LITERARY AUTONOMY IN NORTH KOREA: 
AUTHORITY, AGENCY, AND THE ART OF CONTROL

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By

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LITERARY AUTONOMY IN NORTH KOREA:
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ABSTRACT

What explains the absence of a popular uprising in a country that, despite isolation, has experienced an infiltration of information over the years; despite lethargy, has felt the emergence of class divisions; and, despite oppression, has seen a high number of citizens risk their lives to escape everyday? Given the existence of several conditions that raise the likelihood for civil unrest in North Korea, this paper highlights a shortcoming in prior theories on revolution. In particular, the North Korea case calls attention to an under-theorized constraint that citizens face when determining how to respond to oppression: literary autonomy. By this measure, the incidence of mass disobedience varies depending on 1) reader autonomy, the degree to which readers can gain access to literature, and 2) writer autonomy, the degree to which writers can disseminate written work. By underscoring the utility and significance of literary autonomy, the argument at present hopes to contribute to explanations for variation in civil discontent across authoritarian states. This paper not only complements and builds upon previous theories, but also promotes closer analysis of literary processes, which remain an understudied mechanism beyond the humanities.
The research and writing of this thesis is dedicated to the friends from home who brought the world to me,

Many thanks,
Catherine
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INTRODUCTION

North Korea has withstood the test of time. The notoriously isolated nation of 25 million has endured challenges both internal and external, from surviving widespread famine to deflecting shocks from the international community. Against all odds, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) has managed to evade the fate of so many revolutionary regimes: collapse. But what is even more incredible, the belligerent little country north of the 38th parallel has seen a peaceful transfer of power between three generations of Kims, each one just as provocative as the last.

If these observations sound overwrought, that is because they reflect the frustrated tone of scholars and foreign policy analysts who wonder at the remarkable resilience of North Korea. Curiously, the country that has become the bane of its powerful neighbors, and the nightmare of human rights organizations, has not witnessed mass civil disobedience. The eerie precedent of peace and stability is, to some, evidence of a brainwashed population. To others, it is a sign of much darker forces at work.

Of course, North Koreans are not brainwashed. As one of the most literate and educated populations in the world, your ordinary North Korean is quite smart, economically resourceful, and—as a great many defectors demonstrate—incredibly brave. And yet it is defection, not revolt, that remains the preferred mode of rebellion.

What explains the absence of a popular uprising in a country that, despite isolation, has experienced an infiltration of information over the years; despite lethargy, has felt the emergence of class divisions; and, despite oppression, has seen a high number of citizens risk their lives to escape everyday?
Given the existence of several conditions that would predict civil unrest in North Korea, my paper highlights a shortcoming in prior theories on revolution. In particular, the North Korea case draws attention to an under-theorized constraint that citizens face when determining how to respond to oppression: literary autonomy.¹ I find that the incidence of mass disobedience varies depending on 1) reader autonomy, the degree to which readers can gain access to literature, and 2) writer autonomy, the degree to which writers can disseminate written work.

As I will demonstrate below, previous studies have not taken into account the extent to which state control over modes of cultural production create certain ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ constraints on civil society. A hard constraint refers to the inability to disseminate information and mobilize support, whereas a soft constraint is the inability to impart and empower a competing ideology to the official state narrative. The approach I take here revives the salience of literary theory in questions that concern political science.

REGIME RESILIENCE IN THE DEMOCRATIC PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC OF KOREA

Why do some political regimes experience revolution, while others do not? Which governments are more likely to survive domestic challenges and external pressure? And what compels the citizens of one country to revolt, and the citizens of another to refrain? These questions have been variously posed, answered, and defended by political scientists, ethnic scholars, and economists alike. Even the concept of ‘revolution’ comes in so varied a form that defining this phenomena of social conflict is unclear.

¹ In my use of the term ‘literary autonomy,’ I mean to differentiate from the conventional definition of literary work as an independent aesthetic object.
Although the causal factors of revolution or state breakdown are largely contestable, scholars can agree on a set of conditions that raise the likelihood for civil unrest. Ted Robert Gurr’s seminal *Why Men Rebel* examined revolution from the standpoint of social change. According to Gurr, factors that lead to government opposition consist largely of popular discontent, or a sense of comparative disadvantage, and imbalances between an angry population and the state’s capacity to respond to that anger.² Others have taken a more demographic approach to explain state collapse, such as Jack Goldstone in his study of population growth and its constraints on society.³ There is also ample research on how foreign pressures contribute significantly to the dissolution of a state.⁴

In response to these diverse yet valid theories, Vladimir Mau and Irina Starodubrovskaya contend that a state’s capacity to adapt to change is “the principal factor determining the stability of the established structures.”⁵ Prior and existing theories, they argue, “concentrate on one type of challenge or constraint, or on a limited historical period.”⁶ Indeed, there appears to be a tendency among scholars to zero in on a particular determinant of revolutions as opposed to broader structural factors. Though these approaches tend to limit the explanatory power of a revolution theory, they nonetheless help to explain the forces that raise the likelihood of revolution in specific countries and

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⁶ Ibid., 13.
at specific times. By analyzing the absence of a popular uprising in North Korea, my focus on literary autonomy adds to that list.

Remarkably, the DPRK has proven resilient against crises of the foreign and domestic variety. “Collapsist theory” predictions that the country would not survive find its origins in the 1990s. The famine of 1995-1999, unusual for a relatively industrialized country with a high literacy rate, put those assumptions to the test when the regime somehow managed to withstand the devastating effects on the population. In spite of the flawed public distribution system and the government’s failure to prevent the reactionary forces of underground market movements, the North Korean famine did not precipitate state collapse.

Predictions for state collapse have also been linked to foreign diplomatic efforts. The 1994 Agreed Framework, an agreement that Pyongyang freeze its nuclear weapons program in exchange for fuel oil and resources, was seen by many as a sign of the country’s path towards reform. Optimistically, some people anticipate Chinese-style market reforms to be the ultimate catalyst for change in the economically stagnant country. Analysts anxiously watch for developments in North Korea’s special economic zones (SEZs) for signs of progress.

Others remain wary. In considering the Chinese Communist Party’s capacity for survival, the answer to regime resilience seems more the result of the strategic formation of institutional ties to a changing and potentially challenging economic and social

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8 Ibid., 89-121.
environment. Apropos to the title, contributors to *Why Communism Did Not Collapse* have explained authoritarian durability on a diverse range of institutional factors, from gradual market reform to leadership flexibility.

More recent shocks from the international community are not likely to resonate in North Korea either. The state is highly effective at blocking outside news from infiltrating the country and reaching its citizens. In response to the civil unrest and protests in Libya, North Koreans abroad were told to stay put, suggesting the leadership fears a possible contagion effect if first-hand accounts of the uprisings were to spread among the masses.

What we find is that North Korea is not so different from other authoritarian countries that suffer from poor governance, perceived hostile external influences, and an unsustainable economy. Similar to other oppressive countries, North Korean leaders have instituted the standard parameters to prevent the rise of a civil society capable of challenging the ruling regime. Though the actions of North Korean leaders often appear illogical in response to economic crises, and though their behavior seems unnecessarily provocative toward the international community, their tactics have managed to keep the central government afloat and dissidence at bay.

Upon closer inspection, those tactics reveal how North Korea differs significantly from other politically repressive regimes. While certain conditions, such as the country’s

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relatively small size, make it easier for North Korea to exert control and monitor its people, there are more pervasive elements in the authoritarian toolbox. No other country has as powerful and extensive a propaganda apparatus than in North Korea. Nor does any other country enforce control over the press to the degree that North Korean state authorities do. Uniquely, the North Korean nation is built off of an elaborately contrived myth whose every reproduction in print, video, and monumental form is digested as the official, incontrovertible narrative. Under these constraints, there is room for but one ideology.

**LITERARY AUTONOMY IN NORTH KOREA**

In spite of several conditions that raise the risk for dissent in North Korea, a popular uprising has not occurred because the state suppresses the rise of a civil society. What makes the North Korean state stand out among authoritarian regimes, however, is its absolute control over literary autonomy. By underscoring the utility and significance of literary autonomy, my argument hopes to contribute to explanations for variation in civil discontent. This paper not only complements and builds upon previous theories, but also promotes closer analysis of literary processes, which remain an understudied mechanism beyond the humanities.

It is necessary at this point to make a disclaimer and defend the relevance of the present argument. Analysis of North Korea comes with its fair share of challenges, particularly in regard to the difficult task of finding reliable data. The problem becomes further complicated by the influence of Western media culture, out of which caricature representations of the enigmatic DPRK are born. By considering how certain features of
state control can explain the absence of popular uprising, this paper hopes to avoid a particularistic view of North Korea. Moreover, the motivation behind this research is not to encourage revolution, but to contribute to the nebulous study of a phenomena which so many analysts anticipated seeing in North Korea.

It is apparent that U.S. policy makers place great value in the potential for civil society to challenge the state, especially under the presumption that people who are equipped with communication technologies will mobilize and catalyze change. A bill to amend the North Korea Human Rights Act of 2004 “to authorize further actions to promote freedom of information and democracy in North Korea,” was introduced in February of this year.\textsuperscript{13} The current policy initiatives to permeate the DPRK’s information barrier with “USB drives, micro SD cards, audio players, video players, cell phones, wi-fi, wireless internet, webpages, internet, wireless telecommunications, and other electronic media that shares information,” reflects an American tendency to privilege the role of modern technological instruments.\textsuperscript{14} However, support for policies that promote openness in the DPRK through media technology tend to miss the point on how civil societies emerge and become empowered.

Overwhelmingly, the discourse on the repressive North Korean state assumes that, with the right tools and the proper conditions, ordinary North Korean citizens will not hesitate to take up arms against the state. These arguments appear largely motivated by the democratic movements and popular uprisings that have swept the Arab world. While


\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
study of these events contribute to our understanding of the structural causes of civil discontent, it is less clear how they can be applied to the North Korean context.

TERMINOLOGY

At this point, it is helpful to clarify the relevant terminology of this paper: authoritarianism, civil society, and popular uprising. Authoritarianism is a term whose definition has become diluted over time. When making reference to authoritarian regimes, this paper looks at the countries rated “authoritarian” from the Economist Intelligence Unit’s Democracy Index as a guide.\(^{15}\) In reference to North Korea, however, a few qualities are worth highlighting. For one, North Korea is run under a personalistic dictatorship in which power is passed down by hereditary succession. In order to secure legitimacy, these regimes typically rely on a national myth, or invoke tradition, to stake their claim. Ideas that challenge the nation’s official narrative are not tolerated. This has important implications for understanding how the North Korean state strategically prevents a marketplace of ideas from emerging. The peaceful transfer of power from founder Kim Il Sung to his son Kim Jong Il and finally, the grandson, Kim Jong Un, attests to the efficacy of North Korea’s tightly controlled system of authoritarianism.

North Korea is also a revolutionary regime, one which “emerge[d] out of sustained, ideological, and violent struggle from below, and whose establishment is accompanied by mass mobilization and significant efforts to transform state structures

and the existing social order.” In this definition, Levitsky and Way distinguish authoritarian regimes through four revolutionary legacies: “1) the destruction of independent power centers; 2) cohesive ruling parties; 3) tight partisan control over the security forces; and 4) powerful coercive apparatuses.” Of particular note is this last legacy. North Korea’s coercive capacity goes far beyond the implementation of military and police forces toward, as we shall see below, ideological forces.

By contrast, civil society is commonly identified as a positive force against authoritarianism. Broad definitions of civil society tend to encompass non-governmental organizations that, in the spirit of liberalism, elevate demands for reform and empower ordinary citizens. But over the past decade, the forces of economic integration and globalization have so expanded as to complicate the concept of civil society. Since this paper builds its arguments heavily on the influence of civil society, it deserves clarification here.

There are two important dimensions of civil society that are relevant to the discussion. The first relates the notion of civil society as an autonomous social force, “the we-ness that makes society into society.” I turn to Jeffrey Alexander to emphasize this interpretation of civil society as “a sphere or subsystem of society that is analytically and, to various degrees, empirically separated from the spheres of political, economic, family, and religious life. Civil society is a sphere of solidarity in which individual rights and collective obligations are tensely intertwined.” The second dimension is less abstract and involves the actual adaptation of civil society into structures that are capable of

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17 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
shaping public opinion and challenging the state. The World Bank’s definition emphasizes this aspect of civil society as “the wide array of non-governmental and not-for-profit organizations that have a presence in public life, expressing the interests and values of their members or others, based on ethical, cultural, political, scientific, religious or philanthropic considerations.”

Finally, whether by popular uprising or a coup d’êtat, revolt comes in various forms. It is important to distinguish one from the other in order to better understand how and why civil discontent manifests. Much of the scholarship on North Korea focuses on the potential revolutionary forces within the political elite. Since my argument is concerned with the dynamics that involve mass participation and popular discontent, I emphasize my usage of the term popular uprising here. Instead of taking a top-down approach to explain revolution, I focus on the processes that compel the ordinary citizen to rise up.

**HOLES IN THE EXISTING THEORIES**

Since the emergence of color revolutions and the Arab Spring, there has been a growing body of literature on how to apply the preconditions that fueled revolution in places like Egypt and Tunisia onto North Korea. Broadly speaking, these arguments contend that a similar grassroots movement could find root in North Korea as mobile

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21 For a more eloquent breakdown of the various connotations of ‘revolution,’ see Goldstone, *Revolution and Rebellion*, 8-9.
phones, operating through North Korea’s sole telecommunication company Orascom, become more available throughout the country.  

Well before the Arab Spring revolutions, technological advancements were expected to bear consequences for society. Whether those advancements have a positive or negative impact depends on a country’s social, political, and economic context. Nevertheless, it has become commonplace to equate innovations in communication technologies, such as Internet accessibility and cell phone usage, to the erosion of state control. For example, since the 1980s, “Western analysts pondered the ways in which ICTs [Information Communications Technologies] could be employed to break the Soviet Union’s stranglehold on information. The subsequent fall of communism at the end of the decade helped to cement enthusiasm about the technology’s promise.” The Internet’s potential to empower and expand civil society remains a prevalent indicator for predictions of authoritarian regime collapse in our hyperconnected world.

As the trends suggest, there is great potential for the Internet’s capacity to challenge authoritarian control. What is often lost in these assumptions, however, is the fact that authoritarian regimes are also provided advantageous opportunities through the very technology that threatens to loosen their grip. A comprehensive study on Open Networks, Closed Regimes by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace made salient the counter-intuitive claim that “the Internet is not inherently a threat to

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Of the eight case studies they examine, there is considerable support for the observation that authoritarian regimes reap benefits from the development of ICTs. Assuming that governments have total control of their network architecture, ICT development can provide state revenue, facilitate policy implementation, sophisticate state propaganda, and foster regime legitimacy.

Even Google’s Eric Schmidt and Jared Cohen, in an ominous reflection of their visit to Pyongyang, wrote, “technology doesn't just help the good guys pushing for democratic reform—it can also provide powerful new tools for dictators to suppress dissent.”

Though many authoritarian states are at a comparatively lower level of economic development than their democratic counterparts, they are not obsolete. In an increasingly interconnected world, these governments are eager and able to consult with one another on effective strategies to design, monitor, and implement a digital infrastructure that inhibits subversive energy and reinforces regime stability.

Social scientists and political economists have also identified income gaps as a catalyst for unrest and a strong precondition for rebellious action. An emerging theory among North Korea watchers is that the rise of a ‘new bourgeois’ or ‘new rich’ will spell instability for the regime. Following the famine crisis, North Korea acquiesced to its budding private economy and instituted a series of reform initiatives, ranging from the establishment of special economic zones to more strategic foreign aid-seeking policies.

In 2002, a burgeoning capitalist enterprise known as Jangmadang, or black market, was

\[\text{Ibid., 136.}\]

\[\text{Ibid., 137-139.}\]


\[\text{http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887324030704578424650479285218.}\]

tacitly accepted by the state and continues to evolve in size and scope. According to one study, profits from the Jangmadang can account “for as much as 80% of the total living expenses” for a North Korean.

As Andrei Lankov notes, “the Leninist system is well and truly dead in the North Korea of today.” Privately owned cars, flashy high-heels, LCD televisions, and the illegal purchase of homes reflect nascent entrepreneurial forces and the onset of risky class divisions. An emergent middle class presents a host of challenges for the state. People accustomed to a higher standard of living are less willing to have their privileges taken away. Unless the state can sustain the momentum set by its informal market activities, they run the risk of disenchanting a privileged new class of North Koreans.

Perhaps the most dangerous element of North Korea’s markets is the formation of a new public sphere. John Everard, the former United Kingdom Ambassador to North Korea reflected on the significance of so-called “frog markets,” or unregulated markets where vendors come and go before they can be shut down: “[T]he markets already seem to act as foci for the exchange of news and ideas, a role that is likely to grow if the regime stumbles.” Indeed, the free flow of information in these small communities of trusted traders and loyal consumers reflect a promising microcosm of civil society.

The North Korean state can only allow for so much market freedom before clamping down on it. As Everard makes clear, “There is no place for markets in the

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30 Ibid., 67.
32 Ibid.
DPRK’s ideology, and their existence threatens it.”  

He refers here to speeches in which Kim Jong Il made explicit the danger of free markets to party stability:

In a socialist society, the food problem should be solved by socialist means. If the party lets the people solve the food problem themselves, then only the farmers and merchants will prosper, giving rise to egotism and collapsing the social order of a classless society. The party will then lose its popular base and will experience meltdown as in Poland and Czechoslovakia. 

Kim’s pronouncement articulates the fear of a counter-culture seeping out of free markets. To lose control of the market is to loosen the constraints of that which threatens authoritarian regimes most. It is what Victor Cha astutely identifies as the emergence of entrepreneurship, which “creates an individualist way of thinking that is alien to the government.”

These are all good and valid theories. However, they fail to consider the technical capacity of a ‘new bourgeois’ class to collectively organize against the state. Groups mobilize around a cause. If there is no means of producing—let alone communicating—an alternative ideology, there is far less capacity to mobilize support.

**WRITER AUTONOMY IN NORTH KOREA**

Many scholars have pondered the question of what makes literature relevant to the nation. Perhaps the most groundbreaking of those studies has come out of Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*. Anderson made salient the “imagined” element of nations. That is, citizens—the “members” of a nation—will never actually meet or come to know all of their fellow countrymen, “yet in the minds of each lives the image of their

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34 Ibid., 5.
How members came to perceive of themselves as part of a larger community is profoundly tied to the act of reading. As texts became mass-produced, so too did the act of reading become a kind of mass ritual. A man reading a book in one part of town might conceive of another man in the town over reading the very same text. In this regard, the process of reading all manner of religious texts, newspapers, and fiction was a radical social operation that unified whole communities of people. As Anderson makes clear, national consciousness found its origins with the emergence of “print-capitalism, which made it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves, and to relate themselves to others, in profoundly new ways.” Here are the origins of not only national consciousness, but also the structurally transformative concept of citizens as part of a “horizontal comradeship.”

In North Korea, however, it would appear that the dominant structural system is vertically aligned, which helps to explain why people are more prone to defect than mobilize. Even more, it makes sense that representations of the North Korean nation are overwhelmingly visual. Monuments, billboards, and cultural relics are displayed in such sacred and grandiose form as to force a reality out of tradition and legitimacy out of myth. As one scholar notes, these visual spectacles reflect “a classic case of overcompensation.” Investing in 20-meter tall bronze statues of the nation’s leaders sustains not only the cult of personality, but a very literal sense of vertical loyalties.

North Korea’s cultural entrepreneurs also reinforce regime legitimacy through total control over the press. Although outsiders have been able to glimpse more of North

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38 Ibid., 36.
39 Ibid., 7.
Korea thanks to the presence of foreign reporters, there are major restrictions to what can actually be published in the country. Jean Lee, the former American bureau chief of the Associated Press in Pyongyang, reflected positively on North Korea’s reception of a foreign press corps, but was careful to criticize how the Foreign Ministry, “has favored TV networks and wire service photographers they trust will transmit beautiful images.”

Indeed, the DPRK is privy to the power of the visual, but remains highly skeptical of the power of the press. As Lee notes, “The written word, however, is seen as a threat. Most US newspaper and radio reporters have been shut out in recent years.”

The state’s complete control over literary autonomy removes all room for ideological differences to bud. The salience of this, and literature’s capacity to shape national consciousness, will seem less abstract if we observe two key moments in Korea’s literary history. The first details the forces leading up to the March First Movement, and the second brings into focus how, within the smallest openings of literary autonomy, an ideology may flower.

Well before the Korean peninsula was split in two, Korea boasted a vibrant history of protest and a profoundly devoted civil society. Beneath a legacy of colonization coursed a powerful stream of nationalist thinkers—many of whom make up the original 33 activists of the March First Movement. In 1896, So Chaep’il (better known as Philip Jaisohn) founded the Independence Club, which would establish Korea’s first modern newspaper, The Independent. As Kyung Moon Hwang points out, the

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42 Ibid.
43 Hwang, A History of Korea, 146-149.
social influence of these literary forces triggered, “a revolution in mass culture.” The public discourse created here did not die out under Japanese occupation, but resurfaced in 1919 with the March First Movement. Inspired by the Wilsonian vision of a new world order of independence and self-sufficiency, the demonstration that began in Seoul swept across the country. Though it ultimately failed to achieve its goal of liberating Koreans, it bears mention as the first mass mobilization of resistance against Japan. Even more noteworthy is how it temporarily unified multiple and competing Korean factions.

Two decades after this major event, another smaller, yet no less significant show of resistance, occurred in the pages of the Tonga Ilbo which led to its closure for nearly one year. The Korean-born marathon runner, Son Kijong, secured a gold medal from the Japanese Empire at the 1936 Berlin Olympics. His story was proudly featured on the front page of Tonga Ilbo, with a slight deviation. The Japanese flag on his uniform was deliberately smudged out. Hwang eloquently summarizes the import of the brazen act here:

[T]he event also represents a window into the overarching patterns of culture and daily life in the late colonial period, with recurring exposure to each others’ lives through mass culture strengthening a sense of commonality. The newspaper, in fact, played the central role in circulating these observations, impressions, and ideas. This prodded Koreans to contemplate and reconsider their collective identity, both through an active engagement with pressing issues of nationhood and a more pedestrian pursuit of their lives.

We can see from these two events where the logic of North Korea’s unclenched grip on cultural production creates both ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ constraints on civil society. That is, in

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44 Ibid., 148.
47 Hwang, A History of Korea, 172-176.
48 Ibid., 173.
the context of North Korea, there is no opportunity to disseminate information and
mobilize support, and little hope for injecting a competing ideology into the official state
story.

In the North Korean distortion of history, Korea’s loss of autonomy by outside
imperialist forces is overemphasized. Indeed, the North Korean state derives much of its
emotional legitimacy from its colonial past. Ironically, this focus also serves to justify the
state’s uncompromising authority over the people. By wielding complete control over
literary autonomy, the North Korean state not only deprives the people of their individual
autonomy, but also prevents a counter-narrative from gaining traction.

**READER AUTONOMY IN NORTH KOREA**

Authoritarian political elites bolster their status through legitimating mechanisms.
Crudely, they may enforce their rule through acts of violence and intimidation.
Alternatively—and what tends to be the case in states that reach a certain level of
development—they may opt for more nuanced forms of legitimation. Often, this comes in
the form of propaganda. It is clear that unlike any other country, North Korea’s cultural
entrepreneurs not only enforce control through airtight constraints on literary autonomy,
but also construct a reality of the nation through propaganda.

To the average American, propaganda has a negative and anachronistic
connotation. It might be associated with communism, or the kitschy North Korean posters
which have become ironic decor in a college dorm. But in the context of a closed society
like North Korea, propaganda is not quite what it seems. Without alternative sources to
proliferate information, official state propaganda in North Korea is monolithic. Every
literary text and news broadcast exists as an authoritative source of its own. As detailed above, all manner of significant texts in North Korea is beholden to just one author: the state, which in various forms can mean Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong Il, or Kim Jong Un.

In considering all this, the idea that literature—and language itself—shapes social reality is not so radical a concept, and deserves mention here:

[L]iterature depends on being read in a certain way in order to be effective and successful. It is written for an audience, and that audience is implied in the text. Reception, response, and interpretation are in a sense preordained by the rhetoric of the literary work, but the audience also plays a role in shaping how the work will be understood and what meanings it will have. Each new generation and each new group of readers in a new setting brings to a work different codes for understanding it.\textsuperscript{49}

This is the natural trend of readership. A work produced at a certain point in history will be re-interpreted over time, and by different actors. So long as the North Korean state unilaterally dictates how history and society should be writ, North Koreans are robbed of this organic process. But that is not to imply that every North Korean reader ascribes to the same interpretation of a text, especially when we consider how official state narratives change in subtle ways over time. To North Korean readers, however, these slight deviations may look momentous.

To further analyze literary autonomy in the DPRK is to first understand how cultural production is inseparable from official state policy. Tatiana Gabroussenko, a scholar of North Korean literature, echoes what other foreign readers opine of the state-sanctioned fiction: “North Korean literature has indeed been a field of exceptional

uniformity, unchallenged by any alternatives.”\textsuperscript{50} She clarifies, however, the relevance of studying these texts as “a researcher who is interested in the shifts and twists of North Korea’s propaganda, hidden modifications of the Party line, North Korea’s cultural stereotypes, or the officially endorsed self-portrait of the North Korean people and the image of the world around them.”\textsuperscript{51} Indeed, like the North Korean readers themselves, outsiders can glean a wealth of information from the state’s subtle developments in narrative form. By charting the changes in state ideology under each of the three Kim leaders, we can better answer whether there is space for a counter ideology to surface.

Though it has evolved in meaningful ways, the North Korea of today remains a shadow of its former self. Its current institutions, policies, and even aesthetics, are shaped by its revolutionary origins. To understand the strength of North Korea’s roots is to first grasp the significance of its ruling ideology, \textit{juche}. In short, juche can be understood as a concept of self-reliance, the inspiration behind North Korean policy, the guiding principle for its citizens, and the source of national pride. Yet for all its self-deterministic connotations, juche has also proven to be a rather inconsistent philosophical theory.

The authors of \textit{North Korea: The Politics of Regime Survival} identify the deeply embedded concept of juche in North Korean society as a unique part of the regime’s survival.\textsuperscript{52} Originally, North Korea’s reigning ideology was that of Marxism-Leninism until a constitutional revision in 1992 substituted it for the Korean version, “a revolutionary ideology with a people-centered view of the world that aims toward the

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{52} Young Whan Kihl and Hong Nack Kim, \textit{North Korea: The Politics of Regime Survival} (Armonk, GB: Routledge, 2014), 3-30.
realization of the independence of the masses, the guiding principle of its actions.”\(^{53}\) Well before it was officially implemented in the constitution, however, the concept of juche was closely associated with Kim Il Sung, who first introduced it in the historic speech, “On the Need to Repel Dogmatism and Formalism and to Establish Juche in Carrying Out Ideological Projects.”\(^{54}\) Through juche, Kim Il Sung began to disassociate the DPRK brand of communism from its Soviet influences toward his more nationalistic ambitions.

It is not surprising that this period saw the deaths of several Soviet-Korean communists who threatened Kim’s efforts to solidify power. Under the auspices of a Kim Il Sung-led state, and inspired by Mao Zedong’s personalistic style of leadership, North Korea became fully engaged in the process of revolutionary state-building.

As Hwang notes of this period, “the most dramatic and enduring ideological outcome… came in the shaping of a new historical perspective.”\(^{55}\) Fear of outside forces and foreign intervention served as the principal motivation for the self-reliance which juche espoused. Unsurprisingly, certain historical details were tweaked or entirely omitted from the official history. North Korean intellectuals and writers like Han Sorya helped to propagate these myths and elevate Kim Il Sung’s biography. As Andrei Lankov points out, “The complete control over information flows within society, combined with isolation from the outside world, gave North Korea’s propagandists opportunities their peers elsewhere could not even have dreamed of.”\(^{56}\) During this time especially, descriptions of Americans as “the embodiment of all things evil,” became conventional wisdom. Many defectors like Joseph Kim have verified the indoctrination North Koreans

\(^{53}\) Ibid., 8.
\(^{54}\) Ibid.
\(^{55}\) Hwang, A History of Korea, 221.
experience from a young age: “I’d always been taught that [America] was the enemy, full of big-nosed, big-eyed, vicious people who’d killed my countrymen. I guess I was still brainwashed from all those years ago.”

By the 1970s, propaganda efforts refocused on securing a stable transition of power from father to son. To the concept of juche, the state promoted an addition put forward by, apparently, Kim Jong Il himself:

According to his interpretation, the idea of juche consists mainly of two parts—the philosophical theory that the masses are the masters of history and revolution, and the guiding principles, or the ‘Revolutionary View of the Leader,’ which asserts that ‘nonetheless, the masses are not able to take up spontaneously any revolutionary course unless they are organized into revolutionary forces and are led by the suryong (the Leader).

Under Kim Jong II, we can see how propagandist forces tighten their control, rather than loosen up space, to inhibit the emergence of civil society. The biological metaphor promulgated during this time—that the North Korean leader is “the brain of the body politic,”—unfortunately lends itself to the stereotype of brainwashing in North Korea.

Before Kim Jong Un entered the scene, many wondered optimistically about how the young Swiss-educated ruler-to-be would transform North Korea. Surprisingly—or rather, not—Kim Jong Un has demonstrated remarkable continuity in his consolidation of power, provocative nuclear posturing, and the perpetuation of an intense personality cult. Although there has been a relative improvement in the country’s acceptance of foreign reporters, the emphasis, as Jean Lee noted above, is on advertising a particular vision of North Korea. Despite the fact that foreign correspondents were invited to document the

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59 Ibid.
historic Workers’ Party Congress in May 2016, those who were found to be “speaking very ill of the system,” were quickly expelled from the country.\textsuperscript{60}

While some observe the changes under Kim Jong Un as a promising sign that “the Ice Age in North Korea is coming to an end,” it is not yet clear what this thaw means for an emerging civil society.\textsuperscript{61} Several reports of North Koreans gaining access to information from the outside world have surfaced as of late. Increasingly, it seems that North Koreans are able to glimpse the wealth of their neighbors through South Korean dramas and broadcasts.\textsuperscript{62} Though one can make the claim that these opportunities raise the risk of delegitimizing state ideology, there exist few means and little incentive for people to collectively mobilize in North Korea today.

\textbf{PUTTING LITERARY AUTONOMY TO THE TEST}

To Americans, the concept of measuring literary autonomy may seem bizarre considering that, from our earliest days, we are free to read and write virtually anything in a wide range of media. How, as people who have internalized the concept of literary autonomy, can we measure it in other countries where it appears not to exist?

Indeed, on a macro scale, literary autonomy is almost impossible to measure. In order to gain an accurate sense of a country’s literary autonomy, one would need to collect first-hand accounts of ordinary citizens’ experience as readers and writers.


Organizations such as Freedom House provide substantial assessments of media freedom in the world. While their methodology serves as a fine starting point to evaluate press freedom across diverse political and economic environments, they also conceal an authentic picture of the very micro operations of information flow between communities. China ranks high on the “Not Free” scale with a score of 87 (100 being the worst), but that status belies the actual influence of civil society on the populace.\textsuperscript{63} If we consider how the artist and prolific blogger Ai Weiwei managed to evade state censors and garner widespread domestic support after his arrest, we might come to view China’s literary autonomy as relatively high.\textsuperscript{64} Placing the focus on the formal processes of print and digital media can obscure the informal processes at work in countries where censors are high and transparency is low.

The proposal set forth is ambitious, and remains a work in progress until sufficient data is collected from unofficial sources and interviews. For the purposes of this first cut analysis, I provide a framework for testing the theory. The focus remains largely on the literary autonomy of North Korea as one crucial explanation for the absence of popular uprising in the country.

Literary autonomy can be measured in the countries rated as “authoritarian” in the EIU’s Democracy Index of 2015. The Democracy Index accounts for the vast majority of the world: 165 independent states and two territories. Regime rankings are based on a


\textsuperscript{64} \textit{Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry}, directed by Alison Klayman (2012; New York, NY: MPI Media Group 2012).
range of indicators within these five categories: “electoral process and pluralism; civil liberties; the functioning of government; political participation; and political culture.”

Authoritarian countries characteristically restrict freedoms that would weaken regime stability. Of the EIU’s Democracy Index, “authoritarian” countries featured the lowest overall ratings for “civil liberties.” The indicators for measuring “civil liberties” encompass a set of basic human rights which are embedded in the constitutions of liberal democracies and international institutions like the UN. Governments that respect these principles are likely to show high levels of literary autonomy, a measurement that reflects freedom of speech, freedom of expression, an open press, and a sustainable means of literary production.

But authoritarian countries are not deprived of a literary culture. In fact, many feature a vibrant literary history. However, that is not to say that these countries boast a high level of literary autonomy. As a political system transitions into a new system, certain constraints may be tightened to stymie dissident behavior. Often, this entails curtailing press freedoms and regulating harsh censorship. A country that once enjoyed high levels of literary autonomy is likely to push back on the unfamiliar boundaries forced by a newly installed regime.

It is worth noting that countries rated as “authoritarian” encompass a wide range of variation. Though most developed OECD countries are concentrated in the categories of democracies, there are exceptions which suggest that developmental levels are not a hard and binding variable to measure the relation between wealth and openness.

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Furthermore, since countries rated as “authoritarian” cover the span of the world, geography is not a compelling variable to measure the survival of these regimes. These exceptions are relevant to the present study in that they highlight the “wide variation that exists within the universe of authoritarian rule.”

**CONCLUSION**

Focusing on the under-studied mechanism of literary processes, this paper examined the question of why a popular uprising has not occurred in North Korea in spite of several preconditions that previous scholarship on revolutions would find conducive to such an event. I contend that, given the extent of the constraints on civil society in North Korea, literary autonomy is the mechanism through which we may better understand the anomalous absence of mass disobedience.

A second cut of this argument will look at the variation in civil discontent across authoritarian regimes to determine external validity for the argument at present. The framework through which I propose analyzing this should show that modern authoritarian states with weak literary autonomy correlate with lower risks of popular uprising.

Though there exist empirical shortcomings when putting the present theory to test, this article serves as a promising starting point from which we may better understand the relations between literary processes, civil society, and revolution. In formulating my argument, this paper hopes to yield meaningful contributions to the discourse on regime resilience.

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66 Ibid.


Alexander, Jeffrey, Civil Sphere (Cary, US: Oxford University Press, 2006).


