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**Critic of**  
**“The Natural Death of North Korean Stalinism”**

This draft article would require extensive revision prior to publication. The subject is highly significant and current. Most experts knowledgeable about North Korea agree that this once cloistered nation is increasingly open to outside influence and is undergoing change, the article’s focus. A lively debate persists over the direction, pace and extent of this change. The proposed article, however, does not yet contribute substantively to this discussion.

The primary flaws are substantial and include:

- Lack of a consistent analytical framework,
- a consistently applied definition of “Stalinism,”
- excessively broad generalization,
- reliance on unsubstantiated anecdotal information, and
- a lack of reference to key political developments.

Personally, I subscribe to the author’s overall conclusion that North Korea is changing, but I find his sources of information of dubious quality, many of his generalizations extend beyond the supporting evidence and demonstrates a weak acquaintance with the issue’s historical and political context.

**Analytical Framework**

The author relies on a comparative approach to present his thesis, but the comparisons lack consistency. North Korea is compared to “Stalinism,” a term the author admits “has produced a lot of ambiguity and as a result the term has somewhat lost its sharpness and clarity, ...” (page 2, paragraph 2, Introduction). He quotes an authority on this topic, “as an explanatory concept, ‘Stalinism’ lacks historical and conceptual power, covering more than it uncovers.” (page. 3, lines 2-3). Yet the author adopts the term as the core of his analytical framework.

He accepts a definition of “Stalinism” from another scholar, Seweryn Bialer, and then loosely applies it to North Korea. Predictably, the author concludes, North Korea is a “Stalinist” state. The subsequent analysis, however, yields generalizations that are not necessarily consistent with reality in North Korea or, in a few cases, elsewhere. “The extinction of the party as a movement” is listed as a characteristic of Stalinism (page 3, line 6 from the bottom). In North Korea, however, the Korean Workers Party has been and remains a central pillar of North Korean despotism, an issue the author ignores. Later, we are told that “Stalin’s nationalism” (page 4, line 10 from the top) was “seldom openly racist, while in the North (Korea) the supposed ‘racial purity’ of Koreans was extolled and eulogized ...” Stalin’s genocide against the Jews was racism in its worse form. Korean claims of superiority, however, are rooted in the preference for racial

“purity,” not claims of racial superiority. The conviction of Korean superiority is lined to culture, not genetics.

The author fails to mention numerous key historical developments. There is no mention that North Korea’s founder, Kim Il Sung, in the 1950s purged and sent into exile or had executed all North Koreans who revered Stalin. Also not discussed is Kim’s formulation of his own distinctive interpretation of Marxism-Leninism under the title of “*juche*.” These shortcomings undercut the author’s claim that North Korea’s departure from “Stalinism” dates from the end of the Cold War and the death of North Korea’s founder in 1994. On the contrary, the process began in the 1950s as a consequence of Kim Il Sung’s efforts to consolidate power for himself. Consequently, the author never makes the distinction between the erosion of “Stalinism” and change in North Korea.

The remainder of the article draws on anecdotal information from North Korean defectors and recent South Korean journalistic reports. Understandably, defectors are prone to mingle fact with fiction to satisfy their benefactors’ preconceptions. South Korean news reports tend to be highly politicized as they reflect the intense debate in South Korea over the effectiveness of various strategies for dealing with North Korea. Largely ignored is the growing body of more reliable information about North Korea produced by various United Nations agencies, the European Union and South Korean government.

North Korean society today is far more open than a decade ago, but not necessarily as a consequence of the reasons that the author provides. Unmentioned is the growing flow of foreigners and South Koreans into North Korea since 1995, the extensive work of international and national humanitarian organizations, technical and educational exchange programs between the two Koreas, with EU nations, Australia, etc.

The anecdotal information offered to support the author’s thesis is of debatable quality. The claim that North Koreans have access to outside radio broadcasts (pp. 5-6) ignores the fact that the North Korean government uses electronic jamming to block reception of foreign radio and TV broadcasts, something the South Korean government did until 1992 to prevent its citizens from receiving North Korea broadcasts. When living at the Yongbyon Nuclear Research Center, the only shortwave radio broadcasts that I could receive in 1994-97 were Radio Moscow. I have met with at least 200 North Korean refugees between 1998 and 2005 (most recently in January, 2005), all former residents of North Korea’s northeastern most provinces. All independently agreed that it was impossible to listen to any, including Chinese, radio and TV broadcasts, regardless of what kind of receiver one used.

References on page 8 to the popularity of South Korean soap operas in North Korea apparently is a confusion with the current Japanese craze about these programs. Until 2002, it was illegal for South Koreans to listen to or watch Japanese TV and radio. Similarly, Japan barred the import of Korean movies, etc.

Since the South-North Korean Summit of 2000 (not mentioned), North Korea has become a major producer of South Korean designed electronic goods (televisions, VCRs,

DVDs, computers monitors, even cars). There is no need to “smuggle” these into North Korea, as the author claims. They are sold in department stores and the government controlled markets (available only to the politically well connected with sufficient funds). South Korean *karaoke* music videos are indeed very popular in North Korea.

Similar errors pop up throughout the article. On page 9, the China-North Korea border is described as “badly guarded,” (line 5 from the bottom). On page 22, he claims, “the spontaneous opening of the border with China (largely a result of Chinese inability/unwillingness to hunt down defecting North Koreans) ...” This generalization borders on fantasy. On the contrary, the North Korean side of the border has always been intensively guarded. Since December 2001, the Chinese government has greatly increased its patrols of the border region and routinely arrests and deports North Korean “migrants” deemed “illegal aliens.” Not mentioned in the article is the temporary visitor visa system North Korea and China put in place at the end of 2001. North Koreans with relatives living in China are eligible to receive permits to cross into China for up to 90 days, but the Chinese relatives must pay for all travel expenses and living costs in China.

On page 15, the author asserts, “North Korea was unique in being the only nation in the world where markets disappeared almost completely.” The author’s discussion of markets reflects the very dubious nature of his sources. Kim Il Sung recognized the need for “farmers’ markets” and allowed them. Since 1995, the growth of urban markets was a consequence of the government’s inability to pay people for their labor via the public distribution system of (PDS) of grain. Instead, people were compelled to purchase (with currency) or barter for grain. The economic reforms of 2002, mentioned only in passing (p. 15) were initiated to reassert central government control over the market system. For the most part, the effort has succeeded. These reforms, in short, were designed to prolong North Korea’s socialist economy, not dismantle it. The extent to which capitalism is and may replace socialism remains difficult to determine. The author’s sources, however, reveal less about actual conditions in North Korea than the nature of the debate in South Korea over the nature, pace, and direction of change in North Korea.