

Refereed article

National Loss and the Politics of Mourning in North Korea

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Summary

The main objective of the paper is to approach the politics of mourning in North Korea following the experiencing of the loss of the country's two leaders Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il. Building on theoretical considerations regarding the concepts of "pastoral power" as well as the "theater state," the study analyzes some of the performances, symbols, and rituals connected to the loss of the founder of the state and nation Kim Il Sung and of his successor Kim Jong Il. By so doing, the paper provides a fresh perspective for thinking about national loss — and the ways of remembering linked to it — both as inherently political and at the same time as constitutive of social relations. In order to approach the politics of mourning in North Korea, a deeper understanding of the relationship between the individual and the leader(s), as well as of the subsequent process of subjectivation, is required. As such, the study draws on the concept of "the sociopolitical organism" and the notion of "political life and the nontemporality of loss," as these understandings help explain a set of particular aspects linked to the politics of mourning in the country.

Keywords: North Korea, Pastoral Power, National Mourning, Subject(ivation), Socio-Political Organism, Political Life

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Introduction

To impute to loss a creative instead of a negative quality may initially seem counterintuitive. As a whole, loss inhabits this counterintuitive perspective. We might say that as soon as the question “What is lost?” is posed, it invariably slips into the question “What remains?” That is, loss is inseparable from what remains, for what is lost is known only by what remains of it, by how these remains are produced, read, and sustained. (Eng and Kazanjian 2003: 2)

When Kim Il Sung, the founder and first president of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK, North Korea), passed away unexpectedly in 1994 the international media put forth images of a nation united in rituals of collective mourning. Very similar images were conveyed in the aftermath of the death of Kim Jong Il in late 2011 too. What followed the announcement nationwide by the same female presenter who had made public the death of Kim Il Sung seven years before was a public outpouring of grief, as witnessed first time around too. All throughout the country, seemingly devastated and highly emotional North Koreans flocked to the streets, to squares bearing statues, paintings, and other impressions of Kim Jong Il and his father Kim Il Sung. Paralleled by images of distinctively North Korean landscapes — mountain panoramas, sunsets, and black clouds — and accompanied by choral and military music, North Korean state television displayed images of young and old, of schoolchildren and groups of soldiers, all overcome with emotion. Mourners were shown falling to their knees with undiluted grief, beating their chests, flailing their hands, and stomping their feet while shouting “Father, Father.”

Fitting the common representation of North Korea as an inherent “other” (e.g. Ballbach 2016), most of the international media described the unfolding scenes as bizarre, often depicting events as indicative of a “brainwashed society” (e.g. Friedman 2011). The resulting discourse most commonly revolved around the question of whether all of this was “just staged,” usually neglecting the possibility that these were cases of genuine grief. Such reports, however, tell us more about the institutionalized framing practices of the international media than they do about the subject matter at hand — namely what the loss of the foundational leader and of his successor signified, what the collectivity of the mourning performances entail and mean, and why — especially in an apparently strictly controlled society — these public displays of emotion matter.

Understanding these aspects leads us to address what could be described as the “politics of mourning” (e.g. Eng and Kazanjian 2003) in North Korea that follow experiences of national loss, most notably the demise of the country’s leaders. This is without doubt a highly complex phenomenon, as the mourning of a leader naturally signifies a moment of transition, raising questions of power, loyalty, and succession, among many others. Addressing such issues naturally means to approach

a site that is inherently political, as the grieving and remembering of a deceased leader engages “with the ways in which memoro-politics is produced through, and predicated upon, a constant contestation regarding what matters as memorable [...], who owns memory, and who or what is dispossessed of the rights and rites of memorability” (Butler 2003: 174). This gives rise to the quandary of which and whose losses will be commemorated, and how. Discussing these questions is to acknowledge that mourning is an inherent element of politics in every country, be it democratically constituted or authoritarian. But, what are the specifics of the politics of mourning in an authoritarian society like North Korea? And, what role does the individual play in the public performance of grief?

Theoretical considerations

Addressing the politics of mourning in North Korea is linked to a complex set of potential theoretical debates and perspectives. In the following, Michel Foucault’s elaborations on “pastoral power” as well as the role of the subject (1987, 2007) are linked to the “theater state” concept. This was originally introduced by anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1980), before being notably reworked by Kwon and Chung (2012).

North Korea: A modern theater state?

In Political Anthropology, a theatre state is a political state directed toward the performance of drama and ritual rather than more conventional ends, such as welfare. Power in a theatre state is exercised through spectacle. Originally introduced by Geertz (1980) in reference to political practices in nineteenth-century Balinese Negara, the concept has more recently been reworked and used by Kwon and Chung (2012) to analyze North Korea’s political order. According to the latter two authors, the country’s leadership has turned the DPRK into a theater state: a regime that relies on the use of rituals to perpetuate the charismatic rule of the leadership. The authors point to what Weber called the “routinization of charismatic authority,” arguing that charisma is an inherently unstable form of political authority (Kwon and Chung 2012: 43-63). It cannot be easily renewed or “routinized,” and is further prone to decay and erosion, which means that charismatic authority usually cannot be inherited because it is invested in one leader alone (Kwon and Chung 2012: 42–45). The two authors’ stress the use of theatrical spectacles and rituals to instill a sense of loyalty in the North Korean people to the Manchurian partisans, centered on Kim Il Sung himself. These rituals take many forms, be they mass parades, mass games, or theatrical plays — or funeral ceremonies and mourning rites.

Foucault's concept of pastoral power

In his writings on governmentality, Foucault takes as his starting point the historical thesis that the modern (Western) state is the result of a complex combination of “political” and “pastoral” power techniques (Foucault 1982: 12).

Während sich Erstere von der antiken polis herleitet und um Recht, Universalität, Öffentlichkeit etc. organisiert ist, ist Letztere eine christlich-religiöse Konzeption, in deren Mittelpunkt die umfassende Führung von Menschen, die bis ins 18. Jahrhundert hinein vorherrschend war, einer spezifischen Machtform verdankt, die auf die christliche Beziehung zwischen Hirt und Herde zurückgeht: der Pastormacht. (Lemke 1997: 151)

Foucault (1988: 58–60, 62) argues that Christianity, with pastoral power, has developed a specific power relationship with the subject, which denotes a Christian-religious conception of the relationship between shepherd and flock. At the center of this relationship is the “government of souls,” meaning the guidance of individuals with a view to eternal salvation. The starting point for this form of power relationship is the assumption that certain persons are, through their religious qualities, able to show the individual the right way to salvation in the afterlife. In this context, Foucault stresses that the shepherd takes care of his flock in an almost totalitarian way, monitoring all areas of existence. Furthermore, he not only protects the herd as a collective, but also bears responsibility for each of its individual members.

In other words, pastoral power not only targets the community as a whole but also focuses on the life of the individual. For the latter this means, on the one hand, that one must completely subordinate oneself to the (spiritual) leader and exercise obedience in constant examination of conscience. On the other hand, this presupposes a complete revelation of one's *Seelentiefe* (“depths of soul”) to the shepherd (Ibid.: 62). The government of souls therefore requires the knowledge of the “inner truth” of the individual: the pastoral must know what the individual thinks, they must know their secrets and explore their soul (Ibid.: 60, 62). The guidance of the individual is therefore inextricably linked to a certain knowledge of the truth of the individual, as generated by pastoral power. The Christian pastorate accordingly developed specific methods of analysis, reflection, and guidance, ones intended to ensure knowledge of this inner truth of individuals and their (controlled) formation into subjects. As Lemke correctly notes,

[t]he Christian pastorate works with a practice that is historically unique and can only be found in Christianity: the comprehensive and permanent *confession*. The institution of confession allows the examination of conscience and knowledge of inner secrets, which is indispensable for a “guided soul.” (1997: 154, emphasis in original)

In addition to the institutionalization of confession, Christianity has established also the instance of pure obedience. According to this, obedience no longer functions as an instrument to attain certain virtues but has itself become one: one obeys in order to reach the state of obeying (Foucault 1988: 60, 62; Lemke 1997: 153–154). According to Foucault (2007: 89), in the eighteenth century this individualizing form of power was detached from ecclesiastical institutions and reorganized into the modern state. The consequence was specific objectives changing and increasing, respective institutions differentiating themselves as bearers of pastoral power and coming to specialize in varying functions. This led “to an expansion and generalization of the pastorate, which is gradually breaking away from its form of religious institutionalization” (Lemke 1997: 156). In this process of transmission, ultimately only the concern for the salvation of the soul in the hereafter was shifted to this world.

(...) instead of a pastoral power and a political power, more or less linked to each other, more or less rival, there was an individualizing “tactic” which characterized a series of powers: those of the family, medicine, psychiatry, education, and employers. (Foucault 1982b: 784; Foucault 2007: 90)

David Campbell takes up this idea of the similar governance practices of state and church in his pioneering poststructuralist study *Writing Security*, speaking in this context of an “evangelism of fear” (1998: 49) that is “praised” by modern states. He argues that the modern state uses fears and threats for its own purposes in a similar way to the church, and that the state concept of “security” replicates the church one of “salvation.”

The state grounds its legitimacy by offering the promise of security to its citizens who, it says, would otherwise face manifold dangers. The church justifies its role by guaranteeing salvation to its followers who, it says, would otherwise be destined to an unredeemed death. Both the state and the church require considerable effort to maintain order within and around themselves, and thereby engage in an evangelism of fear to ward off internal and external threats, succumbing in the process to the temptation to treat difference as otherness. (Ibid.: 49)

Understanding the politics of mourning in North Korea: “The sociopolitical organism” and the notion of “political life”

In the following section, the politics of mourning are discussed in the context of two conceptual lenses: the notion of political life (*chōngch’ijōk saengmyōng*), and especially the phenomenon of the nontemporality of loss in North Korea, and the mechanisms of power at work in the relationship between the individual and the leader(ship) — as expressed most vividly by the concept of the sociopolitical organism.

The politics of mourning and the concept of the sociopolitical organism

Approaching the politics of mourning in North Korea first requires an understanding of the relationship between the leader and the people. On the basis of the philosophical principle of “human determinism” — and in direct connection with the expansion of the personality cult around Kim Il Sung after the 1970s — the relationship between individual, collective, and leadership would be (re)formulated. The relationship between the different parts of North Korean society has since been constructed as that of a sociopolitical organism in which a triangular connection is established between the leadership (the Kim family) as the brain, the party as the nervous system, and the people as the body. This construction is important to this study in two interrelated ways: that is, to understand the special relationship between the individual and the leader as well as to grasp the ensuing power relations inherent in this people-leader bond.

Discursive attempts to instill the ethos of a superorganic family by depicting the national collective in terms of family rhetoric are not a new phenomenon. Already in 1976 South Korean anthropologist Lee Moon-Woong defined North Korea’s political order in terms of a family state:

The ties between the masses and their supreme leader are very much like kinship relations. It is therefore appropriate to call the political system of modern North Korea a family state. [...] The leader’s role is akin to the role of a head of household; he exercises absolute authority and is the source of all wisdom. Thus the destiny of the state resembles the fate of a family. (1976: 43)

By defining the family state increasingly in nationalist tones, the mere being a North Korean makes the subject a natural part of a higher-valued community, the collective family, with Kim Il Sung as “parental leader” (*ǒbǒi suryǒng*). It is this unique construction of simultaneously collectivizing and politicizing the individual and their subjectivity and “making familial” (i.e. organically integrating) the collectivity under the (Kim) leadership that strikes at the very heart of North Korean identity-constructions of the self in terms of the body politic. This discursive construction of the self makes the life of every citizen conceptually part of the leader’s personified sovereign body. It is against this background that such slogans as *janggunnim siksol* (“We are the General’s family”) must be understood, as widely displayed in the domestic space of the North Korean household. As stated in the magazine *Ch’ǒllima*: “I cannot imagine how we could live without a socialist system, with its convention of the revered Marshal as a father and all of us living as one big family. Where in the whole world can you find a more benevolent system?” (2004: 49).

In this ethos of the state as a superorganic family, which is deeply embedded in the North Korean political and social discourses, Kim Il Sung — and, by extension, Kim

Jong Il and Kim Jong Un — are not simply considered political leaders; they are, moreover, revered as parental leaders among North Koreans. Even the death of Kim Il Sung did not put an end to this casting. In the North Korean discourse, Kim Il Sung's supervision over the country has continued, while actual leadership has been handed over to his designated heir, Kim Jong Il (and now, Kim Jong Un).

At the same time, the notion of the family state entails and enables a particular power relation, as becomes clear in the following quote.

An immortal socio-political integrity is inconceivable without the existence of the socio-political community which is the integrated whole of the leader, the party and the masses. Only when an individual becomes a member of this community can he acquire immortal socio-political integrity. [...] Just as a man's brain is the centre of his life, so the leader, the top brain in a socio-political community, is the centre of the life of this community. The leader is called the top brain of the socio-political organism because he is the focal point which directs the life of this organism in a unified manner. [...] Loyalty to the leader and comradeship towards him are absolute and unconditional because the leader, as the top brain of the socio-political organism, represents the integrity of the community. (Kim Jong Il 1995: 16–17)

On the one hand human beings are said to be masters of their own destiny, but on the other North Korean discourses state that they require “correct guidance” to carry out their role as subjects of sociohistorical development.

If they are to hold their position and fulfil their role as subject of history, the popular masses must be brought into contact with leadership. Only under correct leadership, would the masses, though creators of history, be able to occupy the position and perform their role as subject of socio-historical development. The link between leadership and masses is a very important question especially in the revolutionary movement, the communist movement, which is carried out by the working class and the broad masses of other people. Without correct leadership the communist movement would not advance victoriously because this movement itself is a highly conscious and organized one involving a serious class struggle. The question of leadership in this movement is precisely the question of leadership given by the party and the leader to the masses of the people. (Kim Jong Il 1982b 16–17).

Human behavior is therefore not guided by the conditions and relationships of production, but by the direct guidance of the ‘brain’, while the body has primarily executive functions. Even more pointedly: According to the state ideology of *Chuch'e*, it is only possible for North Koreans to recognize and develop their own original qualities through the leadership of the Kim family. This conception refers directly to the special position of the latter within the sociopolitical organism, which is the ultimate sovereign in North Korea.

In her groundbreaking anthropological study *Reading North Korea*, Sonia Ryang anchors this transition to sovereignty in the fact that the parental leader's status and perception changed dramatically from the 1970s: "During the two decades of the 1970s and 1980s, Kim Il Sung was enshrined as sovereign" (2012: 17). While he had previously been described as "Beloved Leader," North Korean sources now portrayed Kim Il Sung as "a form of existence that is untouchable, yet ubiquitous, an entity that exists for its own sake, its very nature filled with love and wisdom" (Ibid.: 17). This representation of Kim Il Sung — and, by extension, of his successors Kim Jong Il and Kim Jong Un — as the foundation of North Korean society also led to a redefinition of the role and identity of the subject. According to this the individual now took on a form of self-identification that was in harmony with the ideas of and about the respective leaders, and that promoted a self-perception as subordinate to the sovereign.

In this sociocultural system, individuals are evaluated on the basis of their efforts to follow and adhere to the teachings of the Kim family. The discourse gives the individual a certain idea of themselves, and subjects this understanding to a specific "truth regime." Since the Kim family functions as "master signifier" of this truth regime, as core instances denoting something as true and appropriate, as legal and desirable, the North Korean population is supposed to strive to act on the basis of these guidelines and to internalize them. Accepting these teachings and using them as the basis for one's own actions is thus supposed to be natural and ethically correct. As Ryang explains, members of North Korean society therefore identify themselves closely with the leadership around the Kim family, and "they do so by identifying themselves as the originary point of self-subjection to the sovereign" (2008: 93). Only through conscious and active political subjugation, as well as the accompanying absolute obligation of loyalty toward the leadership and the complete integration into the collective, does the individual acquire meaning through the political life given by the *suryŏng*.

The nontemporality of loss: The concept of sociopolitical life

Approaching the politics of mourning in North Korea requires us to analyze the aforementioned concept of political life. The country's ideological discourses make a fundamental distinction between biological life and what is described as political or sociopolitical life. While the former refers to "man's life as a biological organism," the latter denotes "man's life as a social being" (Kim Jong Il 1982a: 11).

Without physical life man cannot have social and political integrity. However, it is not man's physical life itself that gives birth to his social and political integrity. Likewise, without his developed organic body his independence, creativity and consciousness would be inconceivable, but his biological characteristics themselves do not produce his social attributes. Man's social attributes can take

shape and develop only through the process of his emergence and development as a social being, in other words, through the process of the historical development of his social activity and his social relationship. The history of social development is the history of development of man's independence, creativity and consciousness. (Kim Jong Il 1996: 9-10)

While biological life is "given" by parents through birth, political life is bestowed by the leadership around the Kim family; while the former is finite, the latter endures beyond biological death. Through the "gift of political life" and the wholesale integration into the collective, the individual is redeemed and lives on in the memories of society even after their death. But as Kwon and Chung have correctly stated, the gift of political life in the country is a double-edged sword:

Citizenship in North Korea includes not only the right to enjoy the gift of true political life given by the founding leader but also the obligation to recognize deeply one's personal indebtedness to this gift of life and to show this recognition in concrete actions through deeds of loyalty to the donor and to his house of dominion. (2012: 156)

The prerequisite for attaining political life is therefore the obligation of absolute loyalty to the Kim family.

The concept of life within the Juche ideology is based on the belief in the revolutionary Great Leader (*suryeong*) as the core ideal. [...] The Great Leader [...] provides the most precious element of all to the people, political life, and is the benefactor that allows the people to develop their political life. A man's parents give him physical life but the Great Leader provides his social and political life. [...] Therefore, allegiance to the Great Leader [...] who gave the most precious social and political life is the natural duty of all revolutionary warriors of the Great Leader. One can only bask in his political life when he gives his allegiance to the Great Leader. (Gang 1986: 37-42, quoted in: Chung 2011: 110-111)

Viewed in this way, the (idealized) subjectivation described, among other places, in the *Chuch'e* ideology is a complex process in which the individual must undergo a deliberate act of "subjugation" in order to become a meaningful political subject (see also, Ryang 2012). In this process, the life of every North Korean citizen becomes a conceptual part of the sovereign (social/societal) body personified by the leader. It is a social system in which "even one's own family members become irrelevant" (Ryang 2012: 186), and in which the most important and exclusive social relationship is that between the individual and the sovereign leader. Nevertheless, the former is not completely deprived of their individuality as such; rather, as part of the larger national collective, they are integrated into a superorganic family that is situated above the private family: the higher-valued community of the Kim Il Sung nation, with the Kims as parental leaders.

However while one's biological life is given, gaining political life requires specific effort on the part of the individual — and especially the constant and (self-)critical reviewing of one's relationship to the leadership. Seen from this perspective, the individual is not only passively part of a collective, but is also obliged to permanently and actively discipline their own “moral-ideological purity” (Ibid.: 186). This extreme accentuation of the relationship to the self does not, however, mean the formation of a strong individualism; rather, it results in the “disqualification of the values of private life” (Ibid.: 140–141). Self-cultivation in North Korea, and more broadly the whole process of subjectivation, is therefore not a private but instead a highly public undertaking (Ibid.: 184).

Arguably the most suitable example in this context is the institutionalized — and public — self-reflection or self-criticism within the framework of the review sessions known as *saenghwal ch'onghwa*. Within specific units (such as school classes or collectives), the North Korean population is disciplined to regularly and publicly analyze its weaknesses and misconduct and, through mutual criticism and above all self-criticism, to discover ways to improve or “purify” the self. This strategy of control via self-control is an elementary component of the North Korean exercising of power, and strongly reminiscent of the pastoral technique of confession and repentance. The obligation to accept a certain canon of obligations, to recognize certain statements (and their transcription) as permanent truth, and to accept certain (institutional) authorities (and their decisions) are not only characteristics of Christian governance, but can also consequently be identified in modern nation-states too.

The central point here is the fulfillment of the objective that by influencing the body, dominion over human consciousness is simultaneously gained — not least because regularly executed routines and disciplines transform thinking, or, as Foucault writes, even the soul. On the one hand, such institutionalized measures as public self-criticism certainly serve the purpose of disciplining. Each individual step in a process to be performed is precisely defined; each person is continuously classified and assigned their appropriate place in society. As in the Christian institutionalized technique of confession and repentance, every North Korean citizen has a duty to discipline themselves and to make known their misdemeanors and “sins” through public confession, thus approaching the ideal as represented by their leaders (Ryang 2012: 185).

Viewed in this way the power technique of *saenghwal ch'onghwa*, which aims to uncover inner truth, is an institution that permits the examination of conscience and the acquisition of knowledge of inner secrets — indispensable for the guidance of souls. The steering of the individual is therefore inseparably linked to a certain knowledge of the truth of that person, which is generated, among other things, by

pastoral power. Every individual, writes Ryang, “[is] supposed to feel the presence of the sacred being in order to reveal to this great entity every shortcoming that they happen to possess, so as to attain self-improvement” (Ibid.: 185).

The difference to the Christian institution of confession is public awareness. While that Christian disciplinary technique relies on the anonymity of the confessional, *saenghwal ch’onghwa* is contrariwise dependent on an element of deliberate publicity. This observation is crucial for understanding why the politics of mourning, as an element of the self-cultivation process in North Korea, also entail a highly public element, as exemplified not least by the public mourning ceremonies for the country’s deceased leaders.

Seen against the background of the concept of political life, the process of national mourning for the country’s deceased leaders is not merely an expression of sorrow and grief. Rather, as political life is not bound by biological life, mourners publicly demonstrate loyalty to the deceased leaders even after and beyond their demise, and at the same time publicly assert fealty to the next generation of the Kim family too. As discussed by Judith Butler, the idea of “plural performativity” seems to have a particular important effect here — that is, “the reproduction of community or sociality itself as bodies congregate [...] on the street” (2013: 175). But instead of enacting forms of resistance, the mourning practices in North Korea, as meticulously staged events, also serve the purpose of stabilizing the existing hierarchical and regulatory power regimes.

The staging of loss ... and of what remains

Public mourning is a ritual that has existed in many if not most cultures across the world, from Mesopotamia in the 3rd millennium BC up until the present day. While funerary rites vary as greatly as the manifestations of grief do, in each case the performance of particular such rites has a number of important functions — both in terms of easing the grief of those who remain behind following the experience of loss and regarding what and how that which was lost are to be remembered. In the case of the loss of national leaders — and particularly in countries governed by a distinctive personality cult — this site is inherently political. In their discussion of “public grievability,” Butler and Athanasiou rightly note that

[such] re-membling engaged with the ways in which memoro-politics is produced through, and predicated upon, a constant contestation regarding what matters as memorable, who owns memory, and who or what is dispossessed of the rights and rites of memorability. (2013: 174)

All of this makes the mourning of national leaders inherently political, and in North Korea, as a theater state, the staging of particular events linked to these practices of grieving are of vital importance. The politics of mourning in the country, it is argued

here, is therefore not only contained in psychological discourse but is also embedded in the realm of the public and the performative. In the following section a particular illustrative example of the theatrical staging of mourning following the experience of national loss in North Korea is discussed in greater detail: the related rituals and institutionalization of memory for Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il respectively.

(Public) mourning for Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il

On December 19, 2011, North Korean state media announced that Kim Jong Il had died of heart failure on his armored train at 8:30 a.m. two days earlier, while on his way to give a guidance tour (Choe and Pak 2018: 130; KCNA 2011a; Rodong Sinmun 2011a). Upon this announcement, North Koreans rushed to mourning altars in order to pay homage to their deceased leader. On December 28, much of Pyongyang's population came out onto the streets to bid farewell to Kim Jong Il during his official funeral procession. While citizens wailed, the designated hereditary heir, Kim Jong Un, was exposed to the media and walked for some time alongside the casket during the procession, symbolizing that he would now rule the country in the post-Kim Jong Il era. The entire country remained in a state of (public) mourning until the national funeral service officially ended on December 28. Tidal waves of people screaming and beating their chests often appeared in the North Korean media during these ten days of mourning.

The public grievance that was evident during the state funeral for Kim Jong Il was, however, not a new phenomenon. When Kim Il Sung died in July 1994, the people's response to the death of their state founder had looked, if anything, still more dramatic than that to the passing of their Dear Leader in December 2011. The mourning period for Kim Il Sung was also longer than that for Kim Jong Il, lasting for thirteen days rather than the ten for Kim Jong Il (Lim 2015: 1). For the people, the death of the Great Leader was unfathomable. The statement of former North Korean commando Kim Sin-jo, who was arrested in Seoul in 1968, illustrates the status of Kim Il Sung. He states that he respected Kim Il Sung more than his own parents, and that "he was the center of my thoughts and I was not able to think about myself without considering him" (quoted in: Lim 2015: 1). Reflecting the traditional Confucian rites for the dead, Kim Jong Il ordered the people to uphold a three-year mourning period for his father lasting from July 1994 to July 1997.

The passing of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il constituted major political events in the DPRK's national history. Given that the demise of a leader is a highly challenging political event in any authoritarian country governed by a personality cult, it is hardly surprising that the mourning processes following the demise of these two individuals were themselves highly political, being linked to a particular set of events, rituals, and practices. Among them, the public funeral ceremonies were arguably the most

symbolic and prolific mourning events, constituting major political spectacles. This is because the funeral processes themselves are not only strictly controlled events but also contain a number of messages for both domestic and external audiences — all of which play a crucial role in the theatrical staging of mourning for the deceased leaders.

The similarity of the mourning processes for the two individuals in question suggests a high degree of formalization, even institutionalization. For instance, ahead of the public commemoration ceremonies for both Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il, “National Funeral Committees” were established that then released details both on the mourning process in general and the state funeral one in specific (e.g. KCNA 2011c). These documents are revealing in a number of ways. Most generally, they disclose how the leadership expects all of the North Korean people to participate in a collective grievance for the deceased leader and cites the particular time frames for these mourning periods. Most importantly, however, the order in which the names are listed provides information about the future power of the respective persons (KCNA 2011b; Rodong Sinmun 2011b: 3). As if to wish to underscore that these are strictly national events, the statements highlight that “foreign mourning delegations will not be received” (KCNA 2011b).

During the respective funeral processions, both led by gigantic portraits of the deceased leaders, the people filled the streets of Pyongyang, publicly lamenting the loss of their national leaders. In both cases, the national loss was portrayed to be akin with the loss of the head of the family, with the people screaming “Father, Father.” As Bruce Cumings points out, in traditional Korean society “attachments and the filial gratitude are so strong that Korean children feel acute guilt when parents pass away, and from this come extended and emotional mourning practices – lasting three years in the old days, for a son who lost his father.” It is apparent that mourning practices in North Korea following the demise of national leaders recur to these traditions. Accordingly, “[the] drama of collective bereavement and ensuing funerary proceedings (which nominally lasted one hundred days, including the ten days of prefuneral mourning, and later were extended to three years, but which actually continue to this day) were in fact, in an important sense, a *family* affair” (Kwon and Chung 2012: 22, emphasis in original).

The public gatherings constitute powerful and performative acts of mourning in which there is simultaneously an expression of grief over the deceased parental leader and at the same time an assertion of collective loyalty to both them and future incumbents. As such, the public mourning practices held in commemoration of Kim Il Sung and later of Kim Jong Il were instances of plural performativity that seemed to have at least two important effects: First, they were meant to portray the image of the people articulating their grief, a voice at once individual and social. Second, the

reproduction of community or sociality itself, as bodies congregated and enacted forms of loyalty.

While this level of collective and, at the same time, individual mourning is important, the politics thereof in North Korea encompass another crucial aspect of sociopolitical life too: namely the question of succession that is so important in such a society. In other words, the politics of mourning in North Korea are simultaneously geared toward the remembrance of that which is lost and the highlighting of that which remains. The experience of national loss in North Korea is thus intrinsically linked also to the question of what endures, with mourning practices thus constituting a vital element in the public staging of such a country's political succession.

In a sense, these funeral ceremonies are crucial events for the North Korean state — for it is in this context that the successors are publicly tasked with carrying the legacies of the deceased into the future. Consequently, at both commemoration ceremonies held on Kim Il Sung Square in 1994 and 2011 respectively, the message of a stable transition of power within the Kim family was as important as the actual commemoration of the deceased itself. This is particularly well reflected in the commemoration speech for Kim Il Sung given by Kim Yong Nam. What began as mournful words for the deceased leader gradually shifted toward an unreserved eulogy for the new one, Kim Jong Il — as expressed, not least, by an unfurled vast red banner that read “Let us loyally uphold the ideas and leadership of the Dear Leader Kim Jong Il.”

The nontemporality of loss and the public display and staging of bodies

A particular important aspect in the politics of mourning of both national leaders examined is the nontemporality of loss, arguably most significantly expressed by the decision to preserve their bodies via embalming and then to put them on public display. Following his death, Kim Il Sung's body was made available for regulated viewing within the expansive structure originally called the Kūmsusan Presidential Hall, later renamed Kūmsusan Memorial Palace — and, since February 2012, officially labeled Kūmsusan Palace of the Sun. Before his demise, Kūmsusan was the space in which Kim Il Sung lived and worked. After his death, however, the palace was turned into a central site of North Korean pilgrimage. The palace still houses Kim Il Sung's relics as he used them when he was still alive, and visiting what is deemed a “sacred site” is seen as a privilege. Every day, hundreds of North Koreans walk through the palace, forming long lines and proceeding in a slow, orderly, yet emotional fashion through the halls filled with serene music. What is noteworthy here is that this particular ritual of mourning entails a grieving approach

to the bodies of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il as if they were still alive, as if they were still with the North Korean people. The public display of both Kim Il Sung's and Kim Jong Il's embalmed bodies and the subsequent tributes paid to them by the people are thus to be regarded as a performative enactment of this state discourse, making visible the national founder in the midst of the relics as he used them while still alive. Just as the state discourse stipulates that the *sur्योंg* never dies, his preserved body is also meant to portray this durability.

Similarly, shortly after the official mourning period for Kim Jong Il ended in late December 2011, North Korean state media publicly announced that his body was to be embalmed and put on public display in Kumsusan Memorial Palace next to that of Kim Il Sung (Choe and Pak 2018: 131). These premises underwent a revamp and change of name to become the Kumsusan Palace of the Sun so as "to preserve the Chairman in his lifetime appearance and to shine the Palace as the eternal sanctuary of the Sun" (Ibid.: 131). This move was paralleled by new and modified "immortality towers" erected throughout the country, ones now accompanied by such slogans as "The great Comrades Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il will always be with us" and "The great Comrades Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il are immortal." In February 2012, the Central Committee and the Central Military Commission of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK), the National Defence Commission (NDC), and the Presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly of the DPRK adopted a joint resolution on conferring the title of "DPRK Generalissimo" on Kim Jong Il (Ibid.: 131). The WPK Fourth Conference and the Fifth Session of the 12th Supreme People's Assembly in April of the same year held him as the "eternal leader of the revolution, the eternal general secretary of the WPK, and the eternal chairman of the DPRK NDC" (Ibid.: 131).

Putting the preserved bodies of both Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il on public display, Kumsusan Palace of the Sun has become not only the mausoleum for the Kim family but a focal point of North Korean pilgrimages (Lim 2015: 1). At the same time, however, the Palace is not only a space of mourning for these deceased leaders but also one for the pledge of fealty to their living descendants (Ibid.: 36). This point once again illustrates the power mechanisms at work in the relationship between the individual and the leader, as discussed earlier. As every individual is expected not only to be loyal but also to be close to Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il in order to gain (eternal) political life, their embalmed bodies are a reminder that their own political life did not end — and consequently the need to remain loyal is still in place. As Ryang puts it: "Since Kim Il Sung never dies—not only in terms of body politic but also body natural—dedication and loyalty toward him need also to remain eternal" (2012: 35).

Hence the embalmed bodies of the deceased leaders are not mere symbols of grieving, but actual and material reminders of the necessity of eternal loyalty — and

each tribute paid to their bodies constitutes a performative act further perpetuating the state discourse and the enshrining of the described power mechanisms at work. This nontemporality of loss is not limited to Kūmsusan Palace of the Sun either, but is widely reflected in the broader state discourse. For example, this notion is also encapsulated in the countless aforementioned immortality towers found all throughout the country, being edifices that were established following the demise of Kim Il Sung and later modified after the death of Kim Jong Il to enshrine his own perpetuity too. These structures put forth the message that both Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il “will forever be with us” through the constant presence they represent nationwide. It is this nontemporality of loss that helps explain, furthermore, North Korea’s decision to name Kim Il Sung the “eternal president” and Kim Jong Il the “eternal leader of the party.”

Conclusions

The politics of mourning in North Korea is a complex and inherently political phenomenon, as the death of a leader naturally becomes a significant element in the succession process. As such it becomes intrinsically linked with the ways in which memoro-politics are produced, how the deceased are remembered and by whom, as well as the question of who comes next. In order to successfully approach this complex phenomenon, then, a deeper understanding of the relationship between the individual and the leader(s), as well as of the subsequent process of subjectivation, is required. Drawing on the concept of the “sociopolitical organism” and the notion of “political life and the nontemporality of loss,” it was shown that each of these understandings helps explain a set of particular aspects linked to the politics of mourning in North Korea.

To begin with, exploring the relationship between the individual and leader in the context of the sociopolitical organism helps us to understand the loss of the leader in North Korea as akin to the loss of the national parent. Grieving thus not only becomes a national but also at the same time an individual and social endeavor too. Moreover, the discussed process of subjectivation helps us to grasp that these events, in an authoritarian context such as this one, necessarily entails a public element. The latter is crucial to the politics of mourning in North Korea, as reflected not least in the public nature of the institutionalized both funeral and grievance rites and in the staging of the deceased’s preserved bodies. The latter, however, also signifies the nontemporality of loss, for such endeavors must be seen as constituting part of efforts by the North Korean regime to overcome the impermanence of biological life — and thus to decouple the influence of the deceased leaders from their finite physical existence.

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