

The Path to a Socialist Civilization: Prospect and Tasks Ahead

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I. Introduction

The Kim Jong-un regime in North Korea dawned with the death of Kim Jong-il, Jong-un's father and predecessor, on December 17, 2011. Swift actions ensued after the second Supreme Leader's death to establish his young son as the heir legitimate. On December 22, 2011, just five days after Jong-il's death, *Rodong Sinmun*, began to refer to "Compatriot Kim Jong-un" as the "pure successor" to "the sacred philosophy of white snow." Two days later, the press began to refer to the young man as "Supreme Leader." The newspaper kept running articles about Kim Jong-un and his lift from then on.¹ In less than two weeks after his father's death, Kim found his stature solidified as "Supreme Leader" and "the spiritual pillar of the people of Josen."

The era of Kim Jong-il thus officially came to an end with the memorial service held in front of the Kumsusan Palace of the Sun in Pyongyang on December 28, 2011. The son was quickly crowned as the Commander-in-Chief of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea on December 20, 2011, thereby marking the end of the formal procedures necessary for his enthronement as the communist country's new leader.²

The era of Kim Jong-un thus began with the young leader's New Year's Address to the nation on January 1, 2012. It was more than a mere customary greeting made at the beginning of each new year. The address amounted to the declaration of the vision for the new era. The year 2012 marked not only the first year of Kim's rein, but also the 101st anniversary of the birth of the *juche* ideology. The timing could not be better for declaring the completion of a century-long cycle and the start of a new *juche* philosophy. Kim capitalized upon the halo naturally given him due to the fact that he was the grandson of Kim Il-sung, the nation's founder who commanded uncompromised reference from all the people. Now appointed to command a new century, the young leader was faced with the task of presenting a new vision that reflected the North Korean people's aspirations and demands. Kim did so by declaring the strive to attain to "a socialist civilization" as the ultimate vision to be pursued. He emphasized that the construction of a new society in the mold of that vision was not just his ambition, but was mandated by his forefathers.

The development of a "socialist civilization" has thus become the overarching objective on the agenda for national development orienting the Kim Jong-un regime. Stressing, in his 2012 New Year's Address, that North Koreans now had the duty to "evolve our fatherland into a progressive and bright socialist civilization," Kim argued that fulfilling that duty was in line with the overall trajectory of the global socialist civilization. The vision was clarified in 2013 as demanding a people with "a high-minded culture, physical strength and elegant and moral character" capable of

¹ "Opinion: A life in the Great Blizzard," *Rodong Sinmun*, December 22, 2011 ("Our Respected Compatriot Kim Jong-un prepared this lavish performance with hard work out of the desire to lay the Great General in peace with a joyous celebration"); "General, A New Day Has Dawned," *Rodong Sinmun*, December 22, 2011 ("The rivers and mountains of this country are now shining with the pledge of 10 million, who will stick together like a steel jar under the command of our truly respected Compatriot Kim Jong-un, with the unshakeable determination to erect a powerful and great nation that has been the lifetime wish of the Great General. The voices of the 10 million hearts, now determined to outgrow their immaturity, will resound throughout our fatherland that is being brightened.").

² "Supreme Leader Kim Jong-Un Is the Spiritual Pillar of the People of Josen," *Rodong Sinmun*, December 24, 2011.

building “a society brimming with a healthy lifestyle,” and became the orienting principle of policy and governance throughout the North Korean society.

In this study, we will examine the idea of the “socialist civilization” so emphasized by Pyongyang, what factors gave rise to it and its significance, and what the prospect and tasks are facing the achievement of this vision.

II. Building a Socialist Civilization: Significance and Strategy

1. Political Meaning

What does a “socialist civilization” mean to North Koreans today? Building such a civilization is the new ideology and the objective of national civilization in the Kim Jong-un era. Since Kim mentioned the development of a socialist civilization in his New Year’s Address in 2012, the North Korean press has responded by noting that it was “an important task presented in the Supreme Leader’s historic New Year’s Address” and an ideology reflecting “the realistic demands of the marching 21st century.”³

The primary significance of this new vision has to do with the transition of power. The year 2012, at the start of which the Kim Jong-un era dawned, marked a new century for the *juche* ideology. A century of *juche* is pivotal to Kim’s succession. North Koreans like to celebrate every fifth or 10th anniversary as more significant *jeongjunyeon* years. Because North Koreans mark years with *juche* (e.g., Year 1950 was Juche 39), year 2012 marked the end of a century and the start of a new *juche* century. Kim strategically emulated the appearance and style of Premier Kim Il-sung with the purpose of reenacting the nation’s founder who had opened the first century of *juche*. The dawn of the Kim Jong-un era, in other words, was less about building the new leader’s unique stature or image, and more about presenting the second coming of Kim Il-sung. The timing could not have been more perfect for giving North Koreans an impression that they were now about to embark on a new era with the resurrected (and young) Kim Il-sung.

As the founder of the new century, the young leader was faced with the task of presenting an inspiring and abstract ideal for the future. Kim Il-sung did so by promising the people “white rice, meat soup, tile-roofed houses, and silk clothes,” and his grandson now had to offer something similar. Kim Jong-il tried to rise to the challenge by calling for the creation of “a powerful and great socialist nation.” Kim Jong-un elaborated on his father’s ideal with the vision of a socialist civilization. In his address, “Forward Toward the Ultimate Victory,” on April 15, 2012, Kim asserted: “Add the industrial revolution of the new century to single-heartedness and an indefatigable army, and you get a powerful and great socialist nation.” A pragmatic leader, Kim felt the need to give such concrete details to the abstract vision of a “powerful and great nation.”

An expression serving a function similar to that of “powerful and great nation” is the “Great Paektu Country.” The term was first introduced under the Kim Jong-un regime, with *Rodong Sinmun* mentioning it as part of its article on June 27, 2012, that “erecting the Great Paektu Country is the dying injunction of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il, and willed by Kim Jong-un.”⁴ The phrase made its way into “Forward Toward the Ultimate Victory” (lyrics by Yun Du-geun, song by Kim Mun-hyeok), a popular song released in 2012. It was more a political and symbolic rhetoric,

³ “Legitimacy of Our Party’s Ideology of Building a Socialist Civilization,” *Rodong Sinmun*, July 14, 2013.

⁴ *Rodong Sinmun*, June 27, 2012: “It is the will and resolution of Kim Jong-un to erect the world’s strongest ‘Great Paektu Country’ in honor of the dying injunctions of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il.”

intended to emphasize Kim Jong-un as the legitimate heir of the Paektu lineage and the revolution, rather than to impart more concrete images about national vision. By comparison, “socialist civilization” conveys a more specific meaning. It was consciously chosen as the objective of long-term national development to “fill the new century of the *juche* revolution with years of victory and glory.”⁵

Embracing the creation of a socialist civilization as “the supreme command of the Party and the flag of a permanent victory,” the North Korean press urged the public to join this “most sacred and important task of revolution bestowed upon our Party and people as we inherit the great achievements of the Great Premier and the General,”⁶ further augmenting the tie between the new leader and his forefathers. In other words, pursuing and achieving this new vision of a socialist civilization anchors the legitimacy of the Kim Jong-un regime.

That the Labor Party continues to hold this vision dear is confirmed via multiple channels. At the Seventh Josen Labor Party Congress, held in 2016 for the first time in 36 years, the party members endorsed “the construction of a powerful civilization” as the overarching goal of social and cultural development, which was reaffirmed in the resolution of the fifth Plenary Session of the Seventh Labor Party Central Committee on December 28, 2019.⁷

2. Direction and Strategy

In an op-ed column he co-authored in 2012, Kim Jong-un urged North Koreans to “evolve our fatherland into a socialist civilization.” The socialist civilization, he emphasized, was “a country in which socialist culture flourishes in all corners, a country whose people, equipped with high creativity and culture, create and enjoy a superior civilization at the highest level,” and “a most advanced country whose people have a high-minded culture, physical strength and elegant and moral character.” Entailed in this vision was the ambition to improve “culture and the arts, education, health and sports to a certain extent toward enriching the lives of the people.”

The official media outlets in North Korea then expounded to the public what that socialist civilization meant, what it required, and how people could attain to that vision. In his talk with members of the Josen Labor Party Central Committee on April 6, 2012, entitled “Let us honor our Great Compatriot Kim Jong-il as the Permanent Secretary-General of our Party, and complete the

⁵ Kim Jong-un, “Let us honor our Great Compatriot Kim Jong-il as the Permanent Secretary-General of our Party, and complete the tasks of the *juche* revolution: Talk with Members of the Josen Labor Party Central Committee (April 6, 2012), *Rodong Sinmun*, April 19, 2012.

⁶ Kim Jong-un, “Our social sciences must play active roles in realizing the tasks of the Kim Il-sung-Kim Jong-il ideology: A Letter to the Scientists and Staff of the Social Science Institute in Celebrating Its 60th Anniversary” (December 1, 2012), *Rodong Sinmun*, December 2, 2012: “We have the duty to educate all members of our society as robust Kim Il-sung-Kim Jong-il ideologues, and develop all aspects of social life in line with the demands of that ideology so as to re-erect our fatherland as a powerful nation in the world and an advanced socialist civilization in which the people’s ideas and wishes completely come true. That is the most sacred and important task of revolution bestowed upon our Party and people as we inherit the great achievements of the Great Premier and the General.”

⁷ The second goal listed on the resolution of the Fifth Plenary Session of the Seventh Labor Party Central Committee, as released on *Rodong Sinmun* on January 1, 2020, was emphasizing “science and technology” and improving “education and health services that are at the source of socialist institutions.” Comparing science to “the train leading economic development” and education to “the mother of science,” the resolution declared that the solutions to economic development will be found by innovation-centered and cutting-edge education for “talented workforces capable of producing valuable scientific and technological outcomes.” The plan is consistent with the vision of building a socialist civilization, and suggests that the vision has remained intact in North Korea since 2012.

tasks of the *juche* revolution,” Kim himself further clarified the meaning of the vision, after stressing the importance of economic reconstruction.

We ought to continue with our revolutionization in all aspects of our life, including education, health, culture and the arts, and sports, so as to evolve our country into an advanced socialist civilization.

We should increase national investment in education programs, modernize our education, make decisive improvements to general secondary education, and strengthen higher education to produce world-class and talented workforces in science and technology capable of leading the development of a powerful socialist nation. We should build on the superiority of our socialist health system, and create and distribute great classical works of various eras, popularizing sports and sweeping up the entire nation in the fever for sports. With these, we should turn our people into creators and participants of an elegant and civilized socialist culture, filling every corner of our society with joy and romanticism.⁸

Kim held the talk with the executive members of the Party’s central committee on April 6, 2012, in preparation for the Fourth Meeting of Joseon Labor Party Representatives, scheduled to take place before the Day of the Sun. The stated objective of the talk was to occasion “a milestone moment marking the transition by exalting the Great Supreme Leader and the Great General as the eternal leaders of our Party and consciously committing ourselves to inheriting and realizing the philosophy of these leaders.” Specifically, the meeting took place to make decisions on related matters through discussion, and thereby “revise and supplement” the Party policy accordingly. The Party executives were thus encouraged to confirm their role in building the socialist civilization, and steer the Party toward meeting that core objective. In other words, the talk was organized to establish the construction of a socialist civilization as the chief mission of the Labor Party in the Kim Jong-un era.

The mission was to encompass not just culture and the arts, but to involve redesigning “all aspects” of society and life in light of the mission. On April 27, 2012, during a talk with managerial members of the Party, the national economic institutions and workers’ groups, Kim ordered that the road expansion projects be updated and modernized on a par with “civilized” countries. “Roads are the face of a nation and an important indicator of how advanced its economy and civilization are.” As such, “effective road construction and maintenance are crucial to national economic development, the convenience of the people, and the transformation of the national landscape.”⁹

The main route to take North Korea to the socialist civilization it aspired toward becoming was ideology. It was critical to ensure “the thoroughgoing application of the ideology, policy stance, and instructions of the Great General and the Supreme Leader in all areas of cultural development.” The creation of a socialist civilization, defined as embodying the ideology and philosophy of Kim Jong-un’s forefathers, gained the status of an absolute mandate that all members of the Party had faithfully to execute to the best of their abilities.

Culture was especially important to this mandate. It was important to “elevate the quality of sciences, education, health, culture and the arts, sports, morality, and all other subjects of culture

⁸ Kim (April 6, 2012), April 19, 2012.

⁹ Kim Jong-un, “About the revolutionization of the National Land Management Program in response to the demands of building a great socialist nation: A talk with members of the Party, national economic institutions, and workers’ groups” (April 27, 2012), *Rodong Sinmun*, June 12, 2012.

to the standard of advanced and powerful civilizations.”¹⁰ The vision entailed improving the capabilities of workforces and institutions involved in North Korea’s science, technology, health, culture and the arts, and sports so as to bring them on a par with the global standard, turning the people into creators and participants of a socialist culture. The people were to have “abundant knowledge and be highly cultured” with the development of “conditions and environments that allow for unlimited enjoyment of prosperous and civilized living.”

Education and science are also central subjects of attention under the Kim Jong-un regime. The regime has an ambition to modernize what is, overall, a backward society through the dramatic innovations made possible by science and technology, and has therefore been emphasizing the importance of educating and training workforces for science and technology. The reform of the education curricula was also undertaken as the very first task of the roadmap toward a socialist civilization in 2012. Recognizing that the existing school system was incapable of realizing the vision, Pyongyang extended the schooling years so as to equip students with skills necessary to lead the age of information economics, and altered the content of education accordingly. Furthermore, Pyongyang launched a series of infrastructure projects for educating and training scientists and engineers by introducing programs for universal science education and erecting facilities for distributing new science and technology. The regime has also emphasized “people first” on the cultural front, developing various entertainment facilities and related amenities.

III. Building a Socialist Civilization: Implications for the Regime

1. Keywords and Changes

The keywords for explaining the Kim Jong-un regime and its focus on building a socialist civilization are “change,” “globalization,” and “nationalism.”

Change has been at the forefront of the new regime’s policy since its beginning. In order to build a socialist civilization, it was critical to refresh the depressed social atmosphere and change the people’s perception and thinking in line with the vision for the new era.

Leading the public in pursuit of the new vision required fundamental innovations. Change is not a welcome concept in North Korea in general. Since the inception of the republic, “revolution” has been emphasized instead. “Revolution” in North Korea has meant not so much social progress and innovative change, but more an abstract ideal that commanded unchanging loyalty. “Change,” on the other hand, carried connotations of disavowing that ideal, i.e., ideological defection.

The vision of building a socialist civilization thus struggles to garner much trust and confidence from the generation of North Koreans who experienced the Arduous March firsthand. The year 2012, in which the Kim Jong-un regime came into being, also marked the year in which those who were born in the 1990s and therefore who experienced the Arduous March entered *en masse* the society and the workforce. Those who had spent their formative years during the period find the vision of building a socialist civilization a piece of empty rhetoric, while “the massacre by isolation” continues on, led by the American empire.

The lack of trust in the national vision necessarily forms an obstacle to its realization. It was critical for the new regime to make the people shed their defeatist attitude and embrace a “bold and new” way of thinking instead. Emphasizing that the 21st century was an age of information economics, the regime kept urging the public to embrace change actively in line with the global

¹⁰ *Rodong Sinmun*, July 14, 2013.

trend. The regime needed effective means to convince the people of the inevitable change. The answer was found in art and urban redevelopment.

The Moranbong Band was the main messenger of change in the arts. Labeled as a product of “Commander-in-Chief Kim Jong-un’s special attention and instruction,” the band its name handed to it by Kim himself and went on to produce dozens of performances and shows.¹¹ Since its formation in July 2012, the Moranbong Band rose prominence as the music band created by the Supreme Leader himself. It indeed broke some grounds by playing, in its very first show, American pop music and original sound tracks from Disney’s animations—works of art that had been prohibited as corrupting influences of the enemy. Disney’s mascots even performed alongside the band on stage. The two-hour-long show was broadcast on live television nationwide.

Given the fact that the show took place just half a year after Kim Jong-il’s death, it was indeed revolutionary and groundbreaking to many North Koreans.¹² The Moranbong Band has been having a thriving career ever since, trying to rise to “the Supreme Leader’s magnificent plan and expectation that all creators and artists would emulate the creative spirit of the Moranbong Band and achieve fundamental innovations in their creative and artistic endeavors,” and establishing itself as an icon of innovation and change in the Kim Jong-un era.¹³

The “creative spirit” and “work style” of the Moranbong Band were announced as new phenomena that people in all sectors of the society were to emulate. The “creative spirit” of the band came from its “revolutionary and progressive” nature. The official media praised that creative spirit as “a spirit of iron-willed determination to accomplish the mission given by the Party at the highest level of caliber to perfection, the cutting-edge and progressive fever for creative willingness to create something new relentlessly from innovative perspectives transcending the conventional forms and styles, and the spirit of competition that thrives on healthy eagerness to contest one’s talent with one’s peers.”

The kind of change the Moranbong Band points toward is pragmatism. Contrary to the success of the Moranbong and other music bands under the Kim Jong-un regime, the North Korean film industry has been floundering. Since 2012, the industry produced five or so films a year. For the last three years, 2017, 2018 and 2019, however, no artistic film has been produced. This three-year halt is something completely unprecedented in the country’s history.

The film industry has not been exactly lacking in either encouragement or resources. Kim criticized the lack of progress in the field and publicly urged the industry to produce films. Specifically, in his letter to participants in the Ninth National Artists Congress in 2014, entitled “Let Us Open Up a New Chapter of *Juche* Culture and Arts in Response to the Demands of the Times and the Revolution,” Kim harshly criticized that “culture and the arts programs continue to fail to respond to the demands of the Party, the revolution, and the times.”

¹¹ Political Report Group, “Our Dear Compatriot Kim Jong-un Joined Audience for Inaugural Performance of Newly Organized Moranbong Band,” *Rodong Sinmun*, July 9, 2012 (“Compatriot Kim himself organized the Moranbong Band in response to the demands of the current times, with a far-sighted plan for revolutionizing culture and the arts now that a new century of *juche* has dawned”).

¹² The official media praised the inaugural performance of the band as “revolutionary and combative in style, new and unique in form, and modern, popular and consistently distinctive on the stage.....The performance, a feast of new auditory and visual sensations aided by the lavish lighting effects, seamlessly combined all elements of musical creativity with artistic perfection. It has boldly innovated all elements of music, including the theme, composition, arrangement, instrumentation, techniques and forms.”

¹³ “Let Us Stoke the Fire of Master-Class Creativity in Emulation of the Creative Spirit of the Moranbong Band,” *Rodong Sinmun*, June 3, 2014.

Kim's specific grievance was that North Korean culture and art were so "enslaved to the fixed and outdated conventions" that "the caliber and creative talent of creators and artists lagged behind the progressing demands of the reality and the Party." Emphasizing that "the people" are the owners of socialist culture and arts, as well as their "creators and participants," Kim called for the transformation of culture and the arts from something "exclusively enjoyed by a few experts" into something "the people actually demand and like."¹⁴

During the Seventh Congress of Reports on General Projects held by the Party in 2016, Kim again criticized the backward culture and art community for "failing to produce masterpieces capable of enflaming the hearts of 10 million with fervor for revolution and struggle" even "though all the rest of the society was progressing at the speed of lightening." He specifically called upon the film community to "outgrow depression," urging filmmakers to renew their drive. During the first meeting of the 14th Supreme People's Council held on April 11 and 12, 2019, Kim again urged the culture and art community to "produce many more masterpieces that reflect the demands of the times and the people" and the film industry, in particular, to "stoke the fire of cinematic revolution for the new century" and thereby to "play the role of a pioneer in the nation's drive toward the advancement of socialist culture."¹⁵ The Kim regime, in other words, is determined to prohibit the making and release of new films unless filmmakers actually made movies that rose to the standard of the new times.

2. A Normal Socialist State

Globalization is another central focus of the Kim Jong-un regime. The regime dreams of transforming North Korea into a "normal state" joining the ranks of other nation-states on the global stage, breaking away from the self-imposed isolation since the Arduous March in pursuit of *juche*-mandated autonomy.

The Party has been active in organizing international artistic events and supporting active exchange with the outside world in pursuit of normal statehood. On June 19, 2013, Kim himself changed the 10 Principles of the Party's Singular Ideology System into the 10 Principles of Establishing Singular Guidance over the Party. In the Seventh Party Congress in 2016, he abolished the National Defense Committee, newly introduced the State Council, and appointed himself as its chair. He then abstained from running for office during the 14th general elections of the Supreme People's Council in 2019.¹⁶ At least in form, Kim separated legislature from administration in his efforts to give North Korea a semblance of normalcy.

Pyongyang has been emphasizing the importance of nationalism since the late 1990s, when the former Eastern Bloc began to transform amid the collapse of the Soviet Union, stressing it as the key difference between North Korea and other socialist states. The regime has praised North

¹⁴ "Our Dear Compatriot Kim Jong-un Sent Historic Letter to Participants of Ninth National Artists Congress Entitled 'Let Us Open Up a New Chapter of *Juche* Culture and Arts in Response to the Demands of the Times and the Revolution'," *Rodong Sinmun*, May 17, 2014.

¹⁵ "Compatriot Kim Jong-un, Chair of Joeson Labor Party and State Council, and Supreme Leader of Our Party, Nation, and Military, Gave Historic Address on Policy Administration," *Rodong Sinmun*, April 13, 2019.

¹⁶ Pyo Yun-shin and Heo Jae-yeong, "Is the Status of State Changing in North Korea in the Kim Jong-un Era?: An Analysis of the Local Network of Instruction Connecting the Party, the Government, and the Military," *Korean and International Politics*, 35(3) (Kyungnam University Institute for Far Eastern Studies, 2019), p. 118 ("As Chair of the State Council, Kim Jong-un refrained from running for office in the general elections held in March 2019 to signal the separation of government and legislature, and gave an address on policy administration at the Supreme People's Council in April that year, the first time for a national leader to do so in 29 years since 1990").

Koreans as “an elected people” with the duty of putting their “nation first.” Terms like “the Kim Il-sung people,” “the Sun people,” “the Tankun people,” and “the Arirang people” popped up in the growing nationalist discourse. The catchphrases that have been appearing since the mid-2000s, such as “the great and powerful nation,” “powerful nation,” “the Great Paektu Country” and “socialist civilization,” on the other hand, emphasize the state. Fatherland, in North Korea, does not simply mean one’s homeland. It is “where the true life of the people exists and the prosperity of posterity is guaranteed.” Furthermore, it is “the embrace of the Supreme Leader.”¹⁷

The Supreme Leader’s embrace was what made North Korea one grand socialist family. The Kim Jong-un regime, however, broke away from that family analogy, emphasizing the state instead. The Supreme Leader is redefined as the leader of not the (ethnic) nation, but of the state. “Kim Jong-il patriotism” has been emphasized since his death, reflecting the Kim Jong-un regime’s belief that patriotism should inform everyone’s view of one’s fatherland, fellow people, and posterity. Just as the ethnic nation was inseparable from the Supreme Leader himself in the late 1980s, “Kim Jong-il patriotism” since 2012 has connected the Supreme Leader with the fatherland.¹⁸ This brand of patriotism thus became the bedrock of the “our nation first” ideology officially endorsed by Kim in his 2019 New Year’s Address.

3. Science and Education in an Age of Information Economics

Science and education were the areas where change began to occur first in the Kim Jong-un era. Defining the 21st century as “an age of science and technology” and “an age of information economics,” Kim called for the advancement of science and technology as North Korea’s core industries. Science and technology, “as a central form of culture,” is “a major factor that decides the progress and elevation of human civilization.” “Significant leaps forward in science and technology could open up a new and flourishing chapter of human civilization,” Kim stressed.

Science was also seen as holding a key to restoring North Koreans’ confidence in their nation, so severely undermined by the economic crisis, and thereby enhancing their loyalty to the Party. Memories of the Arduous March still haunt the North Korean public. It was a collective trauma that the society as a whole had to overcome. The Arduous March threatened not only political and economic stability, but also the security of the regime itself. All the policy initiatives since then called upon North Koreans to harness their determination to overcome the “massacre by isolation.” The new regime saw a path out of this deadly trap in science. *Kwangmyongsong*, the epitome of Pyongyang’s ambition for space development, also symbolized Pyongyang’s resolve to fend off the “conspiracy for massacre by isolation” and achieve future economic development. Through the launching of missile *Hwasong* with the declared completion of the country’s nuclear arsenal, the construction of the Hichon Power Plant for energy self-sufficiency, and the Computer

¹⁷ Ri Hyon-suk, “Kim Jong-il Patriotism as the Philosophical and Spiritual Bedrock of the ‘Our Nation First’ Ideology,” *Journal of Philosophy and Political Science*, 2018-3 (Gwahakbaekgwasa jeon-chulpansa, 2018), p. 15 (“Fatherland is not merely a territorial concept referring to the pastoral community in which one was born and raised and one’s forefathers are buried. It is a place where the true life of the people exists, and where the prosperity of posterity is guaranteed. Kim Jong-il patriotism based on the high-minded view of one’s fatherland as the embrace of the Supreme Leader demands loyalty to the Supreme Leader as the best form of patriotism, and makes the pride one takes in the Supreme Leader’s Greatness as one’s biggest blessing”).

¹⁸ Jang Dong-guk, “Important Requirements of Upholding the Our Nation First Ideology,” *Journal of Philosophy and Political Science*, 2018-3 (Gwahakbaekgwasa jeon-chulpansa, 2018), p. 19 (“The our-nation-first ideology stems from the pride of honoring the Supreme Leader as the commander-in-chief of the Party, the state and the military. ‘Our Supreme Leader First’ is the nucleus of that ideology”).

Numerical Control (CNC) machine representing the innovation and modernization of the economy, Pyongyang sought to give North Koreans a new sense of confidence.

Education was touted as the necessary condition for the creation of a new society. The new regime defined the objective of education reform as developing “a revolutionary workforce equipped with general secondary-level knowledge, knowledge of the basics of modern technology, and a creative capability by improving the quality of education in line with the realistic demands and global trend of information economics.”

Pyongyang thus launched a comprehensive education reform, with a heavy emphasis on training and developing future workforces. Judging that it was impossible to train and produce workers required by the new era through outdated rote learning, the first task of reform Pyongyang undertook was to extend the mandatory schooling period from 11 years to 12, at the sixth meeting of the 12th Supreme People’s Council on September 25, 2012. The stated goals were “to improve and reinforce secondary education in response to the demands of revolutionary development” and “to take the socialist system of public education to the next level.” The elementary school enrollment period was thus increased by a year to five years. The secondary school curriculum was divided between three years of middle school and another three years of high school. Textbooks and pedagogics were also overhauled and made more up to date.

Pyongyang continues to innovate education for information economics, encouraging the new writing of textbooks and learning materials and introducing new school subjects that reflect the changing times. Members of the intelligentsia are also urged to increase collaboration with the global research community by contributing studies to international academic journals, attending international academic events, and engaging in exchange with overseas scientists.

4. Socialist Landscapes and Daily Lives of the People

The standard of living has become another important subject of attention in the drive for building a socialist civilization in North Korea. “Modern cultural and entertainment venues, parks and amusement parks” have been newly developed under the stated objective of enabling the people “to partake of socialist culture freely under the most civilized and advanced conditions.”

“Socialist landscape” has become the term in vogue to refer to the new lifestyle amid these improved living conditions. The concept has been around since 2002 to refer to ideal urban and rural landscapes that should be cultivated to show the success of socialism. Since the campaign for improving landscapes was launched in 2002 to mark Kim Jong-il’s 60th birthday, the term “socialist landscape” has reemerged under the Kim Jong-un regime.

The term is integral to the mission of establishing a socialist civilization as it entails urban development. The new regime, in fact, has distinguished itself from its predecessors with its focus on urban development projects, which have been playing a vital role in strengthening political support for Kim Jong-un. Kim came to power too early after his father passed away. Neither was he old or experienced enough to lead people in confidence. Urban development projects thus became the major means by which the new regime heralded the start of a new era for the people and also harnessed the new leader’s public image.¹⁹

¹⁹ “What a Great Age,” *Rodong Sinmun*, November 18, 2014 (“A hundred years or a thousand years from now, our posterity will learn about the Kim Jong-un era by looking at these works of architecture, and will sing praises to him—that the people who lived in that great era produced a new vision for the socialist civilization with their architecture, that they finally triumphed over the imperialists and succeeded in securing prosperity for themselves, that they eventually conquered the world with their architecture”).

Apartment housing has been booming since 2010 as part of this fever for urban development, epitomizing the arrival of “the new century” and representing “the new speed of Pyongyang.” Kim used these housing projects to flout and augment his political power. The Changjon Street Apartment Project, completed in 2010, was the first such project in which Kim participated. The project was an architectural paean to the competence of the new leader and also an embodiment of the victory of socialism against imperialism. It played a major role in solidifying Kim’s image as a leader leading the working class to ultimate victory over capitalism. Kim frequently appeared on the construction site, reinforcing his reputation and image while encouraging workers on site to hurry and criticizing responsible parties for defects and shortcomings. The myth was thus made that Kim led the battle of architecture to a victory.

Since 2012, the Kim regime has been announcing at least one new apartment housing project for a new area every year. The imposing 45-floor apartment complex was erected in the Mansudae District at Changjon Street in June 2012, citing it was the dying wish of the late Kim Jong-il. New projects for Unha Scientists’ Street and researchers at Kim Il-sung University followed suit in 2013, followed by projects for the Wisong Scientists’ Street and the faculty of Kim Chaek University of Technology in 2014. Housing projects were also launched for the Future Scientists’ Street in 2015 and for Ryomyong Street in 2016 and 2017. All the new buildings erected under the Kim Jong-un regime boast lavish and imposing exteriors as if they stood in for the far-reaching vision of the new leader and his determination for urban development. The diverse styles of these newly built apartment complexes also transformed the skyline of downtown Pyongyang. The Future Scientists’ Street Apartments, completed in 2015, are affluent-looking high-rises standing along the bank of Daedong River. The complex was developed for scientists and engineers working at nearby universities and retired experts. The surrounding neighborhood itself is also stylish, while the exterior walls of the apartment buildings are decorated with flamboyant neon lights. The propaganda labels this kind of style as “21st-century architecture” that has been “invented on a par with the global standard to cater thoroughly to the people’s orientation, needs, and lifestyles.”²⁰

Note that the prioritized group for which these new apartments have been erected are those in education and research. The housing project for faculty members and researchers at Kim Il-sung University was among the first housing projects to be undertaken. Housing, in other words, was used to emphasize the Kim Jong-un regime’s commitment to advancing education and science. Writers were also actively encouraged to focus their works on new urban development and apartment projects as part of the propaganda for casting Kim as a leader befitting the new age.

The transformation of Ryomyong Street embodies the height of urban development under the Kim regime. The district designated for development extends between the Ryunghungdong Intersection and the Kumsusan Palace of the Sun, and features a series of skyscrapers, including a 70-floor building and a massive apartment complex consisting of 44 buildings for 4,804 households in total. The completion of this project constituted a vital part of the ideological warfare Kim waged, as international sanctions mounted over Pyongyang’s decisions for repeated nuclear weapon and missile tests. The creation of high-rise apartment buildings, in particular, was to form crucial evidence of the Josen Labor Party’s stature and strength in its fight against “the American conspiracy for massacre by isolation.”

Venues for culture, entertainment and sports were erected in the hearts of these newly developed urban districts. The modern amenities introduced to Pyongyang include the People’s

²⁰ “*Juche* Architecture at Its Heyday Thanks to Genius and Special Leadership of Supreme Leader,” *Rodong Sinmun*, March 25, 2014.

Theater, the Nungla People's Amusement Park, Kaeson Youth Park and Center, Neungla Gopdeunggeo Building, Ryukyongwon, the People's Outdoor Ice Rink, Mirim Equestrian Club, Masiknyong Ski Resort, and Haedanghwa Building.

The transformation of Pyongyang has prompted similar projects in other cities across North Korea as well, including the water parks in Kaesong and Hamhung (along Songchon River). The landscape transformation projects of Pyongyang set an example for the "socialist landscapes" that would serve both as propaganda and as spaces where the people can experience what it is like to live in a socialist civilization.

Pyongyang's attention also reached rural villages. Whereas his predecessor focused on creating and preserving forests in the rural part of the country, Kim introduced new facilities and resources for culture and entertainment into rural villages, emphasizing the importance of culture for their residents as well.²¹

VI. Conclusion: Prospect for the Creation of a Socialist Civilization

The creation of a socialist civilization in North Korea has been the foremost and overarching objective of national development since the dawn of the Kim Jong-un regime in 2012. Kim has been emphasizing that the vision entailed the people's enjoyment of everything in society on a par with the global standard. As the new objective of national development, the creation of a socialist civilization reflects the Kim regime's eagerness to rise to the challenges of the new era and modernize the country, in its own way, through globalization.

The vision of a socialist civilization, in other words, captures the new regime's ambition to improve the culture, society and quality of life for the people on a par with the global standard within the socialist institutional framework. It embodies the regime's willingness to rise to the changing times and boost the stature of North Korea worldwide through science and technology. Kim has chosen the strategy of embracing change actively in response to global trend, and thereby restoring the public's faith and pride in the state.

This readiness to change has translated into policy focus on science and education with the declaration of the arrival of a new era, on the advancement of the arts led by the Moranbong Band, and on urban development highlighting skyscrapers and massive housing developments. The Moranbong Band has been touted as an example of "bold innovation" to be emulated by everyone, and new urban skylines were offered as specific examples of the "socialist landscape."

Kim Jong-un has portrayed the new mission as a matter of honoring the revolution started by his forefathers, but his real focus was more on economics than politics. The Arduous March has taught the country's elite the necessity of economic development to the durability of the regime. They needed to find breakthroughs to this problem while fighting mounting international sanctions.

²¹ Kim Jong-un, "Let's Hold Our Flag for the Socialist-Agrarian Thesis High and Innovate Agricultural Production: A Letter to the Participants of the National Agriculture Congress" (February 6, 2014), *Rodong Sinmun*, February 7, 2014 ("In order for us to build a socialist civilization desired by the people and solve the rural problem once and for all, we must implement a cultural revolution on the countryside. Shout the slogans of science and technology for all in rural villages, and actively participate in the Scientific and Technological Knowledge Dissemination Program to help all our agricultural workers master advanced farming techniques and the use of modern instruments so that more and more agricultural workers can join and study in our new education system. We must strive to provide conditions so that agricultural workers can enjoy culture and the arts as much as they want, and transform rural villages into more cultured, civilized and beautiful socialist landscapes").

Prioritizing economic development as the first and foremost goal, the Kim regime set out to consolidate the basis for it through science and education, while boosting the demand for domestic service industries and international demand for tourism. While emphasizing the creation of a socialist civilization as required by the principle of putting “the people first,” new facilities and buildings were erected and “enjoyment” emphasized to increase the people’s demand for retail and tourism, thereby strengthening domestic demand for economic development.

Urban development, too, has been serving this strategy of economic development. Construction is an industry with far-reaching ripple effects, and large-scale housing and infrastructure projects are therefore crucial to the energization of related industries. The access to, and enjoyment of, the new modern amenities, however, has varied from class to class.²²

As the changes wrought by Kim Jong-un himself have begun to produce visible results, the North Korean economy is more active today than ever. Consumption has been on rise across the North Korean society, reenergizing the economy.

North Korea is now witnessing the rise of a new culture in the Kim Jong-un era. Self-negation was one mandatory virtue in the past, with people forced to sacrifice their needs and wants to help the Party achieve its goals. The Kim Jong-un regime, by contrast, has been provoking and stimulating individuals’ desires for the new era. The future of the Kim regime will depend on how it controls and regulates the activities and lives of the people. It should also strive to improve relations with other countries, lest the goal of building a socialist civilization turn into an empty rhetoric, because North Korea’s ability to sustain economic growth is still quite limited.

²² Cho Jeong-ah and Choi Eun-yeong, *Pyongyang and Hyesan: A Tale of Two Cities – Spaces of Life for North Koreans* (KINU, 2017), p. 87 (“The extent to which the state policy of improving living standards for North Koreans through various construction projects and the development of cultural infrastructure has actually improved quality of life and increased the joy of leisure activities appears to vary along the class line”).

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