Stalin’s long shadow: Cultural transformation and revolutionary potential in late post-totalitarian communist regimes

Abstract

This paper builds on recent scholarship explaining communist non-transitions and proposes two new variables affecting revolutionary potential: the degree of “national ownership” of the ruling ideology, and the extent of transformation of traditional culture and values that accompanied the imposition of communism. A comparison of two oft-ignored Asian cases — Mongolia and North Korea — sheds light on these important variables. While communist Mongolia enacted sweeping cultural, religious, and linguistic transformations to root out "nationalist elements," North Korea's party not only preserved but embraced traditional culture and nationalism, and consequently proved more resilient. The first section reviews the literature on communist transitions and non-transitions, demonstrates why existing Eurocentric models are inadequate when applied to Mongolia and North Korea, and proposes modifying Saxonberg's framework for revolutionary potential to incorporate the factors of cultural repression and national ownership of ideology. The second section provides historical background demonstrating how from similar beginnings Mongolia and North Korea diverged on cultural policies. The third section demonstrates how cultural repression greatly enhanced revolutionary potential in 1990 Mongolia, suggesting counterfactually that its absence in North Korea greatly raises the level of economic hardship needed to mobilize collective action against the regime. A final section assesses the implications for models of communist regime stability and possibilities for generalization to other types of autocracy.
Introduction

Few analysts predicted the dramatic events of the early 1990s, when communist regimes rapidly collapsed throughout Eastern Europe and long-dormant nationalism came to the fore in countries newly carved out of the Soviet bloc. As if to make up for lost time, observers then confidently predicted imminent regime collapse in the remaining communist states — particularly the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) (Manning 1993, Rosenberger 1994, Eberstadt 1999). They were wrong again; by the early 2000s the more honest among them were revising their estimates of the North’s imminent demise and pondering where they went wrong (Eberstadt 2004). Popular explanations for the DPRK’s continued longevity are chiefly focused on the state’s draconian internal control mechanisms (Lankov 2008, Byman and Lind 2010, Saxonberg 2013), their skilled use of their nuclear program to extract concessions from the international community (Cha 2002, McCormack 2004), or the existence of the US military threat helping to preserve a garrison state mentality (Cumings 2013).

This paper explores an overlooked dimension that may help to explain why the DPRK has been able to survive while other Stalin-installed regimes have failed: the relative lack of cultural repression. I hypothesize that the DPRK remains strong in part because its ideology has historically swum with the current of nationalism and traditional culture, rather than trying to swim against it as was the case in all the other communist regimes Stalin helped establish. This paper is divided into four sections. The first reviews the literature on communist transitions and non-transitions, demonstrates why existing Eurocentric models are inadequate when applied to the Mongolian People’s Republic (MPR) and the DPRK, and proposes modifying Saxonberg’s framework for revolutionary potential to incorporate the factor of cultural repression. The second section provides historical background explaining why Stalin-supported regimes implemented cultural repression and demonstrating how, from similar beginnings, the MPR and the DPRK diverged on cultural policies. The third section demonstrates how Stalin’s long-ago cultural repression policies left a latent resentment which greatly enhanced revolutionary potential in Mongolia even decades later, enabling small student protests to rapidly snowball into a national mass movement. This suggests counterfactually that the absence of cultural repression in North Korea greatly raises the level of economic hardship needed to mobilize collective action against
the regime. A final section assesses the implications for models of communist regime stability and possibilities for generalization to other types of autocracy.

**Existing theories on the demise of communism and the missing cultural repression factor**

Most assessments of the causes of failure in the Soviet bloc have focused on the economic strain of maintaining the behemoth central planning system (Kornai 1992, Solnick 1998, Brown 2001), the political strain of maintaining high levels of repression for extended periods (Tucker 1981, Saxonberg 2013), or the failure to adapt to changing circumstances due to institutional rigidity (White 2000, Dimitrov 2013). This leaves questions as to why some of the poorest (North Korea, Laos), most repressive (North Korea, Cuba, China), and most rigid (North Korea, Cuba) communist states have survived intact.

Solnick (1998) argues that “the Soviet system did not fall victim to stalemate at the top or revolution from below, but to opportunism from within”; more specifically, Gorbachev's reforms affected institutional incentive structures, disintegrating structural controls that had kept civil servants loyal to the state. In short, "Soviet institutions did not simply atrophy or dissolve but were actively pulled apart by officials at all levels seeking to extract assets that were in any way fungible" (Solnick p7). While Solnick’s analysis focuses on the single case of the Soviet Union itself, there is nothing to suggest that it should not apply to Soviet satellites where the same assumption holds - that individual bureaucracies, built upon the Soviet model, were primarily self-interested and highly opportunistic. This certainly seems to be the case throughout Eastern Europe in the latter stages, and in Tsedenbal-era Mongolia and post-Kim Il Sung North Korea as well.\(^1\) This raises the question of why North Korea has survived under such kleptocratic practices where other states have fallen.

Saxonberg argues that communist states transition through several phases of legitimacy. In the early totalitarian stage, a regime bases its legitimacy on a superior ideology with a historical destiny to triumph after an initial period of hardship. When decades pass without such a victory and the regime’s ideological hypocrisy becomes apparent, it enters the late post-totalitarian

---

phase. In this later phase the regime becomes “exhausted,” relaxes its ideological demands, and forms a new basis of legitimacy around a "pragmatic acceptance" that "given certain external and internal constraints, the regime is performing reasonably well" (Saxonberg 2013 p18). China can be considered a modern-day example of this. When the economy fails in a late post-totalitarian state, Saxonberg asserts, the regime loses its final basis for pragmatic acceptance and must either collapse or compromise with opposition movements. This leaves the question of how North Korea has managed to maintain extreme totalitarian repression for so many decades, when Saxonberg himself acknowledges that “eventually... totalitarian regimes start losing some of their power, since they cannot rely on mass mobilization campaigns indefinitely.” (Saxonberg p13) If its basis for legitimacy has in fact changed from ideology to pragmatic acceptance, we must question how the regime justifies the current level of economic hardship as “performing reasonably well.”

Thus, the DPRK regime poses a challenge to Saxonberg’s model, as it continues its unchallenged grip on power in spite of the steady erosion of its core ideological principles, the colossal economic failure in the late 1990s, and the regime’s failing capacity to enforce totalitarian control measures. In the following section I will argue that the DPRK’s legitimacy rests on a third element, that of strong national ownership of the ruling ideology — based on a long-established and as-yet-unchallenged mythology that Kim Il Sung and his descendants alone have defended the Korean nation and Korean traditional culture where other nation-states (especially South Korea) have been swept away by modernity and Westoxification.

The idea of nationalist ideology aiding regime survival is not new — Armstrong (2013) presents a similar argument in his explanation of North Korea’s continued survival. That is, by doubling down on strict adherence to the state’s founding myths and ideological purity at a time when others were embracing reform — a process Armstrong refers to as “ideological introversion” — the state was able to withstand revisionist pressures. However, Armstrong assigns a strong degree of agency to the DPRK leadership in deliberately choosing and enforcing this policy: "The collapse of East Germany, absorbed into its capitalist rival and fraternal state, was a chilling precedent for North Korea. As the North Korean leadership saw it, the downfall of East European communism was the direct result of materialist corruption and the erosion of
ideology." (Armstrong p101) Such a characterization raises further questions about how the DPRK uniquely seized upon such a strategy. If regime survival were simply a matter of choosing to resist reform and cleaving to ideological foundations, why didn’t other communist states do the same? My argument differs from Armstrong’s in that it focuses more on structural conditions that enabled North Korea to develop a nationalist version of communist ideology, whereas other communist regimes had no choice but to follow Stalin’s internationalist ideological line, whether they wanted to or not.

Tismaneanu attributes regime survival in North Korea to “the paradigmatic case of unreformed communism, what I have labeled national Stalinism,” adding that “Dynastic, autarkic, terroristic communist rule was the North Korean party’s answer to the collapse of the Soviet Union.” (Tismaneanu in Dimitrov p68) The problem with citing deliberate policy choices as a causal mechanism for regime survival is that it implies a higher level of foresight and self-awareness on the part of the leadership than may be deserved. Tismaneanu’s conclusion provokes the question: if regime survival in the Soviet bloc was simply a matter of the leadership making a conscious choice to proactively crack down on revisionism and hew to a radicalized ideological line, why did other communist regimes not take the same approach? What enabled North Korean party leaders to sustain such consistently radical ideologies where other regimes relented?

As the Mongolian case study will show, imposed cultural transformation and suppressed nationalism under communist rule were key enabling factors in mobilizing anti-communist sentiment during the later transition stages. Much work has been done demonstrating the relationship between the end of the Cold War and the outbreak of nationalist conflicts in former Soviet bloc states (Lampe 1996, Hroch 2000, Goldmann et al 2000). The general conclusion is that Soviet control kept nationalist, segregationist and irredentist desires in check in the various satellites until the Soviet Union dissolved and these impulses were set free. However, surprisingly little scholarship attempts to switch the causal direction and suggest that repressed nationalism and forced cultural homogenization had something to do with the demise of communism in the Soviet bloc in the first place.

One reason this variable may have been overlooked is that most existing comparative work focuses on the transitions in the Eastern European bloc and former Soviet republics. The problem
with limiting the sample in this way is that all of those states experienced similar degrees of cultural loss during early regime consolidation period, received similar directives from Stalin regarding the eradication of nationalist elements, were similarly limited in their leverage and capacity to resist such directives, had similar perceptions of the ruling ideology as an imposed foreign ideology, and ultimately collapsed at around the same time, under similar nationalist pressures. The uniformity of cases makes it difficult to scientifically test whether the long-term repression of nationalism and traditional culture was a significant factor in enabling regime change. Fortunately for us, within Northeast Asia we can identify two cases of Soviet-influenced communist regimes which originally shared many commonalities on a range of variables theoretically relevant to democratization -traditional values, domestic political institutions, native nationalist impulses, geopolitical circumstances, and level of economic development — but diverged sharply on cultural policies and ideological ownership: the MPR and the DPRK. The following section reviews the historical circumstances of Stalin’s cultural homogenization policies and in the process formulates a theoretical framework which connects both cultural loss and ideological ownership to the outcome of regime collapse or survival.

**Cultural transformation and nationalist “fertilizer” for regime instability**

**Historical background: Marxist internationalism and Stalin’s chauvinistic cultural policies**

One of the putative goals of Marxist-Leninist ideology was to build a global coalition of workers that would ultimately do away with nationalism, national consciousness and the nation-state itself (Janos 1996, White 2001, Saxonberg 2013). The original Programme of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union called for a global worker’s movement in which the state would eventually “wither away.” (White p5) Under Stalin’s direction the internationalist aspect of Marxist-Leninism was actively pursued through the formation of the communist states of Eastern Europe. The Soviet-run Cominform was charged with making central decisions about everything from five-year economic plans to education reform, and the various satellites were expected to uniformly carry out these directives.

The Soviets historically had complicated relationships with local nationalists. At times, in the process of early regime consolidation, nationalism had to be harnessed and even stimulated
in order to rally a sufficiently large section of the population around the cause of “national liberation,” with the communists as the putative saviors liberating weaker nations\(^2\) from the grip of global imperialism. But this term had a large class component to it; Soviet communists were not committed to protecting nations as entities discrete from workers worldwide. Throughout Eastern Europe communist parties enlisted the help of nationalist coalition partners to gain power, but then purged them after cementing single-party rule (Gati 1990). Accordingly, nationalist sentiments and affinities for “bourgeois” culture soon became criminal offenses throughout the Soviet bloc.

Transforming culture to serve the needs of socialism was an early and important objective of the Soviet leadership.

The creative arts were also expected to perform an ideological purpose. Painting, for instance, was expected to be representational rather than abstract or allegorical; music was expected to have a recognizable tune; and novels were supposed to be optimistic in character, set ideally in a factory with an identifiable hero who should triumph in the end over the stubborn resistance of the class enemy. (White p8)

The effect that these culturally transformative policies had on popular feelings in the satellite states has been vividly illustrated by the exiled Polish writer Czesław Miłosz: “The surest safeguard is to manifest loudly one’s awe at Russia’s achievements in every field of endeavor, to carry Russian books under one’s arm, to hum Russian songs, to applaud Russian actors and musicians enthusiastically, etc. (Miłosz in Stokes p52) The dramatic emotional impact of these changes on the Eastern European psyche is summed up by Milan Kundera: “[T]he countries in central Europe feel that the change in their destiny that occurred after 1945 is not merely a political catastrophe: it is also an attack on their civilization.” (Kundera in Stokes p218) From their perspective, the Soviet takeover represented not a new transnational phase of human existence, but the culmination of age-old Russian designs for European conquest. As a result, from the beginning the Soviet-friendly regimes of Eastern Europe suffered a deficit of legitimacy among their own people.

\(^2\) Throughout this paper the term “nation” is used in the sense of a self-identifying cohesive ethnic community, usually united by a shared history, language, etc. but not necessarily forming an independent state of its own. This includes the various nations that were subsumed within the USSR — Russian, Kazakh, Tajik, Ukrainian, Buryiat, Armenian, etc.
It is striking to consider that of the remaining communist polities — China, Vietnam, Laos, Cuba and North Korea — none felt the touch of Stalin in their early state formation, save North Korea alone. And, as we shall see, the DPRK escaped Stalin’s culturally transformative policies due to special historical contingencies. By contrast, nearly all of the communist states and breakaway Soviet republics that experienced mass protest movements in 1989-1991 shared a common experience of Stalin-directed cultural transformation in the early regime consolidation phase, establishing an embedded resentment for a ruling ideology that was perceived as a Russian import. Indeed, this may be one of the few commonalities that holds across the fallen communist polities of Eastern Europe, the Baltics, the republics of the Black Sea and Central Asia, and Mongolia.

The forces of modernization and globalization have always spawned great anxiety and unrest wherever they have taken hold, and after all the Marxist movement was at its core a modernizing project. Whether autocratic or democratic, left or right, any new ideology will have a much harder time achieving popular acceptance if it is perceived to have been imported from outside — particularly if the receiving nation has suffered greatly under a foreign-imposed ideology or political order in the past. The flip side of this is that a people will endure greater hardship and stomach more hypocrisy in the name of achieving the ultimate victory of a “homegrown” ideology or political order rather than an imported one. As the following pages will show, Mongolia and North Korea may have been on the same side of the communist-capitalist divide, but they were on opposite sides of a more fundamental nationalist-assimilationist divide; ultimately, that made all the difference for their respective regimes’ survival.

**Two new variables: Cultural Loss and “National Ownership” of Ideology**

The above history paints a picture of wildly unpopular policies of cultural transformation, essentially Russification, implemented throughout the Soviet bloc — policies which were shaped largely by the personal preferences of one man (Stalin) rationalized by Marxism’s internationalist tenet and buttressed by the prevailing social attitudes of post-WWII Russians. My central hypothesis is that popular resentment of these policies remained a latent force among the non-Russian nations within the bloc throughout the Cold War. Ultimately, those nations
which saw their native cultures forcefully transformed and nationalism repressed were the ones which ended up succumbing during the volatile 1989-1991 period. By contrast, those nations which had experienced less interference in their traditional cultures proved more willing to remain under communist leadership despite various ordeals.

I posit that the latent resentment of cultural loss was one factor which made it easier for pro-democracy activists to mobilize popular protest against the regime. Memories of lost art forms, once-cherished religious practices, dying languages, and mothballed traditional dresses gave the uneducated masses negative symbols to associate with the advent of communism. Common people who lacked the awareness to understand sophisticated concepts such as free markets, civil society, popular elections, etc. could focus on the prospect of reviving lost culture. The singing of traditional songs and wearing of traditional dress provided easily recognizable popular symbols for resistance and rebellion. I shall not say that culturally transformative policies “sowed the seeds” of anti-communism, but rather that they “laid the fertilizer” in which seeds could grow more easily. Unpopular cultural transformation alone is not enough; if it were, the regimes would have collapsed long ago. The soil thus prepared, the nations of the Soviet bloc still had to wait for some other event — disastrous currency reform, revelations of endemic corruption, power struggles in the leadership — to germinate the seeds of popular dissent. In Saxonberg’s language, the “revolutionary potential” of society is amplified when culturally transformative policies have been forcefully inflicted upon the society at some point in the past. The other well-known problems of communism — economic inefficiency, unwieldy bureaucracy, institutional rigidity, ideological softening, etc. — remain vital to solving the mystery of the Soviet bloc’s demise. Thus, I consider this new variable to be a friendly amendment to the existing models of communism’s collapse provided by Gati, Solnick, Kornai, Dimitrov and Saxonberg.

A second variable which I develop through the case studies is something I call “national ownership” of the ruling ideology. I define “ruling ideology” as the set of core philosophical ideas about the nature of humanity, power, conflict, progress etc. which inform the internal logic of the state’s laws and institutional structures. High national ownership is marked by a widespread popular perception that the ruling ideology was invented and developed by a member
or members of that nation (ethnicity), with little or no inspiration from foreign sources. As the above history has shown, in those states where communist regimes were set up under Stalin’s heavy guidance — which is to say, most of the Soviet bloc — there was a very low level of national ownership of communist ideology. That is to say, communism was portrayed as a foreign invention, and due homage was paid to its foreign creators — Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin. An exception is North Korea, which as we shall see managed to very thoroughly appropriate national ownership of its ruling ideology, erasing all mention of communism’s foreign founding fathers in the process. Some other communist leaders such as Ceausescu, Tito, and Hoxha were also able to insert themselves into the popular narrative of their ruling ideology’s development, but none of them came close to matching North Korea’s level of historical amnesia regarding its ideological origins. Soviet Russians could be said to have high national ownership of their ideology, particularly in Stalin’s heyday, although even they acknowledged its foreign sources (Marx, Engels etc) to a greater extent than North Korea does. Furthermore, the early Jewish leaders of the Bolshevik movement were never wholly forgotten, and in later periods Russian anti-communism gained momentum from popular anti-semitic sentiment.³

Saxonberg does touch on the issue of “homegrown” versus installed regimes and the correlation with regime longevity. His remarks on the subject require quoting in full:

In contrast to the argument put forward by Gerald Segal and John Phipps — to the effect that "homegrown" communist regimes have been able to maintain power because they retain the loyalty of their military — this book argues that any communist regime, whether homegrown or not, is likely to lose power if it has been without ideological legitimacy for quite a while, and has subsequently lost its pragmatic acceptance besides. Homegrown regimes have fallen in such diverse countries as the Soviet Union, Albania, Ethiopia, Grenada, Nicaragua, and eventually Serbia/Yugoslavia. Meanwhile, not all of the remaining Communist regimes are homegrown, as the North Korean regime is not technically homegrown, despite its fervent nationalism. The Kim dynasty was placed in power by the Soviet Union in 1948, and only survived the Korean War because of Mao's decision to send Chinese troops. (Saxonberg 2013 p20-21)

Several interesting points here deserve closer examination. True, North Korea was not originally a “homegrown” regime as the term is generally understood. But in subsequent years it has assumed a level of national ownership of its ideology that surpasses even that of the Soviet Union. The Soviets, after all, never tried to disguise the fact that their ideology originated in the writings of Marx and Engels — two Germans, and one of them a Jew. In fact, popular opposition to communism and anti-Semitism have gone hand in hand from the earliest days of the Soviet Union up to the present era. Russians were happy to take ownership of the international communist movement when things were going well, but those who opposed the ideology always had foreign scapegoats to condemn for leading their countrymen astray. North Koreans today have no such scapegoat, having erased all traces of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, and the word “communism” itself from their lexicon (Cheong 2000, Lankov 2013). When one focuses on the degree of “national ownership” of the ruling ideology, rather than whether a communist regime was originally “homegrown” or not, the correlation to regime survival becomes much more clear.

It is also significant to note that North Korea also has a much higher level of continuity from its current leaders to the foundations of its ruling ideology than the Gorbachev leadership had with the founders of Soviet ideology. As Cohen remarked of the 1980s Soviet Union, “[A]nti-Stalinism remains the only viable ideology of Communist reform from above” (Cohen 1986 p126) — implying that at least the Soviet leaders did have one viable ideology of reform that did not involve directly condemning their own basis of legitimacy.

I hypothesize that national ownership of ideology is important to regime survival because it makes dissenters more vulnerable to accusations of national betrayal and anti-patriotism. When a nation’s most cherished historical figures are directly associated with an ideological precept, any attack on that precept is easily framed as an attack on the national dignity. A good example from the non-communist world is the United States’ reverence for the Bill of Rights and the “founding fathers” who created it. Proponents of, say, gun control, no matter how salient or well-reasoned their arguments may be, are deemed anti-patriotic and “un-American.” Their rhetorical task is made exponentially more difficult by the fact that they find themselves pitched against not only the abstract concept of the right to bear arms but the ghosts of the nation-state’s most cherished historical figures. The Islamic Republic of Iran is another example of a nation-state which enjoys
high national ownership of its ruling ideology since the Islamic revolution overthrew the foreign-backed Shah in 1979. In the chaos that followed the 2009 elections, pro-democracy activists and critics of the clerical leadership found themselves accused of betraying the heroes of the 1979 revolution and the sacred memory of Ayatollah Khomeini. Such accusations held weight because of the deep national pride associated with Iran’s unique clerical leadership system and the equally strong association of democracy with the hostile West.

By contrast, those nation-states which have little national ownership of their ruling ideology, and particularly those which perceive it to be an imposed foreign import, will find malcontent and dissent to be persistent problems which crop up whenever things are not going well. Non-communist examples of this include those nations subsumed under Japan’s Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere in the first half of the 20th Century, or the modern-day states of Iraq and Afghanistan. The Soviet satellites in Eastern Europe and Mongolia are also prime examples of states with low national ownership of their ruling ideologies. Although there may have been considerable local complicity in installing and sustaining single-party communist rule, their histories could easily be reinterpreted to portray the entire communist system, and the hardships that went along with it, as something that had been inflicted upon them by a foreign power, making it much easier to denounce. Such a narrative is easier to construct when there are actual historical individuals who were persecuted for defending the nation’s culture, distinctiveness and independence, who can then be resurrected as nationalist heroes. The political rehabilitation of such individuals is a concrete and simple demand that protest movements can make of the incumbent government. When such demands are rebuffed, the regime appears cruel and unreasonable; when they are accommodated, it demonstrates the power of the protest movement and gives the people a taste for further protest.

On a cognitive level, high national ownership of ideology leads the people to want “their” ideology to succeed and to spread internationally. It also helps to cultivate an ingroup-outgroup dynamic which pits the state and society together against the rest of the world, rather than state versus society. Members of such nations are less likely to acknowledge that problems are the result of weaknesses or failings of the system, and more likely to look for outside explanations — hostile foreign encirclement, the machinations of global capitalists, internal spies and
saboteurs, etc. By contrast, low national ownership leads people to root against the ruling ideology’s success, to actively seek out evidence of its shortcomings, and to blame it for various hardships in their personal lives.

In this way, low national ownership of the ruling ideology is another form of “fertilizer” that enables the seeds of dissent, once planted, to grow more quickly out of control. I consider cultural transformation and national ownership to be two distinct variables, although it is difficult to separate out their respective impacts as they occur in tandem in most of the available cases. Throughout the communist world, states with low national ownership also tended to suffer high cultural transformation, and vice versa. One exception is the PRC during the Cultural Revolution, during which massive cultural destruction was done in the name of a highly national ideology, at the command of a revered Chinese leader. Outside of the Communist world, it could be said that post-WWII Japan was subjected to an imported ruling ideology, but experienced relatively low levels of cultural loss. Therefore I maintain that these are two separate variables because it is possible to imagine a scenario in which cultural transformation did not occur, but the state leadership neglected to adopt national ownership of its ruling ideology. It is likewise possible to imagine a scenario in which a governing regime developed its own revolutionary ideology and then autonomously proceeded to dismantle the native culture of its constituents, although such instances are understandably rare. I leave to future scholarship the task of finding such cases and testing them to determine which variable has a greater effect on regime survival. For the purposes of the present paper, I shall limit myself to examining the combined effects of these two variables, showing how different inputs produced dramatically different outcomes in two Asian communist states which otherwise appear to share many similarities.

The explicit effects of these two variables are outlined through the following hypotheses:

H1) The more cultural transformation accompanying the advent of communism, the easier it will be for later protest movements to gain mass support among non-elites.

H2) The greater the national ownership of the ruling ideology, the more reluctant people will be to acknowledge failures or weaknesses of that ideology.
Two Side-by-Side Case Studies

Mongolia and North Korea: The case for comparison

Finding a suitable comparison case to North Korea is a difficult task; so many of its internal structures, practices and core ideological tenets appear *sui generis* even among communist autocracies. Certainly comparisons to European regimes are easily dismissed; the communist states of central and eastern Europe had vastly different cultural backgrounds from those of East Asia and also differed in their historical antipathy toward Russia, so integral to the literature described above. Nor does China offer a good comparison, since the Chinese state is so much larger and occupies a much different geopolitical position, facing very different constraints on their foreign policy options. The smaller communist states of Southeast Asia might appear tempting, but decades of warfare shaped their state formation in unique ways, and their political systems were not substantially influenced by Soviet advisors.

As comparable cases go, Mongolia may be the best bet — albeit an imperfect one. Both Korea and Mongolia held subordinate places on the Chinese periphery for centuries before the modern era, although Mongolia was a much later and more reluctant participant in the Sinocentric order (Kang 2010). The two countries share passing cultural, linguistic and religious similarities; both speak languages originating from the Altaic language group, and both have strong Buddhist traditions — albeit of very different sects. Both had long, bitter histories of colonial subjugation and cultural destruction immediately preceding the communist era, making them particularly hostile to foreign political interference. Looking at the geopolitical layout of the Cold War era, it is intellectually tempting to draw parallels between the divided Mongolian nation (the China-controlled Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region, the nominally independent state of “outer” Mongolia, and the Buryat-Mongol Soviet Autonomous Republic) and the divided Korean nation (South Korea, North Korea and the Korean autonomous prefecture of Yanbian in China). As fragments of once much larger and grander nations, both were primed for nationalist and irredentist impulses. Both the Mongolian People’s Republic (founded in 1924) and the DPRK (founded in 1948) gained their independence with Soviet help, and upon achieving independence both Mongolia and North Korea developed their ruling communist parties (hereafter MPRP and KWP, respectively) under Soviet guidance. The foundational
leaders of both states (Choibalsan and Kim Il Sung, respectively) were not the Soviets’ first choice but climbed to power over the corpses of more politically experienced, ideologically conservative, nationalistic predecessors who proved too difficult for the Soviets to work with (Genden and Cho Man-shik, respectively) (Radchenko 2012, Lankov 2002). Both Choibalsan and Kim were nationalist war heroes with strong irredentist ambitions but little domestic political experience, highly dependent on Soviet support at the outset. Yet these two Northeast Asian Soviet bloc states took very different policies regarding national culture, and modernization.

Although Soviet advisors had a role in the formation of both states and the selection of their leaders, it must be remembered that the transformations took place roughly 20 years apart, and the Soviets of 1925 had a very different character and priorities than the Soviets of 1945 — although Stalin played a dominant role in both places. Also, China did not exist as a rival sponsor state in Mongolia’s nascent phase, and at any rate Mongolians would not have accepted any political alliance with their recently ousted oppressors. For the purposes of this paper, I treat 1924 Mongolia and 1945 North Korea as roughly equivalent entities in terms of their level of political development, sense of national identity, recent colonial subjugation, anxiety about foreign interference, and near-total dependence on Soviet support.

For simplicity, I have divided the histories of both countries into roughly equivalent stages of state formation and cultural transformation which proceeded at different periods of time. The following chart should be helpful for reference in the next section.
It must be acknowledged that cross-time comparisons of this sort are inherently dangerous. Similar though the circumstances may seem, East Asia was not the same place in 1924 as it was in 1948. The later period saw the devastating ordeal of the second world war, the opening salvos of the Cold War, and rapid innovations in the tools of warfare, communications, and political control. Global awareness of and attitudes toward the concept of “communism” were evolving. The Soviet leadership underwent significant ideological and political changes between 1924 and 1945. With this important caveat in mind, I maintain that the Mongolian case still offers valuable insights for North Korea; nevertheless I will proceed with caution in the following case comparison section, making every attempt to acknowledge differences where they occur.

**Mongolia and North Korea under Soviet tutelage: Two different approaches to culture**

The international power dynamics of early 20th-century East Asia afforded the Soviet Union the opportunity to conduct two nearly unimpeded experiments in social, political and

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event Description</th>
<th>Mongolia</th>
<th>North Korea</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Early state formation; achieving national liberation, forming the party and military bureaucracies; Soviet-guided land reform; some toleration of nationalism and irredentism</td>
<td>1924-1934</td>
<td>1945-1950</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purge period; core party leadership crystalizes as rivals are eliminated</td>
<td>1934-1938</td>
<td>1953-1965</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frozen period; purges abate; personality cult takes form; Party extends control to all aspects of life; economy stagnates and hardship sets in</td>
<td>1938-1954</td>
<td>1965-1994</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First “great leader” dies; leadership transition and ideological softening</td>
<td>1954</td>
<td>1994</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition to democracy</td>
<td>1990-91</td>
<td>?? ??</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
economic re-engineering: Mongolia, beginning with Sukhbaatar’s Soviet-aided achievement of national independence in 1921-4, and North Korea, beginning with the division of the Korean peninsula in 1945-8. Soviet advisors entered into Mongolia and North Korea with similar degrees of ignorance about — and antipathy for — the local culture, history, and traditional practices. Just as in Eastern Europe, the Soviets made eradication of “bourgeois” culture and “superstitious” religious beliefs an early ideological priority in their Asian satellites.

In Mongolia the eradication of traditional culture was immediate and extensive, transforming religion, language, historical consciousness, and even traditional dress to be rebuilt in the Russian image. The first and most urgent task of the Soviets was to crush the burgeoning Mongolian nationalism which had arisen as the country emerged from Qing dynasty control. A short-lived pan-Mongolia movement led by the Buryiat Mongols was crushed by the early Bolshevik leadership, and nearly the entire male population of ethnic Mongols in the Buryiat Republic was killed or imprisoned in the terror of 1929-31 (Becker p246).

Purges followed for both outer Mongolia and the Buryiat republic: “In the late 1930s the purges saw the destruction of the entire Buryiat intelligentsia and the Buddhist monasteries which were the traditional repository of art and literature and to which every family sent one son.” (Becker p246) Purges of pan-Mongolian nationalists and Buddhist lamas conducted on Stalin’s orders targeted by some estimates killed over 100,000 people, possibly as much as 1/7th of the population (Becker 83). The temples had been the primary center for education and most Mongolian families sent at least one child to serve as an acolyte for some years; they posed a prime ideological threat to the MPRP and therefore Stalin decreed that they had to go. Indeed, so politically compromising was the task of liquidating the Buddhist lamas that the first two Mongolian prime ministers to receive Stalin’s directive — Genden and Amor — refused to comply and were purged, before finally Stalin found a willing accomplice in Choibalsan.

Cultural loss extended to language. In the Soviet republic of Buryatia, “It was national policy to assimilate all minorities to to create a new race, the Soviets, with one language, Russian, so there was no point even for serving or tolerating the existence of others.” In both Mongolia and Buryatia, “the Mongolian-Uighur script had already been replaced by the latin alphabet in the 1930s, and this together with the destruction of the monastic libraries cut off the
Buryats from their own literature, history and culture” (Becker 250). The arts were transformed as well. Mongolian theatre was “all but destroyed by the 1940s,” its playwrights, directors and actors imprisoned. After the death of Stalin most of those surviving were released, and Mongolian theatre was revived “under the social realist traditions of Soviet drama.” (Becker 105). Thus most of Mongolia’s cultural transformation was begun at the command of Stalin, but the task was later taken up with enthusiasm by the “Muscovites” (Russian-educated Mongolian cadres) who dominated the state bureaucracy. Rossabi and Becker both describe how the Muscovites often lacked sufficient skills in their native language, felt uncomfortable around those who could not speak Russian, and saw Russian-style civilization as the key to national salvation in the face of Chinese and Japanese encroachment.

Along the way to suppressing Mongolian nationalism and establishing ideological control, the Soviets also reformed Mongolian education and implemented a reevaluation of the historical role of Chinggis Khan and the Mongolian empire. “This new interpretation depicted the first unifier of the Mongolians as a rapacious plunderer who represented the feudal ruling classes and whose invasions retarded development of the territories he and his troops had subjugated. Mongolian portrayals of Chinggis as a national hero and deification of the founder of the Mongolian empire were condemned.” (Rossabi 2005 p197) Restoring Chinggis Khan’s place in history would later become a rallying symbol for the Mongolian pro-democracy movement.

All else being equal, we might expect that the Soviets would have followed a similar path in reconstructing culture and identity in the new state of North Korea. There as well, the Soviets entered with little knowledge of the country or affinity for its culture. “Among the people who in the late summer of 1945, much to their own surprise, found themselves rulers of North Korea, there were no specialists in international relations and foreign affairs, let alone experts on Korea... Most Party functionaries, military and intelligence officers of Korean extraction perished during the great purge of 1936-8.” (Lankov 2002 p4) Stalin had purged all Korean members of the Comintern at that time out of fear that some Soviet Koreans might be Japanese agents or sympathizers, and had also ordered the forced deportation of 200,000 ethnic Koreans from the Far East to Central Asia (Cummings p225). This left the Soviets woefully lacking in both experienced Korea hands and Soviet-affiliated ethnic Korean cadres.
The initial Soviet officers sent in to pacify the countryside and accept the Japanese surrender soon found themselves assigned a task for which they were woefully unprepared, setting up a new social and economic system for North Korea. They found their most capable early allies to be Korean nationalist leaders, particularly the elderly Christian independence activist Cho Man-shik. According to Lankov, the Soviets supported Cho’s faction reluctantly only until the Korean communist party had consolidated enough power to rule effectively without them (Lankov 2002 p15). After just four months, the Soviets purged Cho and secured the top party and government leadership positions for “their man” Kim Il Sung, then a captain in the Soviet army and a legendary name in the anti-Japanese resistance.

From the moment of its creation, the new Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) found itself competing with the US-supported Republic of Korea to the South for the title of sole legitimate government of the Korean nation and preserver of traditional Korean culture. On account of the social pressures of division, then, we might expect that the Soviets would have tempered their demands for cultural transformation in Korea. Yet 1923 Mongolia was a divided nation as well, and by this logic the MPR ought to have faced a similar pressures to stake its claim to legitimacy on the basis of fidelity to traditional culture. Based on initial conditions at the time they fell under Soviet patronage, then, we might expect Mongolia and North Korea to follow very similar trajectories of cultural assimilation and institutional transformation.

History intervened in the early 1950s. The Korean War, in which the Soviet Union offered only modest material support while Chinese “volunteers” fought and died by the hundreds of thousands to save the DPRK regime, ensured that China and North Korea would have a much closer relationship from that point on. The death of Stalin and the subsequent de-Stalinization drive in the Soviet Union prompted the DPRK, fearful for its own personality cult, to further distance itself from its Russian sponsors and to purge all of the Soviet Korean advisors in the ranks of government (Wada 2012 pp83-86). Thereafter North Korea took a much more independent line, continually playing the Soviets and the Chinese off each other for aid while resisting control by either side, until the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union.

The Kim regime learned early on the political necessity of shaking off appearances of dependency on foreign powers, even going so far as to modify old photographs to remove the
Soviet army insignia from Kim Il Sung’s uniform. Juche, the ideology attributed to Kim Il Sung, went further than Stalinism or Maoism in shaking off its philosophical roots and claiming originality. “Mao and Stalin were presented officially as the successors of Marx, Engels, and Lenin, as the best disciples of the dead Communist sages... Kim Il Sung was never presented in such a way. North Korean propaganda of the early 1950s sometimes referred to Kim Il Sung as ‘Stalin’s loyal disciple,’ but this was done in the times when the alleged primacy of the Soviet Union still remained a core element of the regime’s ideological discourse. Such references disappeared by the late 1950s.” (Lankov 2013 p50) Recurrent themes in North Korean propaganda are “in our own way” (uri-shik) and “our nation by itself” (uri-nara-kkiri). The central theme of juche (often mistranslated as “self-reliance,” the term literally means “the main subject”) has little to do with independence from foreign aid, and everything to do with independence from foreign ideas and influence. The term first appeared in an ideological treatise attributed to Kim II Sung which was published in 1960:

"What is the main subject (juche) of our party's ideological work? We are not carrying out some other country's revolution, we are carrying out Korea's revolution. It is this Korean revolution which is the main subject of our party's ideological work... If you go to an elementary school, the pictures on the walls are all of foreigners like Mayakowsky and Pushkin; there is not a single photo of a Korean. Raising children in this way, what sort of confidence will they have in their nation? Some say the Soviet way is best, others say the Chinese way is best; hasn't the time come to make our own way (uri-shik)?" (Kim Il Sung Selected Works Vol 4, quoted in Wada p. 99)

It is not the intention of this paper to argue that juche was truly a novel invention sprung fully-formed from the mind of Kim II Sung, a product of the ingenuity of the superior Korean man, as the regime has painted it (Myers 2010). Rather, the point is that most North Koreans have been effectively persuaded that this is the case, and in fact such conviction was essential to cementing the connection between nationalism and communist rule in North Korea. If the KWP acknowledged that its founding principles were based upon a foreign ideology, or even a homegrown improvement upon a foreign ideology, the Korean people would not have accepted it wholeheartedly — particularly having only just shrugged off the yoke of Japanese fascism. Koreans needed to believe that they were serving a fundamentally Korean ideology, a novel
creation of a mythologically gifted Korean leader, which had now become a guiding light not only for Koreans but for oppressed peoples around the world.

After shaking free of Soviet influence, consolidating his rule and disseminating his own homegrown ideology, Kim Il Sung felt the need to dispose of the evidence of his earlier connections with foreign ideology. Old periodicals were removed from circulation because “during the 1970s and 1980s, the government did not want the average North Korean exposed to the paeans Kim Il Sung used to deliver to the great Soviet army and Comrade Stalin during the 1940s.” (Lankov 2013 p44) Kim’s wartime position in the Soviet military was downplayed and his guerrilla activities within Korea’s borders were exaggerated. (Goncharov et al 1993)

Where the MPR was forced to cast aside nationalist historical narratives and heroes like Chinggis Khan, in the DPRK traditional heroes were not so much suppressed as they were replaced by the ultimate Korean hero, Kim Il Sung, and his ancestors. His great-grandfather was said to have participated in the brief but fierce battle against the American armed merchant ship General Sherman as it sailed up the Taedong River, his father and two uncles were independence activists, and 8-year-old Kim Il Sung himself was said to have been a leader of the anti-Japan movement that swept the nation on March 1st, 1919 (Martin p13-15). Pre-Kim era Korean heroes like Admiral Yi Sun Shin or King Sejong were not condemned so much as they were overshadowed by the new, modern heroes.

Not only was Korean culture protected from the transformative pressures of Soviet internationalism, Soviet culture and ideology soon joined the list of banned foreign influences deemed hazardous to the ideological purity of Kim Il Sung’s North Korea.

In the late 1960s, the authorities undertook a massive campaign aimed at the physical destruction of the foreign books (largely Soviet and Japanese) that were then privately owned by the North Koreans. In libraries, all foreign publications of a non-technical nature were (and still are) to be kept in a special section, with only people possessing a proper security clearance allowed to peruse them. Remarkably, no exception was made for publications of the “fraternal” communist countries: Moscow’s Pravda and Peking’s People’s Daily were deemed to be potentially as subversive as the Washington Post or Seoul’s Chosun Ilbo. (Lankov 2013 p44)
Reportedly, the last public portraits of Marx and Lenin in the country were removed\(^4\) in 2012 shortly after the ascendance of Kim Il Sung’s grandson, Kim Jong Eun, and the 2009 revision of the DPRK constitution removed all references to “communism,” generally replacing it with the references to North Korea’s own unique *songun* (“military-first”) political system.\(^5\)

Through this overview of their early political development, we can trace the seeds of policies that put Mongolia and North Korea on very different trajectories in terms of determining the place of culture and nationalism under communism. But how is it possible that two initially similar polities were able to take such divergent paths in terms of cultural policy, particularly under the conformity-enforcing structures of the Cold War? One possibility lies in the different targets of political repression in the early formation of the two regimes. The purges in 1930s Mongolia targeted groups perceived by Stalin as challengers to the Party’s legitimacy. By contrast, Stalin never personally directed purges of any magnitude in North Korea. The DPRK certainly *had* its share of purges, and it undeniably borrowed from Stalin’s playbook; but Stalin himself did not preside over them. North Korea’s Great Terror did not truly pick up steam until the 1960s; these purges were conducted at Kim Il Sung’s discretion and targeted any potential challenges to his political authority. As a nationalist folk hero himself, Kim would not have felt threatened by nationalist sentiments as long as they conformed to the narrative he was constructing. Admiring or engaging with traditional culture did not pose a significant liability to upward advancement, and the purges did not create an alienation between traditional culture and the Party.

More importantly, the emergence of the PRC as a rival to the USSR, together with the timely death of Stalin at the end of the Korean War, gave the Kim Il Sung regime the flexibility to pursue a much more independent course and to use nationalism and culture to their advantage. Mongolia, by comparison, continued to be highly dependent on the Soviet Union — and resistant to any hint of cooperation with China — throughout the Cold War period. A large part of the explanation for this can be attributed to the early start the Soviets had in their first satellite, the timing of the MPR’s state formation at the height of Stalin’s power, and the fact that no other


neighboring power was in a position to challenge Soviet influence in Mongolia for quite some time (certainly China was not a rival). Another explanatory factor may be that Mongolia simply was not the geopolitical prize that North Korea was; with no ports and few natural resources, there was little in Mongolia to tempt any of the other great powers of the time to challenge Soviet influence.

Cultural loss as a mobilizing agent of the pro-democracy movement

The fever for democratic reforms that swept across the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in the late 1980s soon infected Mongolia as well. In late December 1989, a handful of Mongolian intellectuals, recently returned from study abroad in Moscow and inspired by the reforms and social movements they had observed there, launched their own small protest rally in Sukhbaatar Square on the occasion of International Human Rights Day. Their pro-democracy movement rapidly gained popularity among common people, factory workers and herdsmen (Rossabi 2005 p12). Alongside demands for greater government transparency, market reforms and a multi-party system, there were also voices calling for restoration the Mongolian script and recognition of Chinggis Khan’s achievements. A leading pro-democracy activist rallied the crowd in Sukhbaatar Square by announcing the foundation of an “Association for Remembering and Respecting Chinggis Khan,” which would build monuments in his honor and advocate emulating his style of government with a council of advisors. (Becker 1993 p48). The traditional Mongolian clothing, or del, became a symbol of opposition often worn by protesters at rallies. In the early transition period, officials even announced plans to restore the use of the Uighur script and to abandon the Cyrillic alphabet, although for practical reasons these plans were never able to be implemented. (Rossabi 2005 p198)

Restoration of traditional culture — and rejection of Soviet control — were so embedded into the protest culture of the transition period in Mongolia that it is difficult to imagine the pro-democracy movement gaining such broad grass-roots appeal without these elements. By contrast, in North Korea today many artifacts of Korean traditional culture (with the exception of shamanism) have been incorporated into the general socialist kitsch of the country. If a pro-democracy movement were to take place in North Korea today it would have to do without the
triumphalist narrative of “taking back” traditional culture which proved so compelling with working-class Mongolians.

An illustrative example is the different roles of traditional dress in the two states. In Mongolia, the traditional dress, or *del*, was perceived as a nationalist symbol and frowned upon throughout the communist era. It became a self-fulfilling prophesy of sorts: during the pro-democracy movement in 1989, leading democracy activists brought their *dels* out of mothballs and wore them during protests in Sukhbaatar Square, and the *del* indeed became a symbol of resistance to communist rule. By contrast, in North Korea today women proudly wear their traditional Korean dress, or *chosun-ot*, to mass dances in Kim Il Sung Square, election day, and other ceremonial events.

Chinggis Khan in particular became a prominent, if unlikely, symbol of democracy during Mongolia’s transition period. At the first truly mass protest in Sukhbaatar Square, on January 21, 1990, a diverse group of intellectuals, workers and engineers rallied together by singing traditional folk melodies praising the legendary conqueror. “Such acclaim for Chinggis Khan could be seen as a challenge to the MPRP and the USSR, which had been denigrated the Mongolian hero, portraying him is a barbarian pillager.” (Rossabi 2005 p16) More recent nationalist heroes were also restored (or in some cases newly invented) through the pro-democracy movement, including the nationalist writer Tsendiin Damdinsüren (Kaplonski 2013), purged for resisting directives to convert Mongolian to Cyrillic script. In North Korea, where traditional Korean heroes were not so much suppressed as they were supplanted by the ultimate Korean hero, Kim Il Sung, and his ancestors, any nascent pro-democracy movement would have to fight *against* the ingrained popular reverence for national hero figures.

Mongolian Buddhism came back with a vengeance at the end of the Communist era and became a key ally of the pro-democracy movement. After languishing away as a token presence in the country for five decades, Buddhism was still held in enough reverence among the common people that establishing guarantees for the free practice of Buddhism became a prominent goal of the pro-democracy movement. In North Korea, the old religious traditions have been replaced with the national cult of Kimilsungism. While there may be some underground Christians still
residing in the North, the promise of restoring Christianity is unlikely to mobilize ordinary North Koreans on such a mass scale as Buddhism had done in Mongolia.

In recent years the DPRK regime has increasingly played up its dedication to cultural preservation, going so far as to “discover” sacred sites from Korean prehistory including the grave of Tangun, the mythical founder of the Korean nation. A 2006 KCNA article is typical of such promotional efforts:

Efforts are being exerted to keep a lot of historical relics in the area of Mt. Taesong and other parts of the city including the mausoleums of King Tangun and King Tongmyong in their origin and to arrange their surroundings well. People in South and North Hwanghae Provinces are taking good care of the Samsong Temple in Mt. Kuwol, ancient tomb No.3 in Anak, fort in Mt. Jongbang, Songbul Temple and other historical relics and have built cultural recreation grounds for visitors. Over 20 historical relics are being repaired and arranged in North Hamgyong Province. And Kaesong City has repaired roofs of more than 30 buildings and forts, heaped earth over tens of old mounds and repainted structures colorfully.⁶

We can observe from passages like these that the regime is eager to promote its cultural bona fides, particularly in comparison to the westernized South. Not only is the DPRK “discovering” new historical sites which validate the mythology of North Korea as the spiritual center of all things Korean, the Kim regime is purportedly sparing no expense to ensure that such sites are properly maintained and treated with reverence. Anyone who would protest against such a regime would be painted as not only anti-Kim but anti-Korean and culturally degenerate as well.

Holding the Mongolia and North Korea cases up side-by-side, it is clear that their dramatically different policies regarding the preservation of original culture, historical consciousness, and nationalism have had a significant impact on their regime survival and the “revolutionary potential” of society. Ultimately, the one which repressed native culture and punished expressions of nationalism ended up collapsing peacefully through a period of civil unrest in which return to traditional culture and values played an important, perhaps vital, part in mobilizing mass protest. The other, whose regime embraced a nationalist myth of sanctifying and preserving traditional culture, remains intact to this day despite far more dire economic

---

conditions and increasingly obvious political hypocrisy, and by all accounts has faced no serious internal dissent.

**Conclusions and implications for existing models**

As a result of the above analysis, I conclude that two additional considerations need to be incorporated into Saxonberg’s model of revolutionary potential: the degree of cultural transformation imposed (generally under Stalin’s orders) during early regime consolidation, and the degree of national ownership of the ruling ideology. Saxonberg’s basic equation of revolutionary potential remains intact; after losing ideological basis for legitimacy, a regime can survive only so long as it maintains enough economic stability for “pragmatic acceptance.” However, the above analysis indicates that a high level of national ownership of the ideology raises the bar in terms of economic hardship necessary to mobilize collective action against the regime. Conversely, a high level of foreign-imposed cultural transformation under the ruling regime lowers the bar for economic hardship needed to mobilize collective action.

After the end of the Cold War, long-suppressed cultural and linguistic traditions were rapidly reclaimed throughout the Soviet bloc and nationalist tensions that had remained frozen for decades boiled over in Eastern Europe. The tremendous passions incited by these developments cannot be denied, raising the question of how much the repression of these sentiments helped to fuel the ground-swelling of popular support for the pro-democracy movements that overthrew the old system in the first place. We might reasonably ask, would the common people of Eastern Europe and Mongolia have been motivated to take to the streets in such numbers for the abstract goals of a free-market economy and democratic institutions, without the added push of reclaiming long-suppressed cultural forms and values?

North Korea has provided a partial test case for such a hypothetical. Its leadership, governing institutions and economic system were initially installed by Soviet advisors with little input from local political leaders; its structures of social control were if anything more closely modeled on the Soviet Union than anything in Eastern Europe. As Andrei Lankov puts it, the DPRK regime managed to “out-Stalin Stalin” (Lankov 2013 p34). The most significant difference was in North Korea’s lack of cultural suppression and the political acceptance of nearly unbridled nationalism. It seems that the North Korean case is fairly unique among
communist regimes in this regard, but it would be worth further study to assess the levels of national ownership of state ideology in the other remaining communist regimes of China, Vietnam, Laos and Cuba. If there is evidence that these cases also escaped the early Stalinist anti-cultural policies and had highly indigenous communist movements, this evidence could be used to extend Saxonberg’s model of communist regime survival.

Can this framework be applied to non-communist regimes? Given that cultural loss and nationalist repression have occurred in service to other trans-national ideologies, this model may have broader implications for a variety of regime types beyond communism. Pressures for cultural transformation have accompanied many foreign-imposed state-building efforts through modern history, from the British Raj and Japan’s “Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere” to modern-day U.S. coalition efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq. Latent resentment of cultural policies could help to explain the internal instability of these systems. The Islamic Republic of Iran provides a prime example of a non-communist state with high national ownership of their ideology and fidelity to traditional culture. Iran also has the collective memory of earlier cultural transformations and unwelcome modernization under the Shah, which makes for interesting parallels to North Korea’s collective memory of modernization under Japanese occupation.

The concept of cultural loss and the popular resentment it inspires may be linked in with the broader literature on the social pressures of modernization. Inglehart and Welzel have proposed analyzing regime strength along two cultural dimensions: (1) traditionalism vs. secular rationalism and (2) survival vs. self expression. As the theory goes, those societies that have moved further toward the secular end of the traditional-secular rational scale are more likely to demand civil and political liberties, while “rising emphasis on self-expression values leads people to demand and defend freedom of choice.” (p3) In retrospect it seems plausible that their data may be skewed because many of the nations in their sample — those that experienced imposed cultural modernization at the hands of Stalin — later came to demand democratization less because they valued self-expression and more because they still resented the communists who had taken away their traditional values in the first place. This idea is backed up by Rustow’s proposition that “a dynamic model of [democratic] transition must allow for the possibility that different groups — e.g., now the citizens and now the rulers, now the forces in favor of change
and now those eager to preserve the past — may furnish the crucial impulse toward democracy.” (Rustow 1970 p345)

As this limited survey has indicated, there appear to be many promising avenues for exploring the intersection of cultural loss and regime change outside of the communist world. The model presented here may even have implications for the nascent democracies in Iraq and Afghanistan, where democratic institutions have been accompanied by rapid cultural transformations ranging from traditional gender roles to popular music and entertainment.\(^7\)

Positive though these changes may seem, such radical cultural transformation is bound to stir uneasiness and even resentment among large sectors of the populace, particularly when the new secular humanist ideology is widely perceived to have been imposed by the United States. In this sense, the regime-destabilizing implications of low national ownership of ideology and popular resentment of cultural loss may not only be a matter of abstract academic interest; it may have immediate significance for US foreign policy and nation-building strategies.

Bibliography


