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North Korea: Changing Political Culture in the 21st Century

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NORTH KOREA: CHANGING POLITICAL CULTURE IN THE 21ST
CENTURY

By

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Introduction

North Korea, otherwise known as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), sits at a crossroad. Its glory days, largely within context of the Cold War, have faded quickly after the death of Kim il Sung in 1994. Without external pressure it is a distinct possibility that the political system will remain stagnant and the citizens will suffer indefinitely. However, history tends to err on the side of the people, and in North Korea the level of repression has caught the eyes and ears of the most powerful governing bodies on the planet — the United Nations and United States. There are many possibilities for its future including total regime collapse, unification by force with South Korea, willing liberalization from within to name a few, or status quo.

Many reformers have called for the implementation of Chinese-style reforms to their economic policy; that is, the reformation of trade restrictions, opening up of markets foreign and domestic, and ultimately allowing citizens to engage in active, free trade with one another. The idea is a major departure from their hardline socialist policies currently in place. The Chinese successfully implemented these types of reforms beginning in 1978 under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping — a reformative period that launched China into the 21st century and ultimately onto the global stage as a major economic player. And they implemented these policies with spectacular results. In North Korea, however, I will outline the causes of current socioeconomic stagnation, the possibilities of implementing economic reforms similar to the Chinese model, and conclude with the determination that this model is incompatible with North Korean politics as it would compromise the foundation of the Kim family's regime stability.

Chapter one outlines Kim il Sung's rise to power; a story of arguably the most successfully implemented personality cult in the history of socialist regimes. His total grip on power is unprecedented in its magnitude due to the myth surrounding the infallibility of his character — nearly all praise in North Korea can be traced back to the generosity of the Supreme Leader. Most notably, frequent purges and absolute loyalty from his underlings ensured that toxic political adversaries were kept to a minimum. Opinions differing from that of the Supreme Leader were not only discouraged, but often led to the dismissal of the individual responsible. Kim's consolidation of power is synonymous with the foundation of the DPRK itself.

The end of chapter one briefly outlines the Korean War waged on the peninsula between the DPRK and the Republic of Korea (ROK). This three year war is the genesis of all modern conflict between the two nations. Further, the methods North Korea employed to secure support from the Soviet Union and China were an early test that would persist as a trademark of its foreign policy into modernity.

Chapter two dives headfirst into the Chinese economic model introduced to reform domestic and foreign policy that launched the People's Republic of China onto the global stage. Implemented beginning in 1978, these measures were largely intended to deconstruct the strict Maoist framework for implementing socialism. Chronicling the chronically low standards of living caused by the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution builds the case for reform that is ultimately implemented under Deng Xiaoping in 1978. Before laying the framework onto North Korea, the Chinese model proves itself to be successful in reversing the damage done by the hardliners under Mao.

Finally, chapter three synthesizes all prior thoughts and delivers the final argument that applying the Chinese reformist model to North Korea will not result in similar economic outcomes due to dramatic differences in the two country's established political structures. Both systems are explicated and differences highlighted, notably the ruling structure that allowed China to evolve and that which will prohibit North Korea from following in their foot steps.

Chapter 1: Kim il Sung — The Foundation of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea

A proper, modern analysis of what some consider to be the most inept regime on the planet must begin at the roots. North Korea is the world's sole communist government to successfully complete three (nearly) seamless hereditary successions. North Korea has continuously enraptured world attention for its provocative attitude and seemingly irrational internal policies, and stands as a glaring contrast to its fabulously wealthy southern brother whose rapid ascension to international economic stardom has only highlighted the abysmal failings of the North.

Yet, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea stands out amongst only a handful of comparatively modern socialist nations for its continued survival. Against all odds, it has survived famine, war, and brutal international sanctions intended to bring the nation to the bargaining table on crucial matters of both internal and regional security.

Most pertinent to the historical analysis, this work will develop the question: what does the selection of Kim il Sung explain about the founding of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea within the context of his omnipresent cult of personality later developed to institutionalize his rule? There will be a brief examination of Kim's so-called revolutionary credentials leading up to August 1945 when he was selected to lead the socialist apparatus of North Korea, but will also focus on early public appearances he made upon his return to the peninsula and early organizational decisions implemented regarding international relations by the Soviet occupational authorities.

Soviet and American leadership convened at Yalta in February 1945 to construct plans for the eventual defeat of the Axis powers' territory throughout Asia. President Franklin D. Roosevelt encouraged Josef Stalin to enter the war in Manchuria to ensure Japan's armies were divided enough if/when the American invasion of the Japanese mainland occurred. Stalin agreed

to enter the war in Manchuria within three months of Axis defeat in Europe in exchange for “preeminence” in Manchuria.¹ When US forces attempted to end World War II by employing nuclear weapons against the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki on August 6, 1945 and August 9th, 1945 respectively, Japanese forces began to remove their remaining occupational forces from the Korean Peninsula, with Tokyo’s eventual surrender coming on September 2, 1945. In light of Yalta, American military brass were concerned with possible Soviet troop movement south towards the tip of the Korean peninsula, passing the agreed upon territorial boundary at the 38th parallel. US Colonels Dean Rusk and Charles Bonesteel picked an arbitrary military demarcation line now known as the Korean Demilitarized Zone at the 38th Parallel line. While the USSR got the major northern ports of Chongjin and Wonsan, the United States controlled the agricultural bread basket of the country.

What Moscow and Washington miscalculated was the tremendous strain the demarcation line would place on trade; northern Korea was the traditional industrial powerhouse which received the bulk of Japanese infrastructural investment during their official occupation between 1910 and 1945, fueling enterprise and economic growth through the construction of ports, roadways, and power production facilities.² At the time, the South was economically destitute. Traditionally, Korea below the 38th parallel supplied the entire peninsula with agricultural products. As trade ground to a halt, the Soviets blockaded trade cross-border to their capitalist neighbors and the administrative line soon became a fortified one.

Originally born Kim Song ju, Kim il Sung, the man the world knows as the founder of the DPRK, was not real in any tangible sense. His image was carefully modeled to fit that of the

¹ Martin, Bradley K. *Under the Loving Care of the Fatherly Leader: North Korea and the Kim Dynasty*. New York: Thomas Dunne, 2004. 50. Print.

² Molony, Barbara. *Technology and Investment: The Prewar Japanese Chemical Industry*. Cambridge, MA: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard U, 1990. 157-58. Print.

socialist revolutionary working tirelessly to free his people from oppression, functioning only as a benefactor of the worker. Vladimir Lenin and Josef Stalin provided a model to anchor his emerging cult of personality. Kim il Sung came to power in 1945 at the appointment of occupying Soviet forces as a noted revolutionary guerrilla, one who operated in Manchuria between 1932 and 1945. His activities in the anti-Japanese guerrilla forces during the preceding thirteen years are basic and well-known, yet inflated to grandiose proportions in later years.³ Kim was well-loved by Koreans for his exploits fighting the Japanese colonialists along the Manchurian border, where he operated for thirteen years as the leader of a famous guerrilla unit. His exploits against the Japanese brought him to prominence among Korean nationalists.

According to the official North Korean narrative, Kim il Sung departed Pyongyang around 1929 when he was expelled from his middle school for participating in unlawful anti-Japanese activities. Eventually, upon his release from jail (he landed in a Pyongyang jail for anti-state activities in 1932) he left Pyongyang for Manchuria.⁴ He was appointed by the Soviet occupational authorities to rule the newly established Soviet occupational zone above the Korean 38th parallel in September 1945 after spending the period from 1929 to 1945 living in China. Eventually, he arrived in North Korea as an obscure Captain in the Soviet Army. Upon his arrival in China, Kim il Sung began to follow the existing structure of Chinese guerrilla units fighting the movement of Japanese imperial forces. His state-published biography leaves the time period between 1945 through 1949 to speculation, which, after examining Soviet archival accounts, pokes holes in the official narrative.

³Martin, Bradley K. "Chapter 2: Fighters and Psalmists." *Under the Loving Care of the Fatherly Leader: North Korea and the Kim Dynasty*. New York: Thomas Dunne, 2004. N. pag. Print. For more information, see Bradley K. Martin's *Under the Loving Care of the Fatherly Leader* which clearly explicates the roots of Kim's time fighting the Japanese as a guerrilla leader.

⁴Suh, Dae-Sook. "Young Kim and the United Army, P. 6-8." *Kim Il Sung: The North Korean Leader*. New York: Columbia UP, 1988. N. pag. Print.

Many details exist that contradict the official narrative of Kim il Sung's ascent to power in the days leading up to October 14, 1945, when he was introduced to the international community as then General Secretary of Soviet-occupied Korea. Officially, Kim il Sung arrived in Korea in October 1945 as a liberator of the Korean people against the occupying Japanese without the aid of the Soviet Army. No official mention is made regarding how, only why. According to official narratives, Kim led an invasion party from the North by way of the Yalu River, Korea's official land border with mainland China.

According to a lengthy interview with Russian Major General Nikolai G. Lebedev, who played a crucial role in the recruitment of Kim il Sung during his tenure of occupation on the Korean Peninsula, the selection process focused more on presentability than experience; Stalin hand-selected a handsome, round-faced Kim il Sung whose propaganda credentials propelled him to the podium on October 14, 1945⁵.

In reality, Kim did not arrive in Korea via an invasion party from the North, as the Yalu river bridge connecting mainland China and Korea had been destroyed. The Soviet naval vessel *Pagachov* landed at Wonsan with Kim aboard on September 19, 1945. Instead of the glorious liberator returning to vanquish Japanese Imperialists from the fatherland, Kim returned rather inconspicuously. A politician of Kim's time, Yu Song-chol, recounts the deviant revisionism Kim instilled in followers concerning the time period surrounding his return in order to protect his revolutionary credentials as a guerrilla soldier whose "humble return" was not befitting of a revolutionary God.⁶ What is important is the discrepancy: Kim did not return as a glorious

⁵ Tertitskiy, Fyodor. "Soviet Officer Reveals Secrets of Mangyongdae - Daily NK." Soviet Officer Reveals Secrets. Daily NK, 02 Jan. 2014. Web. 27 Aug. 2014.

⁶ Hankuk Ilbo, November 4, 1990

liberator of Korea, but a subordinate of Soviet generals whose intentions for him at the time were anything but clear.

Initially, Soviet occupation authorities chose Cho Man-sik, leader of Korea's indigenous nonviolent reformist movement, to head the new government. After vetting both candidates between 1945 and 1949, Stalin personally instructed that Kim Il Sung be named Premier of the new state. Thus, on October 14, 1945, Cho introduced Kim at a rally spearheaded by Soviet authorities proclaiming: "Long live General Kim Il-sung!"⁷ Koreans present at the speech were not impressed by the young, Chinese looking Kim whose credentials were shredded to bits by locals due to Korean traditions which confer respect on age and seniority, both of which Kim lacked at the paltry age of thirty one. Soviet authorities had a daunting task. Korea was only just liberated from Japan; the people were not going to willingly cooperate with a Soviet stooge, they needed a vision of hope.

The Soviets were master propagandists after successfully consolidating power during the Bolshevik revolution. The Koreans simply needed to be persuaded to abandon the hierarchal allegiance which presented the most immediate issue with Kim.

Late 1945 birthed an Allied "trusteeship" program which would have put the Korean peninsula under a learning period, a time wherein both sides could actively achieve independence under Allied tutelage: Koreans would remain, in essence, occupied again.⁸ Prompt outrage spread as both sides demanded not to become a Soviet or American satellite state. Both sought unification and went about solidifying their footprint in different ways; Americans and Soviets both expected their trusteeship over the peninsula to last only a matter of years.

⁷ Ibid., vol. 2, pp. 206–212.

⁸ Ibid., pp. 129–130.

Kim's rise to power between 1945 and 1950 gave way to a crucible-like state where tensions with the North's southern neighbor focused less on uniting the peninsula than an ideological war. In December of 1945, the United States, Soviet Union, United Kingdom, and (then) Nationalist China met in Moscow to discuss a "four-power trusteeship" in which the four allied powers would establish a unified government over the peninsula within five years. Under the guidance of the Joint Commission established at the Moscow 1945 meeting, there would be a remediation of tensions followed by a task force of policy makers within weeks of the declaration.⁹

Reactionary North Koreans jockeyed for top spot, branding their own versions of local communism. Ultimately, independence would not be achieved by a puppet reporting to either occupational force. Kim seethed independence both personally and politically stemming from his torturous upbringing at the hands of Japanese colonial forces. This mirrored what the Korean public craved. On February 6, 1946, Soviet occupational authorities furthered Kim's ruling position as head of Korea's Interim People's Committee. His grounds for garnering public support stood on their own as he fended off powerful opponents such as Pak Hon-yong (head of the Korean communist independence movement between 1910-1945: Kim's days as a Japanese guerrilla fighter portrayed him as the true revolutionary figure Koreans desired.¹⁰ Today, to explicate the rise of Kim is synonymous with the rise of North Korea itself.

What caused tensions to run so high on the Soviet-administered side of the 38th parallel? From 1946 until 1949 there seems to have been considerable tension between Kim il Sung and rival socialist group leaders who were vying for his position. Tensions came to a head when, on August 15 1948, Syngman Rhee helmed the foundation of the Republic of Korea in the

⁹ Byrnes, James F., and Ernest Belvin. "Avalon Project - A Decade of American Foreign Policy 1941-1949 - Interim Meeting of Foreign Ministers, Moscow." Web. 15 Sept. 2014.

¹⁰ Kim was never captured or tortured by the Japanese due to his proximity to the Chinese border during his time in the Soviet Eighty-Eighth Army.

American-administered zone on the southern half of the peninsula. This was followed shortly thereafter by the foundation of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea on September 9, 1949. These crucial last few months marked the possibility of peaceful unification as hard-liners on both sides claimed they had legitimate right to rule over the peninsula. It also served to solidify Korean rivalry with the western-educated Rhee directly opposing the left-wing ideology of the North.

Kim il Sung used his time in the Soviet Union to win favor with the Soviet occupational authorities who needed a Korean who could win clout at home and not stray too far from their political agenda. As opposed to Pak Yong-bon who headed the Korean Communist Party dating back to 1925¹¹, Kim il Sung's brand of communism embodied many Stalinist qualities that won over the occupational leaders and Stalin himself. His fierce independence struck a chord with the exhausted members of the populous more so than Pak's peaceful brand. Kim's guerrilla credentials could be turned into a powerful piece of propaganda as the fighter Korea needed to swiftly liberate it from decades of Japanese — and the looming threat of American — imperial enslavement. Peace was not a resonant tone; no, the North Korean people echoed the Soviet Union in their desire to win independence from occupational authorities.

Further, Kim headed the guerrilla faction of resistance fighters who eventually were drafted into the Red Army as they were disbanded in Manchuria. This gave him credibility among top brass and domestic supporters. On June 30, 1949, Kim il-Sung, flanked by Pak Yong-bon and Alexei Hegrey, formed the Worker's Party of Korea, the ruling body of North Korea until this very day. Most importantly, Kim remained chairman until his death in 1994 after

¹¹ This was the time during which Kim still lived in geographical North Korea and participated in the unsanctioned Korean Communist Party headed by Pak Yong-bon.

purging all original members in the 1950s and consolidating power during and directly after the Korean War.

Another important step toward the solidification of Kim's rule occurred on December 11, 1948 when the United Nations General Assembly "declared there has been established a lawful government (the Government of the Republic of Korea)."¹² By recognizing the sole legitimacy of the South, UN forces were "*recommended*" to withdraw from Korea. Sub-resolution 4.(a) sought to unify the Korean peninsula through a joint expression of free will by both sides while removing divisions set up by the 1947 Temporary Commission to be superseded by a more permanent Commission. Thus, the United Nations simultaneously resolved to unify Korea, withdraw all occupying forces, and maintained that such resolution aligned with the will of both parties, not taking into account the vast sea of socioeconomic and ideological differences between the two parties.¹³

Unilateral recognition of the Republic of Korea (RoK) by the United Nations crippled the plan for the peaceful reintegration of Korea from the moment it was resolved. Guidelines announced later on recommended member nations should only consult the RoK in establishing diplomatic protocols whilst aid deliverance occurred during the time of reconstruction. UN guidelines jabbed at the Soviet's appointment of Kim il-Sung claiming that Syngman Rhee's appointment was the only free expression on the peninsula. A power vacuum emerged across the DMZ with two superpower-backed nation-states vying for unilateral supremacy. Time was the only constraint until one made the first move.

¹² United Nations General Resolution 195, III Assembly, Dec. 12 1948

¹³ United Nations General Resolution 195, 4. (a), III Assembly, Dec. 12 1948

In order to investigate the North's perspective, exploring motivations for invasion nurtured between 1946-1949 could breathe some fresh insight into the Korean War's trigger during this historical period

Mass rebellion broke out across the RoK under the interim government due to Syngman Rhee's crackdown on any suspected leftist forces. Under Rhee, lives were lost in Pusan's Autumn Uprising; rebellions occurred for three years until provisional elections were held in 1948 when Rhee solidified his rule. Thus, the South, as viewed by the North, seemed rife with corruption and instability. Rhee was seen as a hyper-right puppet of the West, more publicly known to have arrived with US occupational forces in 1945. Purges of leftist elements in the South began quickly with the Cheju Massacre in 1948 which claimed upward of 60,000 victims in an extreme representation of Rhee's anti-leftist fervor.¹⁴

Kim il Sung believed that liberating the South would be welcomed in the wake of mass atrocities and acted thusly. Striking first would put the North at a tremendous advantage as the United States' exit in 1948 left the South comparatively weakened. During a visit in 1949, Stalin and Kim discussed the possibilities of launching a cross border invasion into the South to which Stalin seemed to indicate an opportunistic moment might appear that would allow the North to effortlessly launch its attack. Kim justified the move, recorded as saying: "Comrade Stalin, we believe that the situation makes it necessary and possible to liberate the whole country through military means. The reactionary forces of the South will never agree on a peaceful unification

¹⁴ Wehrfritz, George Lee, B. J. Takayama, and Hideko. "Ghosts of Cheju." Newsweek International. N.p., 19 June 2000. Web. 16 Sept. 2014.

and will perpetuate the division of the country until they feel themselves strong enough to attack the North.”¹⁵

Kim deftly manipulated the ever cautious Stalin who feared losing the buffer between the United States and Soviet Union. This outweighed the rational justification of supporting a war that was not truly imminent.

Kim again asked for Stalin’s permission to launch a full-scale invasion of the South on January 30, 1950 to which Stalin replied that he was “willing to help in this matter”¹⁶ and agreed to see Kim in Moscow to discuss the terms of engagement. Weary though he was, Stalin agreed to assist Kim in his war in every way except for physical manpower which could easily trigger an explosive conflict involving the US-USSR directly. This could be seen as a integral piece in Stalin’s new East Asia strategy in response to Ho Chi Minh’s recognition in Vietnam and the successful revolution led by Mao Zedong in the People’s Republic of China (PRC). After cementing the internal security situation in China, Mao was able to pledge support that the Soviets would not.

May 1950 marked the turning point in Korean history. A conversation between the Soviet ambassador to Korea, Alexei Roschin, and Stalin recounted: “and if Americans take part in the combat activities, then China will help North Korea with its troops...China is not tied by similar obligations and therefore can easily extend assistance to the North.”¹⁷ Kim played Mao against Stalin in securing economic and physical (firepower) commitments from both sides in order to

¹⁵ Conversation between Stalin and the governmental delegation of the DPRK headed by the Chairman of the Cabinet of Ministers of the DPRK Kim Il Sung, 7 March 1949. Cited in Evgenii P. Bajanov and Natalia Bajanova, “The Korean Conflict, 1950-1953: The Most Mysterious War of the 20th Century,” Working Paper, Cold War International History Project, forthcoming.

¹⁶ Telegram from Stalin to , with message for Kim Il Sung, 30 January 1950, APRF. Also found in AVPRF, Fond 059a, Opis 5a, Delo 3, Papka 11, List 92

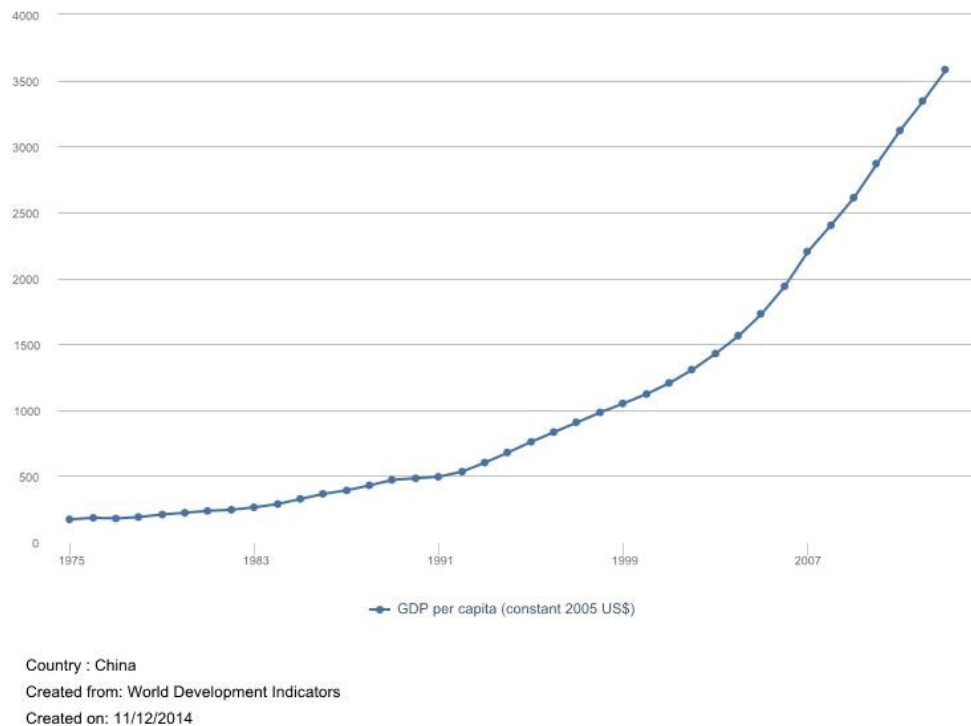
¹⁷ Telegram from Roshchin to Stalin, 16 May 1950, APRF. Cited in Bajanov, pp. 52-53.

finance his war which came to fruition on June 25, 1950 when North Korean forces swiftly moved south across the DMZ into South Korea.

Between 1950 to 1953 the Democratic People's Republic of Korea waged a brutal war against its southern compatriots in an all out offensive to reclaim the lower half of the peninsula. On June 25, 1950, the so-called *Fatherland Liberation War* began as armored infantry poured over the DMZ into South Korea. It met little resistance as it did so. On June 27, 1950, the United Nations unanimously passed UN Resolution 82 in which they determined that the North Korean forces acted in blatant disregard of the lawfully established government in South Korea.¹⁸ In doing so, a UN coalition led by 88% American forces was dispatched under decorated World War II veteran, Gen. Douglas MacArthur. Initially, the Republic of Korea was gravely outmanned on the battlefield, resulting in the near-immediate pushback of ROK forces to the southern port city of Pusan, creating the so-called "Pusan Perimeter."

¹⁸ United Nations General Assembly S/RES/82 and S/RES/83, June 27, 1950

During the offensive northward, UN forces led by Macarthur were able to push North



Korean troops back nearly to the Yalu River which provides the geographical border between mainland China and the Korean Peninsula, thereby forcing China's hand in the war as UN forces literally approached its doorstep. While the Soviet Union was the main patron of Kim il Sung, Stalin feared any direct involvement in the war would translate into all out war between the USSR and US. Indirect Soviet involvement did—in the form of aerial and tactical support— help the Korean People's Army outmaneuver the UN coalition on the battlefield. North Korea lacked any significant air power of its own, instead relying upon 180 Soviet-supplied aircraft meant to deter the South's fleet supplied mainly by excess American war planes from WWII.¹⁹

¹⁹ Goldstein, Donald M., and Harry J. Maihafer. "Chapter 2: Fighters and Psalmists." *The Korean War: The Story and Photographs*. Washington, D.C.: Brassey's, 2000. N. pag.12 Print.

Many notable alliances were formed during the war which seemed to solidify some contentious political alignments and make way for many newly formed ones. Firstly, the United States cozied up to the Republic of Korea as more than a mere defense partner; it became an active ally in the development of political ideology which served to both differentiate the two Korea's systems of governing and the moral/political boundaries dividing the two Koreas. In its defense of the South against the obviously aggressive North during the war, there did seem to be a boundary as to how far Washington would impose moral order across Syngman Rhee's new regime.

Chapter. 2 The Chinese Model

China's important cultural and economic reforms begun in the 1970s are the contemporary basis for arguing that the same reforms could be applied with similar results in North Korea. China's stunning development was due, in part, to serious foresight from the Chinese elite in the 1970s. Their transition from having nearly no foreign trade to trading on a global scale unprecedented in human history provides compelling motivation for the North Koreans to attempt similar measures. This chapter will outline Chinese reforms enacted by Chairman Mao and Deng Xiaoping to argue that similar reforms will not yield the same economic outcomes if applied in North Korea.

By the mid 1950s, Mao's communist revolution was losing steam in the wake of the stabilization period that secured the communist grip on power. He then turned his vision to growth. While workers cooperatives in the agrarian sector were hampered by bad weather and poor resources, Mao responded by announcing the Great Leap Forward in 1958. Agricultural profits were meant to fund the next phase of his revolution in the industrial sector, where the

PRC direly needed to develop. From the misguided “Four Pests” scheme to superhuman demands on steel production it seemed, the result was fatal — by conservative estimates, around 30 million Chinese lost their lives between 1958 and 1961 due to famine and starvation. Mao, the son of peasants with no formal education, was largely ignorant to the chaos engulfing the countryside and continued making isolated decisions.²⁰ The ultimate result, on a micro and macro level, was the complete breakdown of regional autonomy and the communization of all private aspects of life.

An attempt to shed China’s ancient cultural identity culminated in the revisionist Cultural Revolution between 1966 and mid 1970s. Mao pushed the younger generation to revive revolutionary tactics. The theory behind reeducating the masses through terror was to destroy the Confucian identity that many Chinese clung to. The next phase of the revolution required a cleansing of outdated superstition that often utilized ill-placed quotations. In the countryside, however, hardline policy eased with the decollectivization of commune farming in favor of more lenient private markets. Not until after Mao’s death was profit allowed to reenter the agricultural markets instead of the large-scale commune farms that aggregated hundreds of smaller farmers during the Great Leap period. Thus, the market was allowed to allocate assets more efficiently and with that, the famine ceased. Years of internal struggle in Beijing culminated on May 16, 1966 when the highest ruling body of China, the Politburo, issued Central Documents outlining the initiation of the Great Cultural Revolution and subsequent purges of six high-ranking party members.²¹ Mao directed that all capitalist bourgeois elements be purged from power. Essentially, central powers branded the Cultural Revolution as a means to root out dissidents as the propaganda department simultaneously built Mao’s personality cult to immense proportions.

²⁰ Clements, Johnathan. Mao. N.p.: Life & Times, n.d. 114-18. Print.

²¹MacFarquhar, Roderick, and Michael Schoenhals. *Mao's Last Revolution*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap of Harvard UP, 2006. 47. Print.

Similar developments occurred in North Korea around the same time (1960s) with the introduction of *Juche* philosophy as a departure from strict Marxist-Leninist philosophy.²²

From the 1930s until the 1970s there was not any substantive improvements in Chinese living standards as measured by the World Bank's National Income Indicators.²³ A new era in Chinese history began with foreign trade allowances, the *decollectivization* of the largely agrarian system, and the introduction of private enterprise in an attempt to launch China onto the international stage.

The closing of Cultural Revolution paved the way for a series of economic reforms started in 1978 under Deng Xiaoping. Deng survived the purges of the 60s and 70s and established himself as the leader of China in 1978, thus he was able to make changes to the central structure of Chinese rule that Mao never would have allowed. Mao's vision of China's future was that of the worker's utopia under the banner of collectivized agrarian and industrial production. Deng's policies focused on slowly introducing capitalism into the marketplace in order to establish foreign trade routes and domestic investment. Fostering deep seated social unrest would disrupt the fabric of Chinese culture, thus undermining the strength his regime was built upon. Opening to the West was seen as imperative to their development, but was not allowed to happen until Mao's death in 1976.

Transforming China from a largely agrarian society to an international economic powerhouse took careful planning by the Central Plenary Committee. These decisions decentralized focus from extreme party loyalty to market reliance; being able to derive income from a market economy exponentially increases worker productivity while decreasing the power

²² *Juche* Philosophy is the distinguishing mark of North Korean communism which the brand is built around. Pioneered by Kim il Sung, *Juche* instills in North Koreans the virtue of self-reliance, that man is the master of his own universe and only he has the power to shape it.

²³ "World DataBank." The World Bank DataBank. N.p., n.d. Web. 11 Nov. 2014.

that government's unilateral decisions have over the citizens. Deng outlined four modernizations for China to focus on: science/technology, agriculture, defense, and industry.²⁴ Private enterprise was finally prioritized under Deng. Economic production methods emerged, beginning with the dissolution of the strict commune system which previously governed the agrarian sector in favor of the Household Responsibility System.²⁵ Homes were allowed to keep excess crop production under the guidance of local managers who were responsible for profits and loss instead of the archaic egalitarian distribution method of Mao.²⁶

How has China transformed after decentralizing economic decision making? Mao believed the revolution to be a permanent class struggle, uprooting elements from within for constant growth. The Cultural Revolution may then have been Mao's greatest class struggle, but it uprooted his very own accomplishments. This crucial time period post-Mao was not just one of economic and social upheaval, but that of a changing policy view internally. Economic independence meant that the capitalist vs. socialist paradigm no longer governed class struggle, only economic growth on a macro level would and this became China's priority under Deng's leadership. World Bank data recorded from 1976 until present depicts the exponential growth rate China experienced.²⁷

Shedding off the ideology of Chairman Mao as China emerged onto the Cultural Revolution is key in comparing the Chinese growth model to the North Korean's. As Chairman Mao and Kim il Sung both anchored their country's growth model around central planning in an attempt to maximize economic gains, their results varied wildly. North Korean hereditary

²⁴ Keyser, Catherine. "Three Chinese Leaders: Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, and Deng Xiaoping | Asia for Educators | Columbia University." Three Chinese Leaders: Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, and Deng Xiaoping | Asia for Educators | Columbia University. Columbia University, n.d. Web. 11 Nov. 2014.

²⁵ An agriculture production system, which allowed households to contract land, machinery and other facilities from collective organizations. The aim was to preserve basic unified management of the collective economy, while contracting out land and other goods to households. Households could make operating decisions independently within the limits set by the contract agreement, and could freely dispose of surplus production over and above national and collective quotas.

²⁶ Huang, Haifeng (December 26, 2011). "Signal Left, Turn Right: Central Rhetoric and Local Reform in China" (PDF). Political Research Quarterly (Forthcoming). p. 23 ("4.2 Agricultural De-collectivization").

²⁷ "Chinese GDP Growth Time Series" The World Bank DataBank. N.p., n.d. Web. 12 Nov. 2014.

succession kept the political process highly exclusive and, for the most part, highly magnetic to the Kim's ruling philosophy. Adherence to policies that ensure utmost allegiance to the Kims creates an environment of suspicion and stagnancy.²⁸ China largely shed the personality cult of Mao after his death. This established a level of political autonomy North Korea has never evolved into.

Modeling a scenario of economic reforms in North Korea after those that made China so successful sits high atop contemporary political speculations. Simply, modern scholars and think tanks assert that Chinese-style reforms can be applied to North Korea with similar results.²⁹ Due to the resistance to reform their political system — specifically the personality cult surrounding the Kim Family — alongside their foreign policy and internal economic agenda, *true* reform seems highly unlikely.³⁰ Lavish spending goes toward the North Korean Media Apparatus whose sole purpose is to perpetuate the *ethos* of the Kims. Economic mismanagement is more of a recurring theme than a result of turbulent financial cycles seen in market economies. For example, in 2002 a series of economic reforms including increased prices and wages, increased autonomy in state enterprise management, differentiated production methods, and most notably, the Won's value increased 20 fold.³¹ Theory assumed the wage increase would meet the new value of the Won, but the discrepancy was massive and caused unrest across the nation.

China has successfully implemented economic reforms because of its willingness to expand its political ideology. North Korea is inherently crippled in its attempt to enact true reform because the stability of the country relies on political ideology which does not emphasize economic growth.

²⁸ Lan•kov, A. N. *The Real North Korea: Life and Politics in the Failed Stalinist Utopia*. N.p 192. Print.

²⁹ Cheng, Johnathan. "Chinese-Style Reform and Opening? Not for North Korea, Report Says." *Korea Real Time RSS*. The Wall Street Journal, 3 June 2014. Web. 13 Nov. 2014.

³⁰ Williamson, Lucy. "Delving into North Korea's Mystical Cult of Personality." *BBC News*. BBC, 27 Dec. 2011. Web. 13 Nov. 2014.

³¹ Hale, Christopher D. "Real Reform in North Korea? The Aftermath of the July 2002 Economic Measures." *Asian Survey* 45.6 (2005): 823-42. JSTOR. Web. 13 Nov. 2014.

Ch.3 Incompatibility In Depth and Future Potential

Kim il Sung focused on strengthening socialist values between 1950-1994 with little regard to international trade or consumer goods production outside the communist bloc. A meeting between Kim and East German Chancellor Erich Honecker voiced concerns who faced toward the end of his effective rule: “As a developing country, we are confronted with three basic questions. They are: securing to feed our population, solving the housing question and solving the clothing issue.”³²

1991 marked a major transition period for North Koreans with the loss of their largest source of patron aid, the Soviet Union. Nearly every aspect of critical domestic development was derived in some way from the Soviets or Chinese over the fifty plus year relationship between the nations. The highlights of this relationship were predominantly technical/manufacturing training, along with generous loan programs used to rebuild after the Korean War. Various

³²Transcript of Official Negotiations between Comrade Erich Honecker and Comrade Kim Il Sung," October 19, 1986, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, SAPMO-BA, DY 30, 2460. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/110143>

aspects of agrarian life, most notably the organizational methods pioneered under Mao during the Great Leap Forward and used during the early Soviet period, had to be completely retooled to cope with the loss of central plenary direction.³³ The North Korean landscape had to rapidly evolve to meet unprecedented challenges with the loss of its major source of aid and technical expertise.

Korean Foreign Minister Kim Yong Nam led a series of meetings with (then) Soviet Foreign Minister Shevardnadze in 1991 over the possible North Korean rapprochement with Seoul with the ultimate goal of stabilizing relations on the peninsula and the withdrawal of American troops. In order for the Soviets to establish diplomatic channels with the South, Pyongyang would have to sacrifice a level of autonomy, and to some degree, the basis of the Mutual Recognition and Defense Treaty with Moscow that ensured its legitimacy in Soviet eyes.³⁴

Kim Jong il reacted to the destabilized landscape with a military first — in Korean, Songun Chongch'i — policy as a means to maintain adherence to the existing order while mitigating the risk of a military coup.³⁵ Economic upheaval forced the regime to completely reexamine its hold on power, Songun was the answer. What followed the 1993-1995 famine was an opportunity for improved relations with the West and *true* reform. Instead, the military began to take an active role in more aspects of day-to-day activities ranging from heavy-duty infrastructure development to agriculture. This movement accompanied the transition to a mixed economy with the military taking part in new joint-venture domestic and international endeavors.

³³ 3, 3, Csaba Csáki, and Gershon Feder. *Agriculture in Transition: Land Policies and Evolving Farm Structures in Post-Soviet Countries*. Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2004. 6-8. Print.

³⁴ Weathersby, Kathryn. "Dependence and Mistrust: North Korea's Relations with Moscow and the Evolution of Juche." Working Paper Series 08.08 (2008): n. pag. Web. 14 Nov. 2014. <<http://uskoreainstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/USKI-WP08-8.pdf>>.

³⁵ Vorontsov, Alexander. "North Korea's Military-First Policy: A Curse or a Blessing." *North Korean Review* 2.2 (2006): 100-02. Web.

Pyongyang's most apparent effort to reform occurred in 2002. The country's core economic structure was overhauled, intending to strengthen the adherence to socialism while improving citizen's quality of life. A top down effort attempt to co-move wages alongside price levels³⁶ in government institutions for goods such as bus fares and rice (a staple of the Korean diet) ultimately resulted in disaster. Sales prices increased 550 times as a result.³⁷ Official foreign exchange rates for Won to Dollar conversion decreased 75 fold³⁸, most likely due to black market convertibility and cross-border transactions with China. Further from the capital, rural workers were encouraged to implement a bottom-up system of resource procurement which reduced reliance on official channels while simultaneously boosting productivity. Work squads on collective farms were encouraged to model themselves after the Chinese rural contract responsibility system from the 1980s.³⁹ This reform exercise is important because it highlights two characteristics of the North Korean decision making process instituted by the Central Plenary Committee and Politburo: 1) top-down decision making is billed as market reform and 2) the grand design of such "reforms" emanate from the top-tier decision makers.

This poorly implemented bureaucratic approach to market reform had a critical flaw from the onset: unlike China, North Koreans were not allowed to engage in true free market activity due to inherent restrictions on free enterprise. These measures were largely reactionary to the Arduous March period of 1995-1997, a time of catastrophic natural disasters that ravaged critical agricultural yields and even worse central planning used to combat them. Total deaths are estimated to have been between 1.5 and 3 million, largely from famine.⁴⁰ Many years of failed

³⁶ Necessary to move both to prevent hyper-inflation

³⁷ Choson Shinbo, July 26, 2002

³⁸ Choson Shinbo, July 26, 2002

³⁹ The County of Juche, Vol. 2 (Pyongyang: Pyongyang Press, 1989), pp. 46-49. The Household Responsibility System is a new methodology where local managers are responsible for fulfilling quotas and managing the profits and losses of local enterprises. This established a sense of autonomy on a local level that attempted to boost total production.

⁴⁰ Crossette, Barbara. "Korean Famine Toll: More Than 2 Million." The New York Times. The New York Times, 19 Aug. 1999. Web. 13 Nov. 2014.

attempts to reform provides some insight into the decision making process the regime uses. Appearance of reform is repeatedly the theme of each failed policy choice. By appearing to tackle the pressing issues crippling the country, the international community has repeatedly extended no-strings-attached aid on humanitarian grounds. Appearance does little but placate North Korea watchers while satisfying dissenting internal elements. Hope always seems to be a day away, highlighted by the 2002 reforms that promised true reform but resulted in an intensified nuclear program and renewed tensions.

Constructing a scenario modeled on the Chinese economic reform method where Kim Jong Un's regime implements reformist policy is a guide to showing its impossibility. There are several possibilities for the justification for shifts in policy. One possibility of implementing reform floated by scholars is the pacification of the higher echelon "nucleus class" which is composed of intellectuals, soldiers, workers, and elite KWP members.⁴¹ Because these groups make up the crucial support system of the regime, allowing them greater liberties, freer access to public goods, and correcting the inefficiencies in the market would undoubtedly improve their overall level of satisfaction. Other possibilities are more remote but could include altruism or external pressure.

The 2002 reforms attempted to raise prices to meet a truer market rate, similar to the adjustment made in 1979 at the beginning of the Chinese reforms. Price adjustment and wage increases were both intended to correct nearly a decade of economic mismanagement. Letting workers utilize capitalist-style farming methods (briefly) was a sign of autonomy that did not ultimately last. A North Korean Official was quoted as saying: "When production is stimulated in the near future, prices can be readjusted according to supply and demand, but private suppliers

⁴¹ KWP membership is a power of elite positioning within North Korean society and requires a litmus test of devotion to the ideals/dedication to the teachings of the Great Leaders.

will not be able to determine their own prices. Prices will be controlled strictly by the central and local administrative units. The market principle will not be completely reflected in the prices.⁴²”

Liberalization was not truly meant to start the transition toward market pricing but merely an attempt to bring official state prices in line with peasant market prices.⁴³ In the early 1990s, the North Korean Government set up the Rason Special Economic Zone in the far northeast of the country in an attempt to generate foreign currency filling the void of the Soviet Union’s aid. Chinese and Russian companies were enticed to set up factories utilizing cheap, unskilled North Korean laborers in exchange for their business, a source of hard currency for the regime. This pilot program mirrored early Chinese Special Economic Zones created by the Third Plenary Session at the beginning of their full-fledged effort to open to the West. What followed in China was thirty years of policy reform coupled with a total reorientation of official policy toward foreign investment. Implementing similar zones in North Korea was seen as a step towards universal market-oriented policies.⁴⁴ Business continued to function as usual. Workers were still paid similar wages to state factories elsewhere with heavy restrictions on access to foreigners.

Special Economic Zones may not have become the transitory phase toward capitalism that many hoped. Beginning in Rason (which sits next to a critical land border between the DPRK, Russia, and China), there are fourteen special zones with special economic rules which allow officially sanctioned capitalist enterprises to exist, unlike any other region in the country. Increased trade has positively impacted GDP, but mainly as a reactionary measure that attempted to repair the damage done in the wake of the Soviet Union’s collapse. What the SEZs have done is improve bilateral relations on the peninsula by forcing North and South Korea to cooperate

⁴² The Choson Shinbo, July 26, 2002.

⁴³ Official prices are set by officials in the Central Plenary Committee while peasant market prices represent a truer, fair market value for similar goods and services.

⁴⁴ Fish, Isaac Stone (2010-09-25). "A New Shenzhen". Newsweek. Retrieved 2014-11-15.

beyond policy debates. By fusing business interests of the two disjointed nations, the tone of war has dialed down substantially. Joint North-South projects, such as the Chilbosanmeri Joint Company, have been set up in the Rason zone, a welcome sign of cooperation between the two nations beginning in the early 1990s.⁴⁵ In the Kaesong Industrial Park straddling the Demilitarized Zone, the most successful SEZ to date, prominent South Korean firms have risked millions in capital to invest in the North. Due to the creation of SEZs, the tide of patron aid has changed in both form and function; South Korea has supplanted the Soviet Union to provide the majority of the North's humanitarian and economic aid.⁴⁶ Insuring companies against their investment in the North provides a level of security many would need before risking their business on the fickle nation. Overall, the creation of SEZs have improved bilateral ties between North and South but have ultimately failed to enact substantive change on a day-to-day level for average North Koreans. Many workers remain in the same socioeconomic bracket while it is mainly the chilled political climate redeeming the venture. In light of official regime failures, citizens have been pioneering capitalist style reforms all on their own for the past twenty years.

Black markets run by peasants popped up across the nation in response to the Arduous March where smuggled goods from China were able to readily fill the demands of the masses. Common goods such as digital radios, grains, and televisions are available at market rates based on the common Chinese Renminbi which holds a stable value compared to the Won.⁴⁷ Gray market solutions (neither official sanctioned nor banned) to official distribution methods are

⁴⁵ Kim, Seong-Jin (2010-01-19). "北,". Yonhap News Agency, Google Translated, Retrieved 2014-11-15

⁴⁶ "(LEAD) S. Korea to Offer US\$13 Mln in Aid to N. Korea." Yonhap News Agency, 11 Aug. 2014. Web. 16 Nov. 2014.

⁴⁷ Pearson, James. "Black Market Gets Some Respect in North Korea." The New York Times, 04 Nov. 2013. Web. 15 Nov. 2014.

readily available to common citizens, and prove that beneath the official rhetoric the groundwork has been laid should official transition to a free market economy become a reality.⁴⁸

SEZs, markets, and day traders dealing in foreign currency have proven to be positive steps toward change. On the surface there is reason to hope that the Kim regime will enact change based on the rapidly changing landscape of the past nineteen years. Failures of the regime have created opportunity for many. And in the wake of public distribution failures (the official channel that handled distributing many goods since the inception of the regime) stemming from widespread crop shortages in the 1990s, it is feasible that the market will be adept at handling regime transition if/when it should occur. These Zones have provided little more capitalist experimentation grounds that remain isolated from the broader network. Funneling hard currency to the regime has been the most apparent success thus far.

A summation of the two approaches to reform (top-down & bottom-up) can seem compatible insofar as the only variable at play is the idea of reformation. In practice, China was able to shed off the weight of its roots in favor of progressive reform from the top down. While sacrificing the personality cult built around Mao, officials were able to navigate the changing fabric of global trade. Internal economic and social reforms implemented in the 1970s have propelled Chinese GDP to number two within forty years.⁴⁹ Mao did not transfer power in the same hereditary succession that the Kims have done for three generations now; his successor was purged on charges of treason before solidifying power in 1978. Kim il Sung groomed Kim Jong Il for nearly twenty years before the official power transfer occurred. With Kim Jong Un leading now, there have been signs that the Old Guard is undergoing deconstruction with the continual

⁴⁸ Grey Markets refer to the unofficial network of markets and shops outside of the Public Distribution System (PDS) that have popped up around North Korea. They are neither official sanctioned or banned by the government. They exist as a reaction to the shortcomings of the PDS which sustained the basis needs of the citizens for many years.

⁴⁹ "China." The World Bank DataBank. N.p., n.d. Web. 16 Nov. 2014.

purges of government leaders including Jang Sung-taek, Kim Jong Un's uncle and most prominent advisor until his spectacular demise in 2013.⁵⁰

Pyongyang is now tasked with separating politics from economics if one is to thrive without killing the other: choosing to allow the twenty-three million person strong population to thrive or the Kim family. Kim cannot survive without the support of the elite, and their happiness is dependent on a level of comfort incompatible with a burgeoning middle class. Conversely, if the traditional planned economy gives way to a market approach, growing pains could possibly result in the removal of the Kims. Both approaches ensure the survival of the middle class, but only the status quo will continue to ensure the Kims survival. All modern economies have successfully tackled agricultural concerns along with heavy industrial production as staples of long term growth. And economic freedom often leads to calls for political freedom. Continually grappling with these issues has crippled Pyongyang's ability to shift idle hands toward improving common standards of living. Evolution is contingent upon opening up trade routes — signs of this are apparent in trade emanating from SEZs — with foreigners. This would be similar to the *perestroika* period in the Soviet Union undertaken after Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in 1985 amidst crisis. However, reforms unintentionally brought about the dissolution of the State as a means to make the system more efficient. This is likely not going to be the case in North Korea barring a non-hereditary transition in Pyongyang.

Conclusion: Predictions of Compatibility

⁵⁰ "Report on Enlarged Meeting of Political Bureau of Central Committee of WPK". Korean Central News Agency (North Korea), 8 December 2013. Retrieved 19 November 2014.

Holding all of these glimmering rays of hope back from coming to fruition is the glaring incompatibility of the Kim Family's regime stability and true economic progress. A myriad of philosophical routes have ensconced *Juche* into all policy choices of the regime. Hardened survivalism is the *de facto* methodology for making any changes, most importantly those that concern the elite's bank accounts. In China, for example, Deng Xiaoping wished to shed off the failed policies of Mao in hope of a brighter future for his nation. He took drastic steps to open up foreign trade, export culture, and reform policies that had resulted in millions of lost lives. Even before his death in 1976, Mao held a historic meeting with President Richard Nixon in 1972, seen as the beginning of his opening to the West. Never so eloquently put, the difference between Mao's communist China and the West amounted to "philosophic problems" as Mao posited to Nixon on their first ever meeting.⁵¹ Similar issues exist in the schism between North Korea and the West. While the bitter suspicions and mistrust of outsiders has handicapped any serious efforts the regime has attempted thus far, it is not a stretch to imagine that an environment ripe for change will break through at some point.

Two incompatible systems presented (the current totalitarian North Korean system and the current Chinese reformed system) have tested economic outcomes. Isolation and provocation has led Pyongyang into a nearly two decade long bout of economic failure while China has emerged as an up-and-coming superpower. Both systems, at their inception, sought similar outcomes. China has warmed, Pyongyang has hardened themselves. China has liberalized trade restrictions, Pyongyang's provocations have caused the toughest international sanctions since Cuba's trade embargo. Glaring contrasts exist across the board.

⁵¹ Zedong, Mao, and Richard M. Nixon. "Mao Zedong Meets Richard Nixon, February 21, 1972." USC-US-China Institute, 21 Feb. 1972. Web. 16 Nov. 2014.

In closing, a modern comparison must channel itself neatly through this lens and allow the model to serve only as theory. Economic sanctions implemented by the United Nations have crippled only the middle class of the DPRK and left the elites sitting neatly on their laurels. Upper echelon politics will continue as usual until their position within the government is very seriously confronted.

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Bess H. Ward Scholarship Summary

After receiving the Bess H. Ward Honors in the Major scholarship, I was able to utilize the funds to travel to North Korea in August 2013 before beginning my work on project itself. By funding my request to travel abroad, I was able to get a firsthand look into one of the most remote and isolated nations on the planet while simultaneously giving me a first hand perspective into the area I was studying. Specifically, the money was used to pay for the quite costly tour, airfares, and food while staying abroad. This scholarship gives young academics like myself the ability to extend our curiosity to the subjects we have the upmost passion for.