch of cultural anthropology that is removed from ethnographic fieldwork: the method that studies culture at a distance. Tracing its genesis in the culture and personality school and the enemy studies during WWII, American cultural anthropology was largely successful in producing a body of data on enemy nations without involving traditional ethnographic fieldwork. Most notably, Ruth Benedict’s *Chrysanthemum and the Sword* presented a persuasive account of Japanese culture without a day of fieldwork in Japan (Benedict 1948). During the height of the cold War, cultural anthropologists were engaged in studies of cultures behind the “iron curtain” as shown by Margaret Mead and her cohort of scholars that engaged in culture at a distance approach (Mead & Métraux 2000). By bringing North Korea into the foreground of cultural anthropology, this proposed research revisits culture and personality/culture at a distance approach, critically reevaluates it, and updates its productive aspect, notably, the study of the self. The expectation of the proposed research is that by interrogating the concept of self and agency in North Korea, the research would make advancement in the anthropological study of totalitarianism. For, there appears to be an interesting affinity between the study of self as advanced by the culture and personality scholars and the anthropological study of totalitarianism. This research intends to explore this connection further.

In the long run, the research aims to inform a broader community of scholars, policymakers, activists, and concerned citizens of the cultural mechanism of North Korea on one hand and to advance cultural anthropological knowledge on North Korea and totalitarianism on the other.

What we know — or do not know

Founded in 1948, in the wake of the three-year partition of the Korean peninsula by the Soviet Union (in the north) and the American Military Government (in the south), North Korea has maintained a remarkable consistency in terms of its self-closure toward the Western world, its unique practice of cult of personality regarding the lineage of the original leader, Kim Il Sung, and the lasting endurance imposed upon its people in terms of both economic hardship as well as tight political control.
This is not to suggest that there are not enough books presently on North Korea. Far from it—in the recent decade, there has been a spate of books on North Korea by diverse writers including historians, political scientists, journalists, former diplomats, defectors from North Korea, and even fiction writers (Armstrong 2004; Cha 2013; Cumings 2004; Demick 2009; Everard 2012; Johnson 2013; Harrard & Noland 2009; Harris 2007; Kang 2005; Lankov 2007; Lankov 2013; Martin 2004; Ryang 2009a). As such, the world knows about this nation—that it is an oppressive state equipped with concentration or labor camps for dissidents and political prisoners; that its food shortage is acute; and that its China border has become insecure and thousands of North Koreans have crossed the Yalu River over to China and beyond. Yet cultural anthropologists make up a conspicuous gap in terms of North Korea’s author inventory. As a result, North Korea remains an unknown in the intellectual domain of cultural anthropology.

In this light, two recent books deserve a mention. *North Korea: Beyond Charismatic Politics* by Heonik Kwon and Byung Ho Chung (Kwon & Chung 2012) and my own, *Reading North Korea: An Ethnological Inquiry* (Ryang 2012), according to one reviewer, are the notable first attempts to fill the current gap (Song 2013). Kwon and Chung, both anthropologists, in their seminal interpretation of North Korea’s state structure and leader worship develop and apply a new way of interpreting North Korea by using Max Weber’s concept of charisma. But their book is far from anthropological. This is not simply because they did not conduct extensive on-the-ground fieldwork—such is impossible at this time for any outside researcher; this is related to the fact that the authors’ eagerness to create a new definition of North Korea in the western social scientific vocabulary inadvertently limits their interpretation. Rather than first recognizing North Korea as a cultural entity, the authors carry out a top-down analysis of North Korea and leave much of the North Korean culture itself unanalyzed and without interpretation.

My 2012 book makes an advance in placing North Korea and the study of it within the existing understanding of cultural anthropology. By looking at North Korea’s celebration of the eternity of Kim Il Sung’s existence, the book brings North Korea in close comparison with Marcel Mauss’s dual morphology in an Eskimo society, and it makes substantial reference to culture at a distance school and its method (Mauss 1979). However, rather than explaining North Korea’s culture, as must classical ethnographic works have done, the book remains an intellectualized version of North Korea’s self-portrait. The fact that this book’s main source consisted only of literature is in part
responsible for this limitation, rendering the book overly logo-centric and rhetoric-oriented.

Prior to my 2012 publication, I published an edited volume entitled *North Korea: Toward a Better Understanding* (Ryang 2009a). This book was published as a result of an international symposium I received funding for and organized in the University of Iowa in 2007. Divided into six chapters covering the areas of history, international relations, literature, cinema, and human rights, the book addresses multiple angles from which the scholars may approach North Korea. My own chapter engages with the study of love as North Koreans would understand—notably, love for and of the Great Leader that functions as a connecting point among individuals (Ryang 2009b). This book’s interdisciplinary approach is its strength, but by the same token, it cannot be seen as a contribution to cultural anthropology per se.

To address the current gap in anthropological knowledge of North Korea is the main purpose of the proposed research. The research proposes to do so by gathering substantially larger quantity of hitherto unexamined archival, visual, and ethnological materials and also by deepening ethnological interpretation of North Korea.

In order to address the current absence of anthropological knowledge of North Korea in a more theoretically engaging manner, I believe that the interrogation of two distinct areas—one, methodological, and another, theoretical—will result in not only making North Korea relevant to cultural anthropology but also contributing to knowledge production in cultural anthropology in general.

**How we can approach**

The above-mentioned interrogation of two distinct areas includes: 1) to critically reexamine culture and personality school as method of anthropological inquiry and 2) to develop a study of self in totalitarian society. These two are indissolubly connected, as this section will argue.

As mentioned in the outset of this proposal, one of the possible directions that the anthropological study of North Korea will point the researcher to would be a critical revisiting of the study of culture at a distance/culture and personality school due to the current lack of access for outside researchers to this country. It is understandable that today, in the post-Cold War era, anthropologists have largely forgotten the culture and personality school associated with Franz Boas and his students including Benedict and
Mead. At the same time, it would be important to remember that not an insignificant part of American cultural anthropological knowledge has been produced from within this tradition, and many conceptual tools that culture and personality school constructed have been inherited without conscious and therefore, critical appraisal and reexamination.

One example of such instances is the anthropology of self. American cultural anthropology, in contradistinction to British social anthropology, has focused on the notion of self from early on. Its psychological proclivity has in part resulted in advancement of medical anthropology, for example, while in Britain, sociology of medicine advanced much more robustly and medical anthropology is still not quite a well-established subfield within the discipline of social anthropology. It is true that since the mid-1980s, especially after the impact of the intervention by texts with interest in the agency and its role, intersubjectivity produced in the fieldwork setting, and co-production of the selves, including *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Clifford & Marcus 1986) or *Tuhami: Portrait of a Moroccan* (Crapanzano 1980), no longer the native’s self is taken for granted; no longer American or western anthropological selves are taken as a given or as some opaque and authoritarian entity; no longer American anthropologists would simply study the process of growing-up in some remote areas and assert that they have discovered a bundle of discrete and distinct attributes of the native self (e.g. Mead 1928). In the subsequent decade, intellectually engaging and self-critical works on cultural selves were produced, where anthropologists presented a conscious acknowledgement of their own complex positions vis-à-vis people they met in the field (Kondo 1990, e.g.). It is also true that some headed toward writing more about themselves (Behar 1996, e.g.). In sum, after the so-called reflexivity turn (some might prefer post-modern turn), the anthropological study of self has come to be understood, as it were, in separation from the culture and personality school.

Historically, self was actively explored in the culture and personality school. Ruth Benedict’s aforementioned volume, *Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, written exclusively for the purpose of understanding the enemy nation, in this case, the Japanese, is a fine example of such an endeavor. The book is a study of self in a society that comes very close to totalitarianism, that of Japan under the military regime during the WWII (Benedict 1946). Unlike Mead, who was more psychologically oriented, Benedict utilized Japan’s literary tradition to a greater extent in order to explain Japanese culture (and not explain away, like many of her contemporaries have done [Gorer 1942, e.g.]). Benedict looked at the way Japanese individuals were related to the Emperor and from
within this direct connection between the Emperor and His subjects, she drew out the logic that supported the seemingly irrational behavior such as kamikaze sortie bombing. According to the way Japanese individuals conceptualized the emotional commitment that culminated in the notion of loyalty toward the Emperor, dying for Him was logical. Similarly resisting the possibility of becoming a POW of the enemy and therefore, killing themselves rather than being captured alive was rendered understandable in Benedict’s explanation. The book was, moreover, not a mere cultural relativism; it became a critical intervention that formulated postwar Japanese culture at large, and more immediately proved to be extremely useful in the Allied Occupation of Japan which lasted for seven years between 1945 and 1952. Indeed, even as late as the 1980s, Japanese scholars intensely debated why and how it was possible for *Chrysanthemum and the Sword* to become one of the most (if not the most) authoritative texts on postwar Japanese culture (Ryang 2004: Ch.1).

In her book, Benedict started, yet conspicuously left incomplete, to look closely into the notion of the self. Given the historical limitations of culture and personality school — its almost rough generalization, simplistic labeling, and above all, the US-centered approach to others — it is understandable. While Benedict looks at the larger structure of the formation of the emperor-focused loyalty of the Japanese, she does not address any aspects of disciplinary process of cultivating such disposition, generation of rules, and national rituals pertaining to the emperor worship. Her use of rhetorical data is predominantly keyword-oriented, by highlighting some words such as *chūi* (loyal to the Emperor) and *kō* (filial piety) out of context, rather than historically and sociologically grounding them in a body of discourse. Thus, in her accounts of Japanese cultural pattern and the self that this pattern produces remain largely unexamined; she introduces it and labels it, but leaves it unexamined. Concrete processes of its production, disciplinary regime and rule-generative mechanism, and the role played by the state structure and governmental centralization are outside the purview of her inquiry. The self thus presented is devoid of time, or historical specificity, and hence, the emergence of timeless “Japanese self.” These shortcomings that resulted from limitations of the culture and personality school approach need to be amended.

In this project, self and agency emerge as particularly interesting in thinking about seemingly selfless behavior frequently assumed in the totalitarian societies such as North Korea. How do we study self and agency in North Korea, then? This posits a number of challenges. To begin with, North Korea is generally understood as a society where no genuine individuality exists; it is often deemed as a place where millions of population move and think in the same, robot-like way, exactly in the manner that the
state demands of them. Its state rituals are replete with the representation as well as actual acting out of collective ideals and flawless simultaneity displayed by thousands of North Koreans. How do we begin to understand concept of self in such a society? What is the function of the state in the society as this? Is studying the self and agency in this type of society even possible? These questions seem to point to the currently unmet intellectual need of knowing more about self and agency in the so-called totalitarian society.

Rather than simply label North Korea as totalitarianism, the proposed research would like to take a de tour and explore paralleling processes of generative mechanism of culturally and historically specific self. In this regard, early Christian institutions appear to be of particular relevance. As Foucault with reference to the Christian ascetic movement of the first centuries and Agamben exploring the fourth and fifth century Christian monastic life have shown, contrary to the superficial observation, in the communities that require collective commitment, self comes to bear an utmost importance (Foucault 1986; Agamben 2013). This is because without locating the self first, individuals will not be able to subject themselves to the rules and dominant norms in a more effective and complete way. Agamben’s use of time is of great interest here: he highlights in his study of early Christian monastic life, the way time became relevant in the organization of the monks’ lives, administering the specific prayer and allocating specific labor. This went hand in hand with the infusing one’s life with total belief—even during the menial work, monks were supposed to devote themselves mentally for worshipping the Lord. Similarly, the practice of reading and meditation came to hold the key in disciplining them into a being of total devotion. Here, too, one’s identification of self is important: without first identifying oneself, one cannot be selfless.

I suspect that the studies of early Christian monastic life unexpectedly offers a useful clue to understanding the emergence of culturally specific notion of self and agency in North Korea. While this is not to say that North Korea is a religious state, the emergent norm of the early Christianity (or in that sense, any other religion or order in its formative stage where encoding of the rules are in the making) appears to offer a useful insight. Kim Il Sung, the Great Leader, was a man—maybe a great man for North Koreans—in North Korea’s literary and artistic representation until the 1980s. People were assigned to read and memorize his words. By the time of his death in 1994, however, he had gone through a metamorphosis from a man to a sacred being. Thus, the North Korean state had little difficulty claiming Kim’s eternal life upon his death, by embalming his body and conferring upon him, posthumously, the one and only title of “the Eternal President” of the North Korean people. This metamorphosis was
accompanied by decade-long disciplinary process of making North Korean selves into a being that identified itself closely with the Great Leader. The particular relevance of the early Christian monastic order, unlike modern, more established and hence, highly ritualized monastic order, lies in the fact that monasteries bore in themselves elements of experiments and evolving aspects of rule generation. Instituting prayers throughout the day and evening, establishing horologia and liturgical rules, and planning and execution of miniscule of rule went hand in hand with the innovative interpretations and reinterpretation of doctrine. Similarly in North Korea, during Kim Il Sung’s lifetime encoding and shaping of North Korea’s state rituals, order of the day, rules of everyday life, or in a word, form of life was established. This process defines the later, more recent rituals including Kim Jong Il’s funeral in 2011, embalming of his body in 2012, and the encapsulation of the young Kim Jong Un as the legitimate successor of power. These, clearly, cannot be done overnight or easily without the North Korean individuals accepting or participating in it. Thus, the research proposes to look into the self’s participation in co-production of the form of life in North Korea.

I am particularly interested in looking into North Korea’s state liturgy, rituals of celebration and mourning, all focused on the Great Leader’s eternal life; the way rule-generative processes are formed, for example, by researching the use of time in everyday lives of North Koreans; the contents of officially designated study materials that North Korean individuals are assigned to read, the content of performing arts and mass rallies that North Koreans are assigned to attend; concrete instances of the way individuals are drilled to learn dance steps to be performed in the state celebratory events, for example. It should be emphasized that the notion of agency pertains to the researcher; it is the researcher that interprets and analyzes this concept. But, the notion of self is clearly evident in North Koreans’ everyday lives; they have to read and then, be able to lean by heart the Great Leader’s teachings and words; they have to perform on frequently institutionalized occasions a deep self introspection, self-inquisition, and reflection, and then have to present it in public. These instances call for a deeper, more concrete research into North Korean society and the formation of the self.

Through the above inquiries, I aim at two larger goals: One—to re-examine culture and personality school and the study of culture at a distance; Two—to develop a theory of anthropology of totalitarianism. In the long run, the research aims to inform a broader community of scholars, policy-makers, activists, and concerned citizens of the cultural mechanism of North Korea on one hand and to advance cultural anthropological knowledge on North Korea and totalitarianism on the other.
REFERENCES CITED


